

EXPERIENCES TO KEEP UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ENGAGED AND AVOID STUDENT DROP-OUT: SOME BEST PRACTICE EXAMPLES FOR FRENCH STUDIES

A. Ruyffelaert

University of Granada (SPAIN)

Abstract

The final report of 2016 for the renewal of the accreditation [1] of the “Bachelor’s Degree in French Studies” of the University of Granada (UGR), prepared by the Direction of Evaluation and Accreditation of the Andalusian Knowledge Agency (DEVA-AAC) mentioned a number of problems that afflict the Degree. In this context, the graduation rate, the initial drop-out rate and the cumulative drop-out rate were highlighted. The teaching team of the Department of French Philology is very aware that such rates are unacceptable, since the first rate is below the average of all studies at the UGR, even below similar studies (Art and Humanities).

Since several academic years, this team has been working on improvement actions aimed at remedying this situation, analyzing the causes of this abandonment, and proposing a series of specific actions. We understand, however, that there is no magic wand, that such a problem is due to a multitude of factors, and that in some cases the scope for action is limited as it affects variables that are beyond direct control (orientation in secondary education, organization of teaching, absence of level tests in accessing university, number of students,...). On the other hand, we understand that we have a real responsibility in one of the parameters that decisively influence the success, drop-out, efficiency and performance rates of our students, such as the impact on the learning culture with which they approach their studies at university, their attitudes and their involvement in learning.

It is clear that intervention in these factors involves slow work, as is any change in cultural patterns and behaviors. And it cannot therefore be pretended that the actions we have undertaken provide an immediate solution, but rather mark a path that will lead, with the efforts of all the sectors involved (teachers, students, university administration, quality unit), towards a progressive reduction of such drop-out rates, and the improvement of the rest of the indicators to which we have alluded (success, efficiency, performance).

The Quality Improvement Plan, approved in 2016, and put into action since the academic year 2016-2017, includes a series of sections and several actions in order to avoid abandonment and improving student engagement.

Finally, we would like to point out that the implementation of these actions has led to an improvement in some of the rates indicated above, which encourages us to maintain them, strengthen them and personalize them. We can indeed see that, in the last years, the rate of initial abandonment and accumulated abandonment have improved significantly, although the graduation rate (completion of studies in the planned years) needs a follow-up.

Keywords: Innovation, student engagement, drop-out, Degree in French Studies, best practice examples.

1 INTRODUCTION

In Spanish Higher Education, the renewal of accreditation is the process by which it is ensured that the official bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees are being implemented in accordance with the verified report, with adequate resources and supported by an Internal Quality Assurance System that allows for the effective improvement of the degree [1].

In this context, the final report of 2016 for the renewal of the accreditation of the “Bachelor’s Degree in French Studies” of the University of Granada (UGR) [2], prepared by the Direction of Evaluation and Accreditation of the Andalusian Knowledge Agency (DEVA-AAC) [1] mentioned a number of problems that afflict the Degree, among which certain rates are highlighted: the graduation rate (26.67%), the initial drop-out rate (26.15%) and the cumulative drop-out rate (43.75%).

Table 1. Academic performance indicators (in %) of the Bachelor's Degree in French Studies at the UGR between 2015 and 2018.

	2015	2016	2017	2018
<i>Rate of return on investment</i>	71.5	70.8	71.51	66.71
<i>Success rate</i>	79.12	79.02	80.85	78.09
<i>Graduation Rate</i>	34.33	43.48	28.81	39.66
<i>Efficiency rate</i>	95.36	98.44	96.36	92.07
<i>Cumulative abandonment rate</i>	51.43	38.36	48.57	43.75
<i>Initial drop-out rate</i>	37.14	34.38	42.42	26.15

The data from 2018 are of special importance. The teaching team of the Bachelor's Degree in French Studies is very aware that such rates are unacceptable, since the first rate is below the average of all studies at the UGR, even below similar studies (Art and Humanities) [2].

Since several academic years (from 2012-2013, when these problems began to be noticed), this team has been working on improvement actions aimed at remedying this situation, analyzing the causes of this abandonment, and proposing a series of specific actions, previously described [3-12]. However, such a problem is due to a multitude of factors, and in some cases the scope for action is limited as it affects variables that are beyond direct control (orientation in secondary education, organization of teaching, absence of level tests in accessing university, number of students,...). On the other hand, we understand that we have a real responsibility in one of the parameters that decisively influence the success, drop-out, efficiency and performance rates of our students, such as the impact on the learning culture with which they approach their studies at university, their attitudes and their engagement in learning.

The Quality Improvement Plan, approved in 2016 and put into action since the academic year 2016-2017, included a series of sections and several actions in order to avoid abandonment and to improve student engagement. Therefore, the aim of this study is to describe some best practice examples for French Studies to keep university students engaged and avoid drop-out. In the following sections, these actions are presented and results are discussed.

2 METHODOLOGY

As mentioned before, the Quality Improvement Plan of 2016 included a series of sections, which are presented below in the form of a list. It is necessary to know them in order to understand the actions. Details will only be given about the sections (with their corresponding actions), specifically directed towards the object of this study (in its double aspect: avoiding drop-out and improving student engagement):

- 1 Update of teachers in the use of current useful computer tools for the teaching and learning of French language and culture [...].
- 2 Concretion of the templates ("rubrics") which establish the criteria for the evaluation of the undergraduate dissertation taking into account the particularities for the Bachelor's Degree in French Studies.
- 3 Improvement of the coordination between the teachers of the different subjects per course fundamentally in a horizontal sense, as well as, in a parallel and complementary way, in a vertical sense.
- 4 Involvement and responsibility of students in quality education and in academic and cultural matters.

Actions:

- Awareness-raising actions (about the presence in education, participation, interest, motivation...)
- Appointment of a tutor (teacher) per course.
- Meetings with course delegates.
- Compilation of a distribution list with all the students of the Degree, and periodic sending of information.

- Implementation of cultural activities.
- 5 Achievement by the students of the pragmatic and textual competences, forming part of "academic literacy", as well as of the specific skills of the "oral exposition", both necessary for the realization and defense of the undergraduate dissertation of the Bachelor's Degree in French Studies.
- Actions:
- Strengthening of such skills in different subjects.
 - Formation of volunteer working groups, led by a teacher as group tutorials or workshops, about reading skills, commentary of texts, oral expositions and written texts.
- 6 Reduction of school absenteeism and drop-out rate.
- Actions:
- To improve pre-university orientation.
 - To take an initial, standardized language level test.
 - To realize a complete follow-up of attendance to classes, class participation and absenteeism.
 - To pass, at the beginning of the course, a questionnaire about aspects that affect the students' performance and motivation for the Bachelor's Degree in French Studies.
 - The appointment of a tutor per course.
 - After the analysis of the obtained data, realization of interviews with the students (individual or in groups of 2-3 students), by the tutor and the coordinator of the Bachelor's Degree in French Studies.
 - Establishment of "a help network" among students, to improve information and solve eventual problems of follow-up in the different subjects.
 - To improve the coordination among teachers, especially in the first and second years.

3 RESULTS

It is clear that intervention in these factors involves slow work, as is any change in cultural patterns and behaviors. And it cannot therefore be pretended that the actions we have undertaken provide an immediate solution, but rather mark a path that will lead, with the efforts of all the sectors involved (teachers, students, university administration, quality unit), towards a progressive reduction of such drop-out rates, and the improvement of the rest of the indicators to which we have alluded (success, efficiency, performance).

3.1 Academic performance indicators

3.1.1 Academic Performance Indicators of the Bachelor's Degree in French Studies

The academic performance indicators of the Bachelor's Degree in French Studies between 2016 and 2020 are presented in table 2.

Table 2. Academic performance indicators (in %) of the Bachelor's Degree in French Studies at the UGR between 2016 and 2020.

	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020
Graduation Rate	28.81	39.66	29.82	36.36
Drop-out rate	48.57	43.75	48.48	37.50
Initial drop-out rate	42.42	26.15	25.37	27.27
Rate of return on investment	71.51	66.71	71.04	82.97
Success rate	80.85	78.09	83.39	92.44
Efficiency rate	96.36	92.07	94.99	95.65

3.1.2 Academic Performance Indicators of Other Degrees in the same Branch of Knowledge

The academic performance rates of other Degrees in the same branch of are presented in table 3.

Table 3. Academic performance indicators (in %) of other degrees in the same branch of knowledge, at the UGR, in Andalusia and on national level.

		2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019
Graduation rate	UGR average	37.20	39.00	38.00
	Andalusia average	40.10	37.70	38.80
	National average	46.50	46.80	46.90
Efficiency rate	UGR average	87.20	86.30	87.10
	Andalusia average	86.90	85.90	86.00
	National average	88.90	88.50	88.70
Drop-out rate	UGR average	28.90	32.30	28.60
	Andalusia average	32.30	32.90	30.90
	National average	42.60	42.20	42.60
Rate of return on investment	UGR average	78.30	77.40	78.20
	Andalusia average	76.70	75.90	75.90
	National average	80.30	80.20	80.30
Success rate	UGR average	89.70	89.60	89.80
	Andalusia average	88.30	88.30	88.30
	National average	90.40	90.60	90.50
Initial drop-out rate	UGR average	18.00	19.00	19.00
	Andalusia average	19.90	19.80	19.80
	National average	27.70	28.40	28.60

3.2 Discussion of the academic performance indicators

In view of these results and their comparison with those of the UGR/Andalusia/National, we assess that the success rate (i.e. the ratio between credits passed and credits presented for examination) shows a positive trend since the accreditation of the degree: it reaches 92.44% in 2019/20 surpassing the lowest figure obtained in 2017/18 of 78.09 by 14 percentage points. The target value set in the Verification Report of 87.00% is thus fully achieved for the first time. The average value of the overall success rate of the UGR ranges between 89.60% and 89.80%, with the average value of this rate in undergraduate degrees in the branch of Arts and Humanities being 95.51% (academic year 2019/20). Thus, the success rate of the Bachelor's Degree in French Studies is slightly lower than that of the branch, but it falls within the general parameters of the UGR.

Performance rate or rate of return on investment (i.e. the percentage of students who pass a subject with respect to those enrolled), clearly increases (82.97) in the 2019/20 academic year by 11 points with respect to previous years. This figure is also above the UGR/Andalusian/National average. If we add both rates (success and performance) we can affirm that more students have applied in 2019/20 than in previous years and have also passed more exams. This same trend is confirmed in the efficiency rate, which is consolidated at 95.65 in 2019/20.

In relation to the graduation rate (36.36), drop-out rate (37.50) and initial drop-out rate (27.27) for 2019/20, we highlight, firstly, the consolidation of the fall in the drop-out and initial drop-out rates since 2016/17, whose figures stood at 48.57 and 42.42 respectively. Similarly, the graduation rate has risen by around five points. All this thanks to the implementation of numerous improvement actions, which have inspired and continue to inspire the strategic horizon of our work, such as (among others):

- Improving coordination between teachers,
- Reviewing syllabuses (distribution of subjects, review of content, identification of overlaps, etc.),

- Reviewing the level of demand (especially for basic subjects in the initial courses), facilitating an equitable distribution between more and less demanding subjects and ensuring their adaptation to the calendar and real time,
- To homogenize assessment systems between subjects within the same year and degree,
- Adapting timetables to the demands of students,
- Improve the teaching guides of the subjects: clearly indicate teaching methodologies, assessment systems...
- Encouraging the participation of teaching staff in teacher training courses that provide them with strategies adapted to the new methodologies,
- Ensuring coordination between teachers through the implementation of regular meetings,
- Encouraging class attendance.

We would like to highlight that, in this drop in the drop-out rates, the qualitative improvement that has been achieved by having, from the 2018/19 academic year onwards, the possibility of splitting all first-year French language subjects, and from 2020/21 of some second-year subjects has played a very important role.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Finally, we would like to point out that the implementation of these actions has led to an improvement in some of the rates indicated and discussed above, which encourages us to maintain them, strengthen them and personalize them. We can indeed see that in the following time distribution (between the years 2015 and 2020), on the one hand, the rate of initial abandonment and accumulated abandonment have improved significantly and, on the other hand similar positive results are observed for success rate and rate of return on investment. In terms of the efficiency rate, it is maintained.

Even so, three indicators (graduation, drop-out and initial abandonment) are still below what could be expected, as shown by their comparison with those of the UGR and Andalusia (but not with the national average), which indicates that continuous attention must be paid to their improvement, with the conviction that they will continue to be corrected overall in the coming years.

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