

ANALYSIS OF THE VIEWS OF A GROUP OF UNDERGRADUATES ON THE FACTORS MOTIVATING THEM TO CHOOSE THEIR STUDIES

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I. INTRODUCCION

This research aims at discovering the motives which led students to choose a degree in Geography and Territorial Organization in the University of the Basque Country. Students from the four undergraduates courses were interviewed and their memories of their previous studies were recorded. We wished to find out the areas of study which they found most conducive and the subjects they had studied prior to entering university. A definition of geographic science was outlined from student perspectives with a view to discovering their social image of this science. This definition was constructed from the ideas they held before entering university. We also find it interesting to evaluate student opinion in order to detect possible areas of improvement for future revisions of the degree programme. The work we outline here is essentially exploratory.

One of the pillars which constitutes the theoretical basis of this study is the White Paper on Geography and Territorial Organization (ANECA 2005) which was designed to assist universities in making the transition from older programmes of study to degree programmes incorporated within the Bologna Process. The demands of the European Higher Education

Area led to an in-depth academic study of the status quo within Geography degrees across Europe, and of the insertion of graduates into the labour market. It also studied the degree of conformity with the demands of contemporary society.

As recent studies have shown, students registering for this degree do not have a precise idea of what they are going to find. This can be seen, for example, in the analysis carried out by the University of Seville on first year undergraduates studying for a degree in Geography and Territorial Management (Garrido, Galindo, García, y López, 2011). The principal objective of this study was to analyse the causes underlying the failure of these studies to attract more students. The principal results highlighted the vocational character of the choice these students had made and students' ignorance regarding the nature of geographic studies, despite the efforts made by universities to inform prospective students at Open Days, Prospective Student Conventions, etc.

According to Marrón (2011), geographic science has a high educational potential, since it enables students to acquire knowledge which is useful in everyday life, and leads to an understanding of the world and the processes to which it is subject both on a territorial and a social level. It is important therefore to orient students regarding the real goal of these studies, which goes a long way beyond mere memory-based learning.

The historic evolution of this science leads to an understanding of three fundamental questions which can be taken as the focus of discussion: the definition of the specific objective of geographic studies, the application of scientific methods to this discipline, and the discussion regarding the unity of geography in itself (Capel, 1981, 1998; Estébanez, 1982; Johnston y Claval, 1986; Unwin, 1995).

This science is generally associated with encyclopaedic knowledge (names of cities, heights of mountains, rivers, etc.), drawing maps, and descriptions of journeys, etc. This association is not specific to any one country (Holt-Jensen, 1992).

The need to adapt to new demands and technological advances has obliged geographers to create a competitive definition, with the result that we can today define geography as the science that studies, and not merely describes, the variations and distribution of phenomena on the earth's surface - abiotic, biotic, and cultural - and the relations between these. This constitutes its basic objective, giving rise to concepts such as Territorial Organization or Environment.

This view of geography as a science of the territory greatly influenced programmes for the new degrees. In the design of these degrees various tendencies were taken into consideration: socio-cultural, politico-institutional, disciplinary and epistemological, all combined with educational practice (Fernández and Gurevich, 2010).

To get an idea of the general conception of this science among the ordinary population it is necessary to analyse the ideas previously held by students before commencing their studies. In our study, these previously-held ideas led to the construction of social representations which are far removed from what is really involved in geographic studies. These representations may be regarded as obsolete and belong to outdated conceptions which relate geography with purely memory-based data or the interpretation of maps and descriptions of differing climates. Traditionally, Geography (the degree) was associated with second, third and fourth options within students' university entrance choices (Esparcia y Sánchez, 2012). Students registering for Geography do not normally count it among their first preferences, and have

little exact knowledge of the nature of these studies or what to expect. This leads to an attitude which is, initially at least, unreceptive. Similar results were obtained by Miranda (2006).

The present research was carried out with the following objectives: i) to obtain a precise idea of previously-held ideas regarding the nature of geography, which students had before commencing these studies, ii) to extract from definitions provided by the students themselves a definition of what they regard as geography, iii) to determine to what extent their decision to pursue a degree in geography is vocational and to discover their future expectations regarding their choice of career.

II. METHOD

To discover the motives which led these students to pursue a career in geography, a questionnaire was prepared and submitted to all students who registered for geography in the University of the Basque Country during the 2011-12 course and to all students registered in the first course during 2012-13. For the analysis of the data we first carried out a content analysis from which we developed a Categorical System (see Fig. 1) in which categories are sequentially ordered in terms of their significance and not in terms of the number of replies obtained. The Categorical System was then used to order the results.

This content analysis, according to Bisquerra and Sabariego (2004), allows us to obtain a first impression and visualization of the participants and their relationship with the object of study. Qualitative polls “are instruments which serve to discover the significance of the constructs utilized by each person and are projective proofs into which we are led by the significance attributed by the participants to certain concepts” (Goetz y Lecompte, 1988, p.126). In this way, by using open-ended questions, the information obtained is “rich in nuances” (Bisquerra y Sabariego, 2004, p. 337).

The questions used in the questionnaire were: Place occupied by Geography in your initial university studies options? Why did you choose to study Geography? What were your expectations regarding the nature of studies in Geography? What is geography for you? Give five words which describe your conception of geography as a university and knowledge discipline! Which areas of geography most interest you? Which area appeals to you most? What areas of geography do you remember from your secondary education? ... The questionnaire was drawn up specifically for this research and was previously tried out on a sample group before being administered to all students. In this we were guided by Goetz and LeCompte (1988, p. 135) who state “before administering a questionnaire it is necessary to ascertain if the questions make sense to the target population and if they produce the data we wish to uncover”.

The research was carried out among Geography students in the Faculty of Letters in the University of the Basque Country. During 2011-12, 77 undergraduates out of 107 registered completed the questionnaire (72% of those registered). In 2012-13 the questionnaire was administered only to first-year students, with 38 of the 43 students registered completing it, i.e. 88% of the total (Table 1). In all, 117 students out of a total of 150 completed the questionnaire, 78% of the total participants.

Procedure (practical administration): All Geography students had access to the questionnaire. The majority completed it during class hours in one of the computer labs which had

been specifically set aside for the task. Those who did not attend class were sent a web page address by email. Once the data obtained had been analysed, a report was prepared.

III. RESULTS

In this section we outline students' motives for choosing Geography, their previously-held ideas and expectations regarding these studies, their definition of geography and the terms they associate with this discipline, as well as their preferred area within geography itself. To complete this information, we gathered data regarding the subjects they studied during their Secondary education related to this discipline and the position occupied by Geography in their choice of university studies.

III.1. Motives for choosing a degree in Geography

In their choice of studies we find personal, professional, and academic motives as well as motives related to their social environment.

To the category of *personal* motives we attributed replies which refer to their hobbies, their interests and their desire to learn, as well as those which indicate a direct interest in geography. In the area relating to their hobbies we find replies which relate to the physical aspects of the discipline, such as an interest in the natural world and in hiking and mountaineering.

Professional motives are mostly related to optimistic expectations regarding their insertion in the labour market. They believe that present-day studies in geography give them an advantage in the labour market as compared with older programmes related to this discipline.

Academic motives have to do with their failure to achieve sufficiently high results in the University Entrance Exams to be admitted into degree programmes in other disciplines and it can be seen that the fact that there is no cut-off point in gaining access to Geography has a lot to do with this choice.

Their previous academic experience is important, and can be definitive, both with regard to their experience with subjects and their experience with teachers. A final academic motive has to do with the attraction exerted by the actual content of the degree programme.

Motives relating to their *social environment* have to do with their families or friends, both of which play an important role in their choice of studies.

III.2. Geographic studies in relation to previously-held ideas and expectations

When questioned about their *expectations regarding the nature of the studies* they had undertaken, there were numerous responses stating that these had not been fulfilled.

Certain replies indicate that they had expected a direct continuation of their secondary studies and emphasise the importance of the secondary subjects studied in acquiring knowledge of the different sciences. In this respect, Geography may constitute a single subject or form half of a single subject together with History, depending on the choice made within the Secondary Studies programme.

All the responses in this section, 21% of the total, refer to an excess of subjects not directly related to Geography itself, and they mention History, Philosophy, Oral and Written

Expression, and Economics. All these responses correspond to first and second year students. They complain that the weight accorded to these subjects in the total number of credits necessary for graduation takes away from their specific formation as Geographers and so makes them less qualified for the labour market.

In their responses regarding the *different areas of Geography*, more than a third of the students (38%) reply that they expected to find subjects related to the different geographic areas, the traditional areas of Physical and Human Geography, that of Regional Geography, and the area of technical subjects (cartography, GIS,...). Of these four areas, Physical Geography is the one most frequently found among the responses provided.

In so far as *geographic concepts studied during their secondary education* are concerned, they mention all the subjects previously studied. Terms that stand out in their replies are “relief” and “capitals”, both of which are related with traditional geography, though not so much with modern geography, and which continue to have an important weight in secondary education. The 117 participants remembered between 2 and 4 areas, giving a total of 364 areas in all remembered from their previous studies. These we have grouped into different categories and they are shown in Fig. 3. To the already-mentioned “relief” and “capital cities”, the most important areas to be added have to do with Climatology, Cartography, Physical Geography, Population Geography, Political Geography and themes related to Economics.

III.3. The modern concept of geography.

From the students we get a very complete definition of geography. In some cases, they limit themselves to a definition of geography by means of adjectives, while in others they analyse more deeply geographic studies.

They understand geography *in terms of a study of the planet, Earth*. Specifically 76% of the replies received fit into this category, thus clarifying the object of study of geography as the Earth, this planet, or the earth’s surface. We find references to the planet, the study of its evolution, or its physical part, the interrelationship among its elements, the interpretation and integrated study of its territory.

There are 36 responses referring to the integrated study of the territory (31%). They claim that the task of geography is the study of humans (Economics, History, Population...) and also the study of the natural environment (climate, geomorphology, edaphology, hydrology...). There are no traces here of the historic dichotomy we find in geography. Other concepts relate geography with the definition of Science and refer generally to geographic science (26% of the responses fall into this category).

III.4. Definition of geography by concepts

There are numerous concepts related with geography which, though not directly derived from geography itself, form part of the day-to-day world of this discipline. Among these terms, a number stand out such as “territorial administration or management”, “space”, “analysis”, “relations or interrelations”, “research”, “diversity”, “description”.

In the area of Physical Geography, climatology, the environment, flora and fauna, are terms which appear in both questions with more or less equal regularity. In the area of Human Geography population is mentioned with almost equal regularity in both cases, while economics, a term they remember from their secondary education, is not a term that they relate so much with geography today.

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Geography is a minority option among students who enter university for the first time. In many cases, secondary students do not know what is included in the area of geographic studies and their knowledge is limited to what they saw in the text book used in class.

Thanks to the questionnaire we have seen that in some cases students are driven to choose this discipline by personal motivation related to a liking for the natural world while in others they are motivated by positive experiences relating to this subject during their secondary education.

Academic motivation is related with low results obtained in the University Entrance Exam which impeded them from choosing their most favoured choices, and so they end up in Geography (42% affirm that Geography was not their first option). The rate of drop-outs may be related to this; if a student has little incentive to study, it is very likely that he or she will lose motivation and give up. This is referred to in the study carried out by Esparcia and Sánchez (2012) where Geography is referred to as a refuge for second, third and even fourth options within students' choices.

A second conclusion that can be drawn is that in spite of the distribution of information among prospective students, only 25% found that their studies corresponded with what they had expected. 38% of participants expected to find subjects related to the different geographic areas, without specifying whether they had explicit knowledge of the content. The other 21% find an excessive load of subjects extraneous to geography which may interfere with a more complete formation as geographers. The data obtained here coincide with the findings of Garrido, Galindo, García, and López (2011), where it is evident that the student who registers for Geography does not have an exact idea of the content of these studies. And this in spite of the efforts made by the University of the Basque Country and the Faculty of Letters to distribute information through Open Days, Prospective Student Conventions, talks, etc.

In so far as the search for a definition of geography is concerned, this group of students define it as a science, the principal object of which is an integrated study of our planet and the earth's surface as well as the relation that exists between humans and the physical environment. The terms which they find useful to define geography are climatology, territory or cartography, terms very closely related to traditional notions of geography and which show that previously-acquired notions are deeply rooted, and have been acquired not only through their educational training previous to their university entrance but also through their relations with the environment and their everyday experience of life, areas which can constitute an impediment towards understanding and knowledge (Rayas, 2004).

The most common reply was the study of relief and of nature, though we also find other disciplines such as Economics or Politics, these latter being less frequent than the more

traditional climatology. However, it is to be noted that they are higher in frequency than cartography and the study of capital cities. In the degree programme, the integrated study of the territory occupies a prominent place superseding the classical terminology associated with geography, such as maps, relief, or climate. This initial contact with qualitative research has enabled us to identify certain behaviours which are repeated year after year among new undergraduates and which could form the basis for further and wider research. In conclusion, it can be affirmed that students choose to pursue a degree in Geography mainly for two reasons: on the one hand because of a genuine interest in this field, and on the other hand because of low results obtained in their University Entrance Exams. When students are asked to define geography, the expression most used is «the study of relations within the territory». When asked to define geography with a list of terms, the terms most frequently used are climatology, cartography and territory. The areas that they most easily remember from their previous secondary school studies are: nature, relief, climatology, economics, politics and territory. New degree students, as compared with their congeners in older programmes of study, show a certain dissatisfaction with subjects not directly related with geography itself.

