

Projects with added value to increase competitiveness and student satisfaction

**Case study: The renewal of the BA in Advertising and Public Relations.
University of Girona**

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Abstract

This communication is aimed at describing the measures implemented in the new BA of Advertising and Public Relations in the Faculty of Tourism-University of Girona at the moment of redefining its curricular design to make it more appealing and according to the needs of the era of the Internet.

According to Universities' guidelines there was a need to reformulate the academic curriculum. This need for change was used as an opportunity for boosting the internationalization of the studies, increasing the approach between students and professional profiles through the implementation of compulsory internships and eventually, among others, providing the BA program with added value activities which encompass master classes, circles of conferences given by top professionals, as well as specialized workshops about technologies of the Information..

Keywords *re-curriculum design; involving professional companies; developing optional activities; networks development; enhancing internationalisation.*

1. Introduction

Universities need to cultivate knowledge and foster entrepreneurship, collaborate with the professional sector, promote diversity and inclusion and help students assume an active role in the digital economy (World Economic Forum, 2018). Needless to say, universities should provide students with education of quality and motivate creative thinking, as well as present the necessary methodologies to help students become professionals. The BA of Advertising and Public Relations has been taught at Faculty of Tourism-University of Girona following the Bologna Plan since 2008-2009. Since then its length is 4 years (full-time) and has 240 ECTS. The areas covered in the degree are Public Relations, Advertising, Marketing, Strategic Communication, Issues Management, Events and Audiovisual Communications. In 2016 its curriculum was restructured and the first promotion of students who have undertaken this new curriculum will graduate in June 2020. The main goal for the renewal of the curriculum has been to increase the competitiveness of this degree in comparison to well-known universities adapting it to the current needs of the professional sector.

2. Methods to change the situation

The methodology to apply these changes was based on meetings with experts and students, separately, as well as an exhaustive review of similar programs of other European universities. Considering this, the changes in the curriculum were introduced after meetings between the coordinator of the BA and managers, marketing experts, entrepreneurs and chiefs of communications, graphic designers, advertising consultants and former students. Companies are interested in attracting the best talent, this is why universities and companies should reach agreements to improve their competitiveness (Lutcher, R. Keneth, 2018). The contact between university and professionals has been a first step to consolidate our network of partners. Moreover, we organized focus group with former students to identify weaknesses perceived by students during their inclusion to the job market.

As a result, the areas identified as essentials were written communication, use of English in advertising working environments, project management, oral expression and digital and virtual skills. These aspects converge around the suggestions made by Gow, K & McDonald, P, (2000). The changes implemented in the BA are oriented to the increase of the internationalization of the Faculty of Tourism, the application of digital marketing and communication tools from the first year and the obligation for students to enrol in curricular internships. University students (Gil-Galván, R.; 2011) would like to have acquired organizational competences, time management, leadership, proficiency in oral communication and ability to work under pressure. These skills have been included in the development of the new curriculum as maximize their opportunities to work in international contexts. The incorporation of contents related to digital communications from the very first

year, the fact that the students can develop projects in “Audiovisual Production Techniques” with technical equipment for recording and editing audiovisual and audio contents from the first year, as well as the possibility to participate in non-compulsory internships since the first year of the BA required the assumption of a new role for some lecturers, which although is not officially recognized by the University, is essential to optimise the management of contents in this degree. These lecturers structure the contents of each subject to ensure that the topics of the different subjects do not overlap, which could be risky due to the similarity between the areas of knowledge covered in this degree. This monitoring made possible the creation of itineraries created through assignments done in similar subjects during the four years of the BA. For instance, in the first year the students have to create an audiovisual postcard aimed at promoting their city, while in the fourth year they have to record a music video to promote a professional local singer. Students participate in chronological itineraries that increase their difficulty accordingly their evolution. If there was not such a compartmented structure nor a check about these contents, which increase year after year, it could happen that there would be some repeated assignments, a situation that happened before the renewal of the curriculum. The new degree also incorporates initial and final surveys of each subject in order to promote the redefinition of the subjects according to the perceptions of the students. The resulting data provides valuable and insightful information that may help lecturers improve their way of teaching.

Mastering oral expression is a transversal competence. During the first year of the BA, the subject “Written and Oral Expression” focuses specifically on the development of oral and written skills in Catalan, Spanish and English. These sessions help students acquire an instrumental and practical basis which enables them to express themselves correctly in all the subjects. In most projects speakers are selected randomly before starting the presentations. It helps them practice their expression skills and increase their tolerance to stress. Subjects such as entrepreneurship and mindfulness have been included that a relevant part of students decide to found their own company once they have graduated.

2.1. Internationalization

Internationalization implies the integration of different cultures into teaching. This involves challenges related to the service provided to students. Hence, providing more subjects in English is a way of broadening the perspectives of internationalization. Moreover, this may help students interact between them in a foreign language. Qiang (2003) suggests that academic programs should be oriented to facilitate the adaptation of incoming as well as outgoing students and remarks that educative centres should have exchange programmes, motivate the study of foreign languages, cross-cultural trainings, visiting lecturers and scholars and creating links between academic programs and research. Due to the curriculum renovation, the offer of subjects in English has increased. Given that their future workplaces probably will be multilingual, multicultural and international, this offers opportunities for

students to keep improving their level of English. Additionally, it is a way of ensuring that incoming students find suitable subjects. Erasmus students represent a new opportunity for local students to practise a foreign language, as well as acquire new work attitudes and styles (Bracht, et al. 2006). In addition to this, local students are encouraged to become local guides for incoming students.

2.2. Digital competences

The new BA includes a subject called “Audiovisual and Narrative Scripts”. Its methodology follows an APP (project-based learning) approach and its students are expected to assume a professional role. The students of this subject work in groups and have to face a real challenge: they have to find a local business which does not have online presence and persuade the owner to authorize an online marketing campaign. This campaign consists of a web with a blog and the management of professional profiles in social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. Both parts have to sign a contract in which they mention the obligations and rights of each part. This subject lasts one semester and once this period has finished most students keep developing projects for this local business. In addition, this PBL exercise joins this subject with two different ones: Documentation and Digital Marketing. By joining synergies students do not have repetitive exercises.

2.3. Compulsory internships

Internships are a crucial part of the BA because they represent an opportunity for putting into practice the knowledge acquired and it is probably the first contact of students with their future workplace. The new curriculum involved turning the subject “Curricular Internships”, which previously represented 20 ECTS, into a new subject of 12 ECTS. This change implied that every student has to work in a company for at least 250 h during the fourth year of the BA. Nevertheless, the students willing to practice their skills in a company can do that voluntarily from the first year.

3. Projects with Added Value

These changes are oriented to encourage students to acquire a more active role in their learning process. Additionally, we have developed four additional projects:

3.1. “Entre Subjectes & Atributs”

This is a season of conferences celebrated on a weekly basis addressed mainly to students of the University of Girona but open to all the public. Around 30 speakers visit our Faculty each year to talk about marketing, tourism, strategy, advertising, public relations, management and communications. More than 90 conferences have been celebrated since the course 2015-2016. Speakers are selected depending on the relevance of the company they work for, the

content of their talk and the innovation. Attendance is compulsory for students because each talk is directly linked to at least one subject. All participants can suggest speakers for future editions. After every conference attendees are asked to answer a survey. According to data obtained from the report 2018-2019, the average punctuation for the overall event, the speaker and the contents is about 8,3/10. Broadening the spread of the activities held at the University maximise the interaction between University and society (World Economic Forum, 2018). Some conferences of the upcoming edition will be partly developed in collaboration with the city council of Girona.

3.2. “Plan for the improvement of written expression in the Catalan language”

A plan for implementing the improvement of the Catalan language was launched since the year 2016-2017 to help students mastering communication and meeting the requirements of the professional sector. By the moment we know that the performance of the students who started this plan is increasing favourably, as we will show later. Through this action students receive insightful feedback about their written expression and receive tailored resources according to their results. This plan is expected to increase the quality of redaction in all students’ assignments, specially their final project (TFG).

3.3. “La Productora” (our audiovisual amateur start-up)

This is an in-company (audiovisual enterprise ruled by talented students of the degree). The students who participate in this project can use all the audiovisual equipment and TV, photo and radio studios of the university to broadcast and edit audiovisual material. The contents created by them are used as promotional material of the Faculty of Tourism. This action allows our students to be familiarized with audiovisual equipment and acquire experience. At the same time, their material is used to promote the university during the doors open days for families and future students.

3.4. The Creative itinerary

The “Creative Itinerary” is an optional creative and personal project addressed to those students with the highest marks. It includes two sessions conducted by creativity and advertising professionals. This started in 2018 and is aimed at motivating students’ creativity and thoughtfulness. Each participant is offered four statements and has to present a solution which solves the initial problem in a creative and non-conventional way.

4. Preliminary results

These measures are created to improve the work insertion of graduates and check the evolution of the students. From the academic year 2016-2017 all the students are studying the BA with the new curriculum and are supposed to graduate in 2020.

4.1. “Plan for the improvement of the Catalan language”

The data obtained from the marks of the plan for the improvement of the Catalan language demonstrates a positive evolution in the written expression of students.

Table 1. Marks obtained by students. “Plan for the Improvement of the catalan Language”.

Academic year of test		2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
1st year students	Amount of assignments corrected	84	86	85
	Students who scored grades D and E (fail)	76,19%	67,44%	63,53%
2nd year students	Amount of assignments corrected		75	72
	Students who scored grades D and E (fail)		41,33%	13,88%
3rd year students	Amount of assignments corrected			90
	Students who scored grades D and E (fail)			28,89%

Source: own elaboration from SLM (Modern Language Services) University of Girona (2019).

4.2. Job insertion index

In 2018 a study about work insertion of former students of the BA in Advertising and Public Relations was developed. The study was formed by former students who graduated in 2012 and a group of students who graduated in 2016. Those students who graduated in 2012 were the first batch of the BA degree in four-year. The participants in the study who graduated in 2016 were the ones who had switched from old curriculum to new curriculum. The main result of this study indicated that there is a relationship between internships and work insertion. Most students who had chosen top companies for their internships found it easier to find a job once they graduated. This fact is supported by the idea that “placements, internships and work-based learning opportunities are an effective way of providing university students with relevant employment skills, knowledge and awareness of employer culture.” (SCRE Centre, 2011:30). It is very important to emphasize the relationship between the increasing number of subjects specialized on online content and audiovisual production techniques and the improvements in employability figures. Since we are reinforcing these types of skills that companies need, many of our students are involved in their first job, in most cases as Community managers.

4.3. Amount of incoming and outgoing students

According to the data provided by the External Relations of the Faculty of Tourism, the students who participate in a mobility program has increased. This evolution can be an indicator of internationalization.

Table 2. Evolution of outgoing students BA in Advertising and Public Relations.

2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
11	9	18	23	27	31

Sources: own elaboration from Universitat de Girona.

4.4. Minimum grade evolution and demands as first option

The availability of places to study this degree is limited to 80 students for each promotion, however the demand to study this bachelor programme is higher than this figure shows.

Table 3. Evolution of quantitative data of the BA in Advertising and Public Relations.

Academic year	Places available	Demand as first option	New intake of students	Percentage of students in first option	Cut-off mark (june)
2015-16	80	81	87	91,25	7,858
2016-17	80	139	87	91,25	
2017-18	80	128	91	88,68	8,64
2018-19	80	126	90	86,67	8,812

Sources: own elaboration from Universitat de Girona.

5. Conclusions

Universities should provide students with fulfilling challenges, supervise their learning process, motivate the innovative learning and offer valuable contents. Every action should focus on the development of skills and competences oriented to the student satisfaction and employability. They should empower students to become critical thinkers, empathetic leaders and decisive and flexible professionals. Before the graduation of the first promotion of the students who followed the new version of the BA (2016-2020) and not having more data, we can preliminary affirm that the new design of the curriculum of the BA has been useful for improving students in almost all the study areas detailed here, as written expression, audiovisual and online Skills. In comparison to the first results, the marks have improved steadily.

Regarding the number of outgoing students, this figure has increased during the two periods. Moreover, some students decide to arrange their internships with international companies. It is an indicator that curricular contents are oriented to internationalization. According to the impression of the students who enrol in subjects with a professional approach and are

assessed through project-learning methods, their grade of satisfaction is very positive. In the surveys they mention qualitative significant items such as “due to this project-learning method I have learnt how to deal with a real customer”, “some customers do not know exactly what they want to promote” or “Now I know clearly what I want to be as a professional”. This indicator can be related with the increasing employability we noticed. Despite living in an environment still troubled by the economic recession, it is easy to find examples of students who find their first job thanks to their internship in companies, and as we said before, also linked to online communication jobs, that are the sign of the new era of communication. To sum up, the aspects which generate added value to the new BA make a difference between similar degree programmes offered by other universities, even older than the University of Girona, are the Adobe courses, the conferences “Entre Subjectes & Atributs”, the Plan for Improvement of expression in the Catalan language, the broadcasting company ruled by students as well as the approach between theoretical and professional practices. These improvements ensure the focus on the skills which can help employers to choose students from the BA of Advertising and Public Relations of the Faculty of Tourism-University of Girona. As Gil-Galván, R. (2011:529) suggests “the required level of organizational competences and leadership information significantly increases job satisfaction.” Hence, reaching optimal levels of motivation and satisfaction towards learning can lead to higher satisfaction in the workplace.

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