COMPETENCE-BASED PLANNING IN MASTERS: A CHALLENGE FOR THE UNIVERSITY FACULTY

[*La planificación basada en competencias en los masteres oficiales: un reto para el profesorado universitario*]

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Abstract

To focus the attention on competences means a radical change for the teaching design. It is one of the places where the most effective changes are expected. The research presented here tries to analyze the way that competences are used when describing official Master degrees. The competences of 87 Master degrees from 9 universities are analyzed. The results show that most Masters do not specify their competences. The most common ones refer to the knowledge application and that an enormous heterogeneity exists when classifying the types of competences.

Resumen

Desde la planificación docente, centrar la atención en las competencias supone un giro radical. Es uno de los elementos en los que se aspira a que se introduzcan cambios efectivos para dar respuesta a las demandas que plantea el Espacio Europeo de Educación Superior. La investigación que aquí se presenta pretende comprobar cómo se conciben las competencias en la planificación de los másteres oficiales. Se analizan las competencias de 87 másteres de 9 universidades españolas. Los resultados reflejan que la mayoría de másteres no explicitan sus competencias, que las más comunes están referidas a la aplicación de conocimientos y que existe una gran heterogeneidad a la hora de clasificar los tipos de competencias.

Keywords

Competence, competence-based teaching, assessment procedures, official Master degree, European Higher Education Area

Descriptores

Competencia, Formación Basada en Competencias, Procedimiento de Evaluación, Másteres Oficiales, Espacio Europeo de Educación Superior

The implementation of the European Higher Education Area is requiring a change in the approach to planning and developing learning and the target competences to be developed are meant to play a central role. It should be borne in mind that Royal Decree 1393/2007, which establishes the regulations for official university studies, states that "thus, the goals of curricula that lead to the awarding of degrees must focus on the **acquisition of competences** by students, expanding - without excluding - the traditional approach based on contents and classroom hours." In this regard, studies such as those by Briggs, Stark, and Rowland-Poplawski (2003), Ibarra and Rodríguez (2005) and Stark, Briggs and Row-

land-Poplawski (2002) highlight the importance of educational programme design as an organising element of university activity.

The study presented here [1] , based on an analysis of a series of Masters programmes regulated by Royal Decree 1393/2007, analyses the way in which academic university staff are conceptualising and defining professional-academic competences. First, we present the conceptual framework of the research, which revolves around the concept of competence and its assessment. Afterwards, an explanation of the research conducted is offered and its basic methodological aspects described. The study concludes with a presentation of the conclusions drawn and the main implications that can be inferred for the university context.

Competences and programme design

The regulations that govern university studies in Spain contain the term "competence" as the end goal to be achieved with students; thus, competences must be a key reference in the quality of university teaching. Despite the evident importance assigned by the legislation – and RD 1393/2007 cites the term "competence" on 21 occasions - what is understood by the term and how it must be defined or formulated is not specified at any time.

A multitude of studies and articles that attempt to define the concept of competence have recently appeared. One of the earliest references can be found in Zabalza (2003:71), which cites the definition put forward by the National Institute of Employment in 1987 that refers to competence as "the set of knowledge, expertise, skills and abilities that allow professionals to perform and develop work roles at levels required for employment".

This definition has been completed and specified in subsequent studies that highlight several different aspects that help us understand the term "competence" within the university context. In this respect, they state that competences involve a number of different cognitive

resources (Perrenoud, 2004) or levels of knowledge (Le Boterf in Cano, 2005), to which Gallart and Jacinto (Cano, 2005:19) add the adjective "reasoned"; thus, competences are a "series of constantly changing properties". Other authors emphasise the applied nature that competences should have; thus, Villa and Poblete (2007) refer to performance in various contexts, Gairín *et al* (2009) speak of the integration of knowledge, skills and attitudes to perform a specific task and the EvalCOMIX Project (Ibarra, 2008) states that competences allow academic and/or professional actions to be performed.

Furthermore, in the document entitled "Guidelines for devising undergraduate and Masters degrees", the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science (MES) indicates that competence is conceptualised as the "combination of knowledge, (intellectual, manual, social, etc.) skills, attitudes and values that enable a person to face problem solving and interventions successfully within a certain academic, professional or social context." (MES, 2006).

In short, we consider competence to be a latent attribute, knowledge, attitude, ability, skill and faculty for performing a profession, job or academic action, with the proper and appropriate execution of the required academic or job-related activities and actions (Ibarra and Rodríguez, 2010).

Thus, placing students' acquisition of competences in the centre of university education highlights one of the traditional primary functions of higher education: professionalisation.

The principal goal of education for job performance must be to train students as future professionals and provide them with the conditions for developing not only their knowledge of the discipline that defines their professional field, but also the way in which to handle pertinent strategies and action techniques, as well as the attitudes needed to respond satisfactorily to the demands that will be posed by the exercise of their professions

within different possible professional contexts. This competence-based education must be completed in the professional and work sphere, yet universities are duty bound to redesign their degrees so that students begin to work on these competences within the academic realm that immediately precedes the start of their professional lives.

This new approach is based on the conceptualisation known as "Competence-Based Education" (CBE) (Yániz, 2006; Rué, 2008). In this sense, we must bear in mind that the CBE's main referent is each profession's competence-related profile, i.e., **professional profiles** understood as the "set of competences demanded by society and employers in and for the performance of a certain profession or occupation in a specific work environment" (Álvarez and Escudero, 2008: 36). Thus, competence-related profiles within this education are an indispensible element of university programme design and these competences will continue to be developed and specialised in work institutions and work places.

Nevertheless, universities as institutions of higher learning must orient their education beyond the specific competences strictly related to the exercise of a particular profession. In this respect, CBE also includes the so-called general academic (generic) competences needed to develop knowledge and transmit it. The capacity for autonomous learning, teamwork, the possession of a heightened ethical sense, originality and the promotion of research are several cross-sectional aspects that must be fostered in university education. In short, this is a question of helping educate not only competent professionals, but also informed, mature, critical and responsible citizens.

The final reference for configuring the CBE curricula each university must specify is the **professional-academic profile** of each degree, understood as "the set of competences required by society and employers for the responsible performance in society and the competent exercise of a particular profession" (Álvarez and Escudero, 2008: 35).

A synthesis of the foregoing means that the competence-based programme design of any education offer (module, subject or course) involves:

1st- Selecting the *general academic (generic), subject-specific or technical competences* to be developed.

2nd- Analysing, when applicable, these competences and breaking them down into *simpler units* for the purposes of teaching, learning and assessment.

3rd- Selecting and associating each competence or subcompetence with the *knowledge needed* for its performance, which involves formulating the syllabus of the discipline (Álvarez and Escudero, 2008: 40) and organising it in terms of designing teaching and learning activities, constructing and choosing materials, stages and strategies and distributing time in terms of ECTS credits.

4th- Designing assessment procedures that include tasks, criteria and instruments for assessing competences.

Competences as the object of assessment in official Masters programmes

One of the general principles for designing future degrees is established by Royal Decree 1393/2007, which regulates the formulation of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees: "Teaching must be organised with the objectives of adapting teaching and learning methods to the objective of student *acquisition of competences* (…)." And it states that "emphasis must be placed on the learning methods involved in these competences, as well as *procedures to assess their acquisition*."

An assessment procedure can be defined as the specified form of tasks and/or activities to be carried out by teachers and students to as-

certain and evaluate the level of students' competences. Thus, this means stating in detail the logic behind the assessment process to be followed, which should cover the assessment tasks to be carried out by students, assessment criteria, the modality (when applicable) of these tasks, the expected results or outcomes of assessment tasks and methods, techniques and instruments (Ibarra, Rodríguez and Gómez, 2008).

Specifically, the legislation in force states that "the study programmes leading to the awarding of Masters degrees will have between 60 and 120 credits that contain all the theoretical and practical education students must acquire: core and elective subjects, seminars, placement or "stage" fieldwork, guided personal studies, final Masters project work, ***assessment activities*** and others that may be needed according to characteristics specific to each degree." Hence, the relevance of assessing competences in Masters programmes, which should bring us closer to the new evaluative realities that reflect teaching and learning processes in keeping with the demands that the EHEA and global socioeconomic environment require of universities.

Assessment is one of the most important means of change and innovation, since it determines how and what our students learn. However, current evaluation systems and procedures emphasise work by the academic staff rather than student learning. We clearly need to rethink these systems and procedures and move from a model in which the academic staff passes out grades to one in which both teachers and students develop their assessment skills and, as a result, their education and professional-related competences.

This framework for reform, which requires students to confront new changes and apply critical thinking when studying different areas, together with the multi-dimensional definition and assessment of competences, demands new methods that introduce assessment strategies that are more comprehensive than traditional memorisation-based pen and paper exams in university classrooms.

Assessment in higher education as a focus of interest is of transcendental importance, since, as Boud (2006) claimed, "Students may escape from poor teaching through their own endeavours, but they are trapped by the consequences of poor assessment." Thus, the challenge facing academic university staff lies in involving students in significant and authentic assessment tasks, so that assessment and learning can be the two sides of a single coin and so that clear educational benefits can be gleaned from assessment activities carried out by teachers and/or students.

One of the first tasks to be addressed in an assessment process consists in determining the object of assessment, i.e., the situation about which information will be gathered in order to evaluate its merit and scope. As a result, the EvalCOMIX Project considered its first specific objective to be the analysis, determination and classification of the competences to be assessed in the Masters programmes in the field of social sciences at Spanish universities, with a fundamental interest in stipulating the competences of interest to designers of postgraduate education for their development and evaluation. If a satisfactory definition and specification of the competences to be developed is lacking, establishing suitable learning tasks and evaluation procedures will clearly be unfeasible. Thus, establishing competences will play a key role in the coherent and valid construction of university curricula.

In short, this study aims to provide a response to the following questions:

· *How do university professors conceptualise the competences and assessment to be developed in official Masters programmes?*
· *Which competences are specified as the object of assessment in official Masters programmes and what are these competences like?*

The following pages present the methodology that was followed in conducting this analysis

of competences in official Masters programmes at Spanish universities, as well as main results and conclusions that can be drawn.

METHOD

To conduct this research, a multiple case study was carried out that, as Rodríguez Gómez, Gil Flores and García Jiménez assert (1999: 96), allowed us "to study a situation that we wish to explore, describe, explain, evaluate or modify". In our case, the objectives were fundamentally of a descriptive/evaluative nature, for which nine cases - each of which corresponded to a participating university in the project - were used.

A research team responsible for its own study was formed at each university (or case). The results presented in this paper are the results of the global analysis of all these cases (9 universities).

Population and sample

Of the population composed of all the approved official Spanish Masters programmes offered during the 2007/08 academic year, pursuant to the contents of the study's framework project, we chose to focus our analysis on programmes in the area of social and legal sciences at the nine universities participating in the project. Thus, the cases studied were what Stake (1995) calls a "learning opportunity", since the participating researchers had easy access to information at their universities, thus constituting an incidental sample. The nine universities analysed were the universities of Cadiz, Granada, La Laguna, the Basque Country, Seville, Valencia and Zaragoza, the Complutense University and the UNED (Distance University).

On the basis of the results and conclusions presented by Ibarra (2009) and Rodríguez, Ibarra and Gómez (2008), we then expanded the Masters to be analysed by increasing the initial sample from 69 Masters programmes to a total of 87. These programmes were classified by taking into account the university at which they were offered and subject areas. The following table shows the total number of Masters programmes analysed at each university that participated in the study.

University	Masters	%
Cadiz	3	3.45
Complutense	14	16.09
Granada	9	10.34
La Laguna	6	6.90
The Basque Country	15	17.24
Seville	5	5.75
UNED	2	2.30
Valencia	28	32.18
Zaragoza	5	5.75
Total	*87*	*100*

Table 1: The Masters programmes studied, divided by participating universities

Fields referred to the places in which the Masters degree could be classified using the basic courses for the branches of knowledge established in Royal Decree 1393/2007 as a reference and a prior analysis of the data. The subject areas of business, communication, economy, education, psychology and sociology appeared in the aforementioned Royal Decree; in the preliminary study, we decided to eliminate the other subject areas that appear in the legislation and introduce the categories of cooperation and development, law, journalism, tourism and others, in order to agglutinate the areas that could not be classified in these subject matters.

As for the predominant subject areas of the Masters in the area of law and social sciences that were the object of research, table 2 offers the results of the classification by the field of knowledge in which these Masters are classified. It should be borne in mind that one single Masters degree could be assigned to more than one field, if its subject area so required. In all, 12 Masters were classified in more than one field. The total references of the analysed Masters are as follows:

List of Masters programmes analysed	n	%
Business Administration and Management	5	5.05
Communication	3	3.03
Cooperation and Development	11	11.11
Economics	20	20.20
Education	8	8.08
Law	7	7.07
Journalism	2	2.02
Psychology	16	16.16
Sociology	6	6.06
Tourism	2	2.02
Others	19	19.19
Total references	*99*	*100*

Table 2: References by field of the Masters programmes analysed

As can be seen, the Masters programmes in the fields of economics (20.20%), psychology (16.16%) and cooperation and development (11.11%) stand out. Together, these three fields accounted for almost half of the Masters analysed (47.91%).

The field of "Others" (19.19%) encompassed the Masters in the fields in equality, the environment, Arab cultures and occupational hazards, among others.

To conclude this section, we can say that although it is true that the sample's representativity cannot be established by the number of cases nor type of sampling, we wish to point out that the variability was adequate in terms of both participating universities (cases) with regard to size and geographical location, etc., as well as the fields and contents of the Masters programmes.

Instrumentation

To collect data, a record of Masters and competences was designed for each case in the study (9 universities) and completed on the basis of information on the area of social and legal sciences in the official Masters programme offered by the respective universities. These records reflected the modality of each Masters (face-to-face, blended or distance/online), the target competences and proposed assessment methodology in each degree, when information existed in this regard. After the records were completed, they were deposited in a collaborative virtual work space created to this end by the Basic Support for Cooperative Work (BSCW) software installed on the servers of the University of Cadiz (http://bscw.uca.es). The different documents were organised, reviewed and analysed by the research team at the University of Cadiz.

2.3. Analysis process

NVivo 7.0 software was used for a qualitative analysis of the data. First, the data were converted and transferred from the original table format of the records used as an instrument to a linear format that the NVivo software could comfortably use.

This analysis was based on **competence** categories**.** To establish these categories, we drew inspiration from the core competences described in Royal Decree 1393/2007 for Masters programmes. In order to examine the analysis in depth, we created two subcategories: *general academic (generic) competences* and *subject-specific competences*. Each category used a subject under which each competence was classified. Chart 1 enumerates the competences used in the classification.

COMPETENCES	
Applying knowledge	Generic competences
	Subject-specific competences
Learning autonomously	Generic competences
	Subject-specific competences
Communicating conclusions	Generic competences
	Subject-specific competences
Formulating reflective judgements	Generic competences
	Subject-specific competences
Integrating knowledge	Generic competences
	Subject-specific competences
Originality	Generic competences
	Subject-specific competences
Problem solving	Generic competences
	Subject-specific competences
Other competences	Generic competences
	Subject-specific competences

Chart 1: Distribution of competences

After the classification system was identified, the next step was to establish labels for the target Masters programmes and competences. The typologies of competences specified in the different Masters were:

1. Generic competences
2. Subject-specific competences
3. Basic competences
4. Professional competences
5. Additional competences
6. Research competences
7. Instrumental competences
8. Relational or interpersonal competences
9. Systemic competences

RESULTS

Heterogeneity in formulating and defining competences

In the first place, we found a high degree of heterogeneity in the definitions of competences whenever they appeared, since - as we shall see later - on several occasions, the target competences to be studied and assessed were not defined in the Masters programmes; instead, the aims were expressed in terms of traditional objectives, i.e., objectives sought by the activities and tasks developed in the official degrees.

Terminological diversity and taxonomical difficulties were very frequent in this sense, since several Masters programmes presented wide-ranging *ad hoc* classifications of competences or classifications based on several sources, such as the Tuning Project (González and Wagenaar, 2003). Thus, and as mentioned when referring to establishing labels corresponding to the target competences in the process of analysis, we found nine different types of competences, which varied according to the designs and plans in the Masters programmes analysed.

Objectives versus competences

Another relevant fact we observed is that not all the Masters programmes specified the competences they aim to develop. To the contrary, as can be seen in table 3, 58.62% of the degrees restricted themselves to indicating a list of purported objectives, without referring at all to competences. This seems to be a highly significant indicator of the issues affecting the design of the new Masters degrees with respect to CBE.

Total Masters		Masters that defined competences		Masters that defined objectives, not competences.		Masters that defined neither competences nor objectives	
N	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
87	100	35	40.23	51	58.62	1	1.15

Table 3: Definition of competences and objectives in the Masters programmes analysed

In view of this, we chose to include both the competences as well as the objectives specified in the Masters programmes in the classification, taking their content into account in order to be able to investigate their given meanings. In other words, starting with the difficulty in enunciating and defining competences - since the regulations make no references to guidelines or specifications for their formulation - we concentrated on ascertaining their scope or meaning instead of eliminating information under the criterion of incorrect drafting.

Competences developed in official Masters programmes: the primacy of knowledge

A total of 731 references were labelled and divided into the categories of generic (30%) and subject-specific (70%) competences during the classification process, as table 4 explains. These competences were differentiated when the data from the 9 universities were analysed together.

This analysis was conducted by researchers at the University of Cadiz, since the information from many cases or individual universities did not specify whether the competences or objectives (when applicable) were generic or subject-specific. As previously seen, diverse taxonomies in other situations existed that were modified in relation to the proposed study categories. All the same, we must recall that the classification into different competences referred to content, not to explanations as such in the analysed documents.

COMPETENCES	GENERIC		SUBJECT-SPECIFIC		TOTAL	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Applying knowledge	45	20.64	220	42.88	265	36.25
Learning autonomously	25	11.47	11	2.14	36	4.92
Communicating conclusions	30	13.76	27	5.26	57	7.80
Formulating reflective judgements	24	11.01	63	12.28	87	11.90
Integrating knowledge	10	4.59	21	4.09	31	4.24
Originality	13	5.96	13	2.53	26	3.56
Problem solving	12	5.50	19	3.70	31	4.24
Other competences	59	27.06	139	27.09	198	27.09
TOTAL	218	100	513	100	731	100

Table 4: Distribution of references by competence.

As can be seen, "applying knowledge" (20.64%), "communicating conclusions" (13.76%) and "learning autonomously" (11.47%) were the most frequently specified generic competences. As for subject-specific competences, "applying knowledge" remained firmly in first place with 42.88% of the references, followed by "formulating reflective judgements" (12.28%).

It is striking that in both categories, applying knowledge is the target competence to be developed in most cases (36.25% of all competences). The fact that more than one out of each three competences or objectives analysed in the official Masters programmes refers to knowledge can be interpreted as the on-going importance granted to the acquisition and application of knowledge, as compared to any other academic-professional skill or competence.

In the opposite case are competences such as "originality", "learning autonomously", "problem solving" and "integrating knowledge", which despite being covered as core competencies for the Masters programmes in the current legislation, do not even account for 5% of all the competences studied in any of the cases.

There are a total of 26 references to developing creativity and originality in the Masters programmes and 265 references to applying knowledge, which means that there are 10 times more references to the acquisition and application of theoretical knowledge for each target competence or objective.

Lastly, another salient aspect is that one out of each four competences could not be classified according to the indications in RD 1393/2007 (27.09% of other competences).

The meaning and definition of competences

One fundamental objective of this phase in the research within the EvalCOMIX Project's global context was to stipulate the meanings of the competences devised by the designers of the Masters programmes, in order to be able to offer assessment procedures that were coherent with them.

As explained above, a clear and correct definition of target competences is considered a cornerstone in the coherent design of teaching and learning processes and assessment procedures within university curricula.

In order to examine the analysed competences in more depth, below is a selection of the references classified according to competences. In chart 2, we set out in detail two examples per competence, both general and specific. In all, 32 examples are offered in order to be able to properly understand the meaning of competences given by the designers and the classifications made.

COMPETENCES	GENERIC	SUBJECT-SPECIFIC
Applying knowledge	"Training students to apply in an original and personal manner the theoretical frameworks studied to the explanation of concrete local or international problems on which their own research can be based." "The ability to transfer academic knowledge to different real situations."	"Detect manifestations of sexism in different societal spheres in order to transform and eliminate them by developing public or private actions." "Guide and advise professionals in intervention programmes that target populations with specific educational needs."
Learning autonomously	"Capacity to carry out autonomous or semi-autonomous work." "Autonomous learning: the capacity to learn autonomously and upon one's own initiative, appropriate knowledge and work methods and fulfil educational tasks and activities."	"Provision of the competences needed for the on-going acquisition, revision, maintenance and up-dating of new knowledge and skills, which enables professional practice in the field of health psychology to be improved and potentiated." "Capacity to review the existing literature in the field of health and social sciences."
Communicating conclusions	"Communicating their conclusions to the public with a lesser or greater degree of specialisation and transmitting clear, objective messages in the material approached" "Acquiring oral and written skills for presenting theoretical and research studies."	"Training students to issue advisory reports on concrete situations in the international economy or sectors thereof" "Written and oral communication: the capacity to convey ideas clearly and comprehensively, resorting to pertinent examples and capitalising on support resources, and the capacity to write clear, well-structured documents in a language accessible to all and incorporating criteria from the genre."
Formulating reflective judgements	"Capacity to issue judgements." "Capacity to critically evaluate theories, methods and research results in the field."	"Critically analysing societal changes and their impact on different social groups in order to design effective intervention contexts and discover new intervention platforms." "Training students to critically analyse and reflect on processes, problems and policies related to globalisation, development and international cooperation."
Integrating knowledge	"Capacity to integrate knowledge for practical problem solving." "Capacity to integrate knowledge from different approaches and apply research methods from different fields of knowledge."	"Introducing the projection of psychological research in the analysis of problems and social intervention." "Relating cognitive theories that explain specific educational needs to findings in the field of basic neuroscience."
Originality	"Capacity for original and creative work." "Imagining new situations and problems in order to develop new ideas and solutions using the concepts and theories learnt and handling available information."	"Supplying students with the knowledge that provides them with a basis or opportunity to be original in developing and/or applying ideas within the context of education research." "Interest in researching and creating new data in psychology, both as receptors or evaluators of innovations or as generators thereof."
Problem solving	"Problem solving skills and abilities." "Problem solving and decision making: the capacity to identify, analyse and define significant elements of problems to solve them effectively on the basis of certain criteria."	"Fostering the study of strategies and techniques that encourage the negotiation and resolution of conflicts stemming from social relationships between men and women." "Problem solving for migrant populations at both the individual and small group levels."
Other competences	"Knowledge of a foreign language." "Capacity for teamwork."	"Transferring to students the knowledge needed to understand the European Union's public legal framework, with a special focus on its recent transformations." "Promoting mobility among European and non-European students and professors in Europe."

Chart 2: Examples of definitions of competences.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This article highlights the importance of competences within the new Masters programmes at Spanish universities. In recent years, the concept of competence has been studied and defined by numerous authors in professional and academic fields. The current legislation, inspired by the European convergence process, emphasises the focus of teaching and learning methods on the acquisition of competences that start out in the academic realm and are projected into students' future careers.

Thus, competences have become one of the pivotal elements in designing new curricula and constructing university education. The importance of competences does not revolve exclusively around deploying teaching methodology for designing activities, but rather, transcendentally, around designing and applying assessment procedures coherent with the competences to be developed and the contents of Royal Decree 1393/2007.

Carrying out new assessment practices within this new context is a potentially ideal opportunity to introduce major innovations and improvements in university education.

During our research, we analysed 87 official Masters programmes in the area of the legal and social sciences at 9 Spanish universities during the 2007/2008 academic year. Focussing on the competences described in the information from these Masters programme, we listed 731 references in all and divided the competences both into categories inspired by the current legislation as well as into generic and subject-specific competences.

Despite the abundant volume of literature on the topic of competences in higher education and the good intentions, we have seen how the current situation is still far from desirable.

Firstly, we noted a pronounced absence of or confusion about the specification of the competences the official Masters programmes aim to develop. Thus, 6 out of each 10 Masters programmes analysed only defined learning objectives and in none of these cases were competences defined. This substantially contradicts the focus of CBE that has been implemented at Spanish universities for years. In the upcoming years, it is desirable to reflect competences not only in the formal and administrative design of degrees, but also in public information on the studies and in curricula design.

Continuing with the analysis, we detected a great variety and heterogeneity in the typology of competences specified. There seems to be no consensus on the types of competences to be developed and we found up to nine different types in the information on the Masters programmes analysed. According to the different designers, competences may be generic, subject-specific, basic, professional, additional, research-related, instrumental, relational or interpersonal and systemic.

On the basis of the data extracted, we can assert that the prevalence assigned to knowledge as opposed to other competences of equal or higher importance in adapting to the EHEA and the new socio-economic environment is being maintained. The fact that there are 10 competences related to the acquisition or application of theoretical knowledge for each competence related to developing creativity or originality may be disconcerting. It seems that proposals to promote critical or reflective thought or learning how to learn are still far from being an academic reality. A clear gap exists between societal and job-related demands for training flexible, creative professionals with resources for on-going learning and complex problem solving.

These conclusions have led us to consider the need to promote activities that allow university academic staff to:

a) Become aware of the importance of developing competences within the context of the EHEA and CBE;

b) Explicitly and unequivocally determine the different target competences to be developed;

d) Discover the educational value of all the competences as a whole, as opposed to the reductionism of knowledge.

In this regard, it is necessary to delve more deeply into the educational processes that provide academic staff with platforms for communicating and exchanging ideas. In this sense, the efforts made by various institutions, such as the Catalan Agency for the Quality of the University System (AQU), through the publication of various guidelines for assessing competence are worthy of note [2]. The same is true of the activities, tools and instruments that different research groups have been designing and developing that enable academic staff to address assessment from alternative perspectives that encourage student participation and the development of their levels of competence [3].

To conclude, we recall that the sample for this study was made up of 87 official Masters programmes. Each academic year has brought an almost exponential increase in the number of Master's degrees offered by our country's universities; the curricula have also been modified and improved each year. Thus, it is difficult to estimate the representativeness of the results obtained, although the variability of the Masters programmes and competences analysed added an extra point to their possible generalisation, at least within the context in which the study was conducted: the official Masters programmes in the area of the social and legal sciences during the 2007/2008 academic year.

Each year, competence-based definitions and planning will no doubt improve and become more consistent with the new European framework. Nevertheless, we need further revisions and new research into the new Bachelor, Masters and Doctorate degrees related to how and the extent to which the conceptual bases and implications of compe-

tence-based education are being specified, as well as how competences are being specified in planning and the extent to which methodologies and teaching strategies are consistent with procedures for assessing competence.

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[1] The EvalCOMIX Project: Assessment of competences within a blended-learning context. Study programmes and analysis improve the quality of higher education and academic university staff activity (Ref. EA 2007-0099). The Ministry of Education and Science's Secretary of State for Universities and Research (http://evalcomix.uca.es).

[2] These can be consulted at: http://www.aqu.cat/publicacions/guies_competencies/index_es.html

[3] The excellence project entitled "Re-Assessment: Re-engineering of the e-assessment, technologies and development of competences in university students and professors" with ref. P08-SEJ-03502, financed by the Andalusian Government's Ministry of Innovation, Science and Enterprise.

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