

MEMORANDUM: THE NECESSARY DIALOGUE BETWEEN SECONDARY AND UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

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Abstract

Background

Our teaching experience in various first-year subjects, common to different university degrees in Arts and Humanities, has led us –for consecutive years– to meet students who have just finished their high school studies and have begun their university education. This has enabled us to acknowledge the gap between the skills they have acquired during high school and those expected to achieve during their time at university.

Method

Being aware of the difference in quality that exists when starting higher education, we consider that our approach from university cannot be solely based on the fierce criticism of the level of education students currently obtain during their years at high school. Therefore, we believe that the direct dialogue with the main people intervening in secondary education –both teachers and counsellors– is crucial in order to approach education as a collective and coordinated project, where everyone involved plays an important role.

Results

Using tools such as ongoing training courses for teachers and the education community offered by our autonomous region or agreeing to coordinate the university admission exams for a subject within our region, we have found that this dialogue is not only feasible but necessary.

Conclusions

Tools such as those aforementioned make it possible to become aware of the challenges high school teachers face when teaching subjects directly related to the topics taught at university. Likewise, in addition to the required exchange of experiences, from the university we can anticipate the guidance, tools and resources secondary teachers may need and make them aware of the challenges students will be exposed to at university to further acquire better training.

Keywords: Secondary education, higher education, university admission exams, courses for teachers.

1 INTRODUCTION

The transition from high school to college has always preoccupied the academic community. In recent years, however, there has been a growing interest on the part of the university to welcome, guide and serve students better in their access to higher education [1]. In fact, many institutions and centres have systematized the tasks of promoting the university in high school or welcoming new students upon their arrival in higher education and have also implemented tutorial plans to facilitate the integration of students into higher education. Even student retention –getting students to go ahead with the chosen grade and not drop out– is being claimed as a fundamental goal of all grade coordination teams [2]. And, precisely, an abrupt leap from high school to university is one of the factors related to the dropout rate of a degree during the first year.

In this contribution, however, we would like to address another aspect of this multifaceted problem of transition into higher education: the need for university faculty to come into contact with the community of secondary school teachers and counsellors related to their discipline. We believe that it is feasible and necessary to use certain resources to ensure close communication between university and secondary teachers in order to achieve various objectives:

- To exchange information and teaching experiences.
- To avoid a gap between the knowledge that high school students may have and the knowledge that the university requires in order to begin studies.

- Achieve greater student efficiency in the university entrance examinations.
- To detect concerns or theoretical or methodological difficulties that high school teachers may have for the development of their ordinary teaching that can be remedied with the advice of university teachers.

2 METHODOLOGY

The recommendation of the resources that we present in order to create this link between university teaching staff and secondary education is inspired by the invitation we received from a professor of the Faculty of Fine Arts of Leioa to participate in a course for the continuous training of teachers promoted through the *Prest_Gara* call of the Basque Government [3]. The Department of Education of the Basque Government has a complex operational structure that is not worth describing in detail, but it is worth mentioning that from *Berritzeguneak* –training and innovation support centres created in 2001 by the Basque Government [4]– a proposal is made for courses that may be of interest to nursery, primary and secondary school teachers. This proposal is put out to public competition and entities and institutions –such as the Faculty of Fine Arts in our case– present themselves to the call for the awarding of the courses for which they have presented a project.

Thanks to this participation in a course of the *Prest Gara* call, we came into contact with teachers from our faculty who are especially involved in relations with secondary education, we got to know the support structure for the non-university educational community of the Department of Education of the Basque Government, we were aware of different possible resources for approaching the “bachillerato” –higher secondary education courses– teachers and, perhaps most importantly, we had fruitful contact with “bachillerato” teachers who were closely connected with our discipline, which allowed us to become aware of its reality, difficulties and challenges.

On the other hand, our teaching experience of over ten years in the Faculty of Fine Arts of Leioa and in the Faculty of Letters of Vitoria-Gasteiz, both of the UPV/EHU, served as an incentive to develop a growing interest in the transition from secondary to higher education. During our teaching career we have taught, almost every academic year, subjects of History of Art in the first year of various degrees offered in the two centres. In all these years, we have tried to enable students to make the leap to a university level; and, on the other hand, we have stated that one of the most recurrent themes in the first year coordination meetings is the concern for the low level of students who access our university degrees from secondary school: the most veteran teachers inevitably compare the last generations with others more distant in time; and the new teachers relate current students not only to those of past generations with whom we may have had contact, but also to the memories we have of ourselves and our own classmates during our years as university students. In either case, university teachers' analyses of the level at which current high school students enter university are often not positive. In this case, the belief expressed in the old Spanish proverb that "any past tense was better" is also fulfilled.

University teachers often allude to the various changes in educational legislation or to the lack of autonomy and motivation of students to explain this majority drop in the level of students who access higher education from secondary school. Undoubtedly, to save the qualitative leap that exists when entering university education, it would be essential to reflect on these and other possible factors that do not involve the protagonists of higher education, but we believe that university teachers should take an active role as soon as possible to contribute to ensuring that this leap is not so abrupt.

The two circumstances described above led us to use two fundamental resources related to the jump between secondary and higher education, and also to the needs of secondary teachers for advice or training:

- a) We have access to the coordination of the entrance exams to the university of the subject "Fundamentals of Art II".
- b) Each new school year we attend with a proposal for the course related to the subject that we coordinate, offered within the *Prest_Gara* call for continuous training of the Basque Government teaching staff.

3 RESULTS

The access to the coordination of the entrance exams to university of the subject "Fundamentals of Art II" has been important to initiate a close relationship with the secondary teachers who teach this subject

and to influence the training of the students who access the Grades of the Faculty of Fine Arts of Leioa –Degree in Art, Degree in Creation and Design, and Degree in Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Assets–. Many of the students who enter any of them have studied the Artistic “bachillerato” and, therefore, have studied this subject obligatorily.

"Fundamentals of Art II" is a core course of the second year of the Artistic “bachillerato” and linked to "Fundamentals of Art I", also a core course of the first year of the same “bachillerato” modality. Both subjects appeared in the itinerary of the Artistic “bachillerato” as a result of the LOMCE –Organic Law 8/2013, of December 9, for the improvement of the educational quality in Spain [5]–. “Fundamentals of Art I” deals with contents related to Theory and History of Art from prehistory to early modern period and "Fundamentals of Art II" deals with contents from late modern and contemporary ages. The complexity of these subjects is that they integrate a theoretical and historical perspective on the development of all the arts, not just the plastic arts, which makes the programs of both subjects extremely vast.

In spite of the responsibility involved in the annual design of the tests and admitting that, as is obvious, they are always subject to multiple criticisms by the educational community, we consider that this resource has been essential to guide the orientation that teachers give to the subject. If it is taken into account that the second year of “bachillerato” is mainly aimed at the preparation of students to efficiently pass the university entrance exams, the type of exercises that are proposed to be carried out in these tests conditions to a great extent the orientation that teachers give to their classes and the depth with which it is necessary to work on the contents.

The access tests, however, always have the advice of *Berritzeguneak* service and Educational Inspection and, precisely thanks to their orientation, the characteristics of the examinations are presented annually in public meetings attended by secondary school teachers, where they can submit any consultation, suggestion or objection to the coordinators. In these meetings, the secondary teachers get to know the different coordinators and obtain information on how to contact them. Thanks to this, an important communication channel is opened through which the coordinators receive numerous questions and an essential feedback on the work they are carrying out. A wide range of queries, from needs for bibliographic advice to details of the contents of the subject are solved thanks to this communication channel.

Through this resource of coordinating the university entrance exams of a certain subject, all the teaching staff directly related to the coordinated subject is reached and the education received by all the students who study it is affected; however, we would not like to underestimate the following resource that we would like to present: the possibility of getting in contact with smaller groups of teachers of the coordinated subject thanks to the courses offered in the *Prest_Gara* public call for continuous training of the teaching staff.

Precisely, this tool is key to having a closer, continuous and lasting contact with the secondary teachers related to the coordinated subject, since the courses are developed in several sessions –the course offered in relation to the subject we coordinate is 30 hours, of which 20 are class hours; in other cases, the course hours range from 15 to 105 hours–.

The development of the course allows us to share in detail contents, bibliographical suggestions and teaching experiences with secondary school teachers. In addition, thanks to the collection of opinions from the attendees, it is possible to design the topics to be dealt with in the next courses based on the suggestions made by the teachers themselves in relation to their doubts or shortcomings. The format of the courses also allows for theoretical-practical sessions in which, in addition to theoretically delving deeper into certain contents, proposals for teaching innovation associated with them can be designed and discussed.

This resource of continuing education courses for secondary teachers is therefore particularly enriching and makes viable a fruitful two-way dialogue between secondary and university teachers.

4 CONCLUSIONS

In the era in which teachers defend the need to help students develop fundamental transversal skills to successfully carry out cooperative work, we believe that it is also fundamental to focus education in its different stages, but also in a holistic way, as a choral and coordinated work in which each educational agent has an important role.

We believe that university teachers can take a proactive role in contributing to a coherent and light transition between secondary and higher education. For this reason, we consider that their work as

teachers is focused on two main fronts –as a member of coordination and management teams, the leap to higher education may also entail other challenges and tasks–:

- The work from the classrooms for students to acquire the skills that ensure a level commensurate with higher education.
- By using resources such as those presented in this article, it is possible to anticipate and try to alleviate the needs of students who access university degrees: on the one hand, it can contribute to greater coherence between what is required of secondary school students and the prior knowledge they must have for the development of university degrees; on the other hand, it can carry out advisory and reinforcement work among secondary school teachers in order to contribute to enriching the contents and resources they use in their classrooms.

To sum up, the constant dialogue between the two educational communities involved in the transition from education to higher education is fundamental in order to make possible a logical evolution through both. The closer and more transparent the relationship between the two collectives, the more benefits they can bring to the bulk of the educational community. In addition, the opening of a second approach such as the one we have just mentioned leaves the door open for the design and implementation of joint teaching innovation projects such as those carried out in other disciplines that can contribute to further enriching the educational experience of students and teachers [6-10].

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