

Turmoil in Spain's universities

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The Spanish government plans to shorten the length of undergraduate degree courses. The wisdom of this move is questionable and its execution impossible without a major overhaul of the present system.

To what extent should governments set guidelines for university degrees? This is a burning question in Spain's universities, particularly in its 20-odd biological science faculties. Government officials and university vice-chancellors hope that shorter first-degree courses will bring Spain into line with its European Community partners. Against them are ranged students, university teachers and faculty deans, who see threats to both academic freedom and career prospects. Since April this year, classrooms in many faculties have remained empty. University teachers and students have organized local and national demonstrations — even hunger strikes — and government officials have convened meetings with faculty deans. The strong possibility that end-of-year examinations would be disrupted led the standing committee of Spain's vice-chancellors on 16 May to defer until November its final decision on curricular changes.

Several interconnected matters are at stake. First, long-standing infrastructure deficiencies make short, intensive, first-degree courses impractical without massive injections of money. Second, academic freedom is juxtaposed against political responsibility, while privileged interests resent public accountability. Third, how should the appropriateness of first-degree course structures be determined, and should the length of a first degree in a given subject be uniform? Fourth, there is growing international concern about the long-term effects of the fragmentation of biological knowledge as a result of undergraduate specialization. Fifth, how broad should the biological grounding of undergraduates in all biologically related disciplines be? And finally, would not technical, professional, or academic specialization be better served by intermediate-level postgraduate degrees following a shorter, broad first degree?

The proposals by the Spanish government would cut back first-degree courses from five years to four in economics, social studies and humanities, and most 'hard' sciences, although six-year engineering courses will only be cut to five. Medicine stays at six years, veterinary science at five, and pharmacy will be extended by six months from its present five years.

There is disquiet about how the proposals evolved and about their implications. Government officials originally consulted all university faculties and professional bodies about first-degree requirements and desirable 'profiles' for different

graduates and professionals. This resulted in about 50 policy documents, each representing the views of the discipline concerned. In most cases, the advice was accepted, even where course cuts were imposed. The biologists' profile, however, was slashed beyond recognition. Biologists say it will mean nothing to employers. Government officials say it denies biologists none of their goals. Biologists suspect skulduggery and are up in arms. Why?

Spanish first-degree courses comprise first and second cycles. The first is equivalent to pass or ordinary degree courses and the second to honours courses. There is also an optional undergraduate thesis offered by those who want a classified degree. Government proposals involve selectively cutting a year off the three-year first cycle. The teachers' protest is partly because first-year students lack the knowledge to assimilate several different subjects. This may well be true — at any rate, no risks are being taken with medicine, pharmacy or veterinary science, which are to keep their three-year first cycles. Biologists claim a similar need to give a grounding in a range of subjects more diverse than that of 'hard' sciences. They note European Community guidelines are for minimum standards only. Their concern echoes that of Professor Sir Richard Southwood's biology committee of Britain's University Funding Committee "... that traditional areas of biology are being increasingly neglected" (*Nature* 338, 363; 1989). Nobel prizewinner Professor Severo Ochoa has made the same complaint, and so has the *Colegio Oficial de Biólogos*. The view is backed by Professor James Kavanagh on behalf of the Council of the European Communities' Biologists Association, which he chairs, and which "... because of its interest in maintaining equivalence of standards for the recognition of Spanish professional biologists in other EC countries, supports the recommendation of ... studies over a 5-year period".

Students feel four-year graduates may be at a disadvantage against biologically related professionals with five- or six-year degrees, in seeking employment against a background of the highest unemployment rate in the European Community. Specialist, second-cycle-only degrees are proposed in food technology, biochemistry, and environmental and marine studies. Biologists hope to enter them after a broad first-cycle grounding, as they said in their rejected profile, but biology students

with only a two-year grounding may not meet prerequisites if, as they fear, vested interests in other faculties claim the teaching of the new degrees. Veterinary science and pharmacy could be offered food technology; chemistry could be offered biochemistry; agronomists and highway and forestry engineers could be offered environmental and marine studies. Some of these faculties already offer their own undergraduates some relevant course units and so their professional graduates might take a second degree in as little as a year by reusing credits already acquired. They could then outbid biologists seeking employment. Biology students feel outmanoeuvred and are, literally, striking back. Some vice-chancellors have expressed the view that second-cycle-only specialist degrees might be better transformed into postgraduate, 'masters', courses, on which steep matriculation fees can be levied, unlike first degrees; students and many teachers reject such attempts to privatize public universities.

Spanish students in all faculties facing cuts worry lest employers apply the rule-of-thumb that five-year graduates from one university will necessarily know more than four-year graduates from another. Equating quantity with quality would be symptomatic of underlying rigidities, both within universities and outside them. Notwithstanding guarantees to university autonomy in Spain's 1985 University Reform Law, diversity in degree structures has been whittled away by extrinsic and intrinsic factors. There is an urgent need for more and better libraries, laboratories and clerical back-up.

Professional teaching requires more tenured lecturers. Professors and lecturers have to undertake unnecessary clerical and administrative duties, leaving teaching to the untenured staff. Few untenured staff now apply for tenured appointments outside their home ground. Whereas budding lecturers used to study for national selection examinations, even though success might consign them to the other end of Spain, under democracy regionalism flourishes, with the subliminal message 'only local people need apply'.

Major overhauls of the present system are needed before short, intensive first degrees can become a practical possibility — always assuming they are educationally desirable.

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