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Students' Perspective of On-line College Education in the Field of Journalism
La educación universitaria on-line en el ámbito del Periodismo desde la visión del estudiante

The advance in new technologies has changed the educational model considerably. On-line education has arrived with a bang at university and those degree courses linked to the field of communication have adopted this type of technologies. In just a few years, the number of courses available in the communication field that include on-line subjects has multiplied. It seems that this tendency of proliferation will continue due to large demand for degrees in the communication field as well as the possibility of completing these degrees on-line. This paper shows the perspective that on-line journalism students at the Rey Juan Carlos University (URJC) in Madrid have on their studies. The results of a survey of students of the different courses that include the subject allow us to gain a perspective of their experiences at the beginning and end of the studies. The questionnaire asks about socio-demographic traits from which we draw a sociological profile of the on-line journalism student. It also delves into the motivations and expectations surrounding the decision to enrol in this subject and in its assessment both in terms of learning and the relationship between peers and teachers. Some of the conclusions point to the positive attitude of students and a satisfactory evaluation by the students.

El avance de las nuevas tecnologías ha cambiado considerablemente el modelo educativo. La formación on-line ha aterrizado con fuerza en las universidades y las carreras vinculadas al mundo de la comunicación se han incorporado a ese modelo de enseñanza. En pocos años la oferta en las titulaciones de comunicación se ha multiplicado y parece que esta tendencia se pronuncie en un futuro ante la demanda que tienen las titulaciones de comunicación, por un lado, y las enseñanzas virtuales, por otro. En este artículo se da a conocer la perspectiva que los estudiantes on-line de Periodismo de la Universidad Rey Juan Carlos (URJC) de Madrid tienen sobre sus estudios. Los resultados de una encuesta a los alumnos de los diferentes cursos que engloban la titulación nos permite ofrecer una perspectiva de sus experiencias al inicio y al final de la carrera. El cuestionario indaga sobre aspectos socio-demográficos a partir de los cuales se traza un perfil sociológico del estudiante de periodismo on-line. Asimismo, se profundiza en las motivaciones y expectativas que rodean la decisión de matricularse en esta modalidad y en su valoración tanto en términos de aprendizaje como de la relación con compañeros y profesores. Algunas de las conclusiones apuntan una actitud positiva de los estudiantes y una valoración satisfactoria de la enseñanza por parte del alumnado.

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1. Introduction

The age of new technologies has brought with it a major transformation in the field of schooling and higher education. More and more centres of education are offering the chance to study on-line by means of a virtual teaching system. Internet-based (on-line) education has been on offer in Spain for some time now – the first wholly on-line university, the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, (UOC), was founded in 1995 and the model has been copied by newer educational institutions. If, in addition, we take into account that many classroom-based universities that have extended their syllabi to include on-line courses it simply goes to prove that on-line education, adapted to the philosophy of today's information society, has been a success.

Having said that, whilst it is true that on-line education programmes have been developing both in Spain and elsewhere for some time, journalism studies have been a late starter in this area of education, since the practical content of many subjects and the use of technological equipment made it difficult to adapt the syllabus of these degrees to distance and/or virtual educational models. However, experience from other areas of knowledge, the development of pilot programmes which are the result of various pieces of research (Palomo, 2008), technological breakthroughs and existing demand in this subject area has allowed universities to launch on-line communication studies.

The Madrid-based Universidad Rey Juan Carlos (URJC), which in 2006 introduced studies in Journalism in the format of «blended learning», has carried out ground-breaking activity in this area. One year later this was extended to the Advertising and Public Relations degree course in response to the success of the initiative.

Additional on-line communication studies have been introduced, coinciding with the creation of the European Higher Education Area which aims to improve the international competitiveness of European universities. In this way, in the university year 2009-10 three exclusively virtual universities added the possibility of studying communication courses using the e-learning format. These were: the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya which offered a Degree in Communication and a Degree in Information and Documentation; the Universidad a Distancia de La Rioja (UNIR) offered a Degree in Documentation and the Universidad a Distancia de Madrid (UDIMA), a private autonomous university started a Degree in Journalism.

As can be seen, in a short space of time the number of on-line degrees available in the area of communication has multiplied and it seems this trend will continue into the future if the demand for communication degrees on the one hand, and virtual education on the other, are anything to go by. Given then, that the first tentative steps are being taken but that these are already proving to be successful (in fact this year will see the first cohort of graduates in journalism from the URJC's on-line course) it would seem appropriate to take a step back and consider this new experience – new in both the field of education and that of communication. Drawing upon the researchers' own personal experience in the URJC (itself a pioneer in this area), and seeking to develop knowledge in this field, research (needless to say, exploratory in nature) was carried out to gain an insight into these first ever students of Journalism on-line and their opinion and assessment of their experience of on-line education.

It must be added that, despite being a relatively new phenomenon, many research studies have already been carried out into on-line teaching. These range from theoretical studies to empirical ones and all from different areas of study. Some favour the technological perspective (Marcelo, Puente & al., 2003; Baggetun, 2006) or, more frequently, the teaching and educational field (Castaño, Duart & Sancho, 2010; Lara & Duart, 2005). There are even some studies which focus on the profile of the student and their evaluation (this is the case of this study), such as those undertaken by Cabrero, Llorente & Puentes (2010) dealing with the study of Philosophy and Physics in the Dominican Republic or about students taking a virtual Masters Degree (Justel, Lado & Martes, 2004). However, no studies of on-line communication studies (specifically journalism) have been documented as yet and certainly no research has been done about the profile and opinion of students. As such, this piece of work may launch a line of study for which some work has been done (Santin, 2009), in an attempt to consider not only the teaching practices which have been developed but also the challenges faced when teaching communication in the 21st century – these challenges inevitably include the use of new technologies.

Not all use of technology is the same in the field of education. Some terms should be clarified here because, as Grahame Moore (2001) says, there is a certain confusion when talking about "virtual teaching" given that there are many different teaching models encompassed within. First of all, it should be stated that the use of technologies does not necessarily mean we are talking about on-line teaching. Almost all universities have brought in some virtual elements in their education system. They all have, to a greater or lesser extent, some form of pilot projects for e-learning. There is a middle ground where we find the concept of "b-learning" which is understood to be a learning model which allows elements of virtual education to be brought in and exist alongside classroom-based learning formats (Coaten, 2003); for example, by using in-class sessions and face-to-face tutorials in conjunction with on-line activities such as forums, chats, downloads (all associated with e-learning). Although, as Llorente (2008) says, "b-learning" may be "introduced in a series of ways by means of a virtual and in-class design and also to an endless amount of contexts for which these models are feasible". Therefore it is not the same to use b-learning in the design of one subject for a particular degree as

to use it in the context of an on-line degree course. The basis is different in each case and the opportunity for students and teachers to interact is totally different.

For the journalism degree the different models described are available but the one adopted by the URJC and which is the focus of our study, uses the b-learning model which diminishes the amount of face-to-face contact between student and teacher in an attempt to develop on-line resources to the full. Virtually all the activity for the course is carried out on the net and only those subjects which are essentially practical in nature or which require the use of and expertise in audiovisual technologies include some in-class activity. In the same way, the teacher is able to determine whether or not an in-class assessment method is used so it may well be that in the case of some subjects with on-line assessment, there is absolutely no face-to-face contact between teacher and student.

That is the main thinking behind some of the criticism aimed at this educational system, namely that it is automated, or, at the very least, de-personalised; whatever the case, totally different from the traditional model. Be that as it may, it is here to stay and journalists may now obtain their 3-year of 5-year degrees using this methodology. That being the case, it is well worth facilitating initiatives which attempt to understand what the system is like and what its players think about it.

2. Material and methodology

In Social Sciences the case study is generally used as a research method, because reducing the field means efforts are focused and research can be carried out which, although more modest than that which is performed using more elaborate methods, allows specific objectives to be met in a context with limited resources as is the case today.

Obviously, case studies are limited to one particular subject so it is not possible to generalise the findings to other contexts. Having said that, it is a useful tool for obtaining a reliable estimation in one specific context which is under study and to identify trends and what the thinking is, thus allowing us to describe and better explain the phenomenon being researched.

With all this in mind, our study set out to research the on-line teaching of journalism, specifically at the Universidad Rey Juan Carlos. The reason for this choice is that it is where the teaching took place, but also because it is a pioneer university for the teaching of on-line degrees in the field of communication - and specifically journalism - in Spain. The undergraduate degree has been taught since 2006. It should also be said that the first five years of the degree course have been completed and 2008 witnessed the transformation which was required by the Bologna process as a consequence of which the on-line degree option became available. We have carried out a survey among all students who are currently (2010/2011) studying the 3-year or 5-year degree because we have direct access to these students and because they are the first.

The population of the study, ie., students of journalism on-line at the URJC numbers some 200. We have taken advantage of the attendance of students at semester one exams to guarantee a near-full turn-out. However, the fact that some assessment methods are done in groups and in some cases, on-line, together with a high number of students who failed to take the exam – a recurring phenomenon in the case of non-classroom-based subjects – has led to many null responses. Summing up, participation has been around 60% of the total. Altogether 121 surveys were completed. The distribution of interviewees per year is also irregular with more students from the first years of the course, not only because they have answered in a more optimistic way but also because in on-line courses, the percentage of students dropping out tends to be greater than in classroom-based courses. This means that the latter years of a course tend to have considerably fewer students than the first years.

The questionnaire has taken a series of socio-demographic variables into account and also questions for assessing the experience of teaching, with a semantic differential. The resulting data have been processed statistically and frequency and percentage analysis has been carried out for each variable where appropriate.

3. Results
3.1. Student profile

Certain socio-demographic features may be noted for students of journalism on-line at the URJC – although no pretence is being made to create a model. Firstly, it could be said that the proportion of male to female students is almost a 50-50 split. This ratio may be unusual given that journalism tends to have considerably more female students than male – 64% according to INE (National Institute of Statistics) figures. In the URJC's on-line degree courses, 57% of students are female. There are proportionally more female students, as tends to be the case in most journalism degree courses, but not many more.

Another socio-demographic characteristic of on-line students at the URJC – at least in journalism degrees – is that most students are also working – 80%. This percentage confirms that the target public of these degrees are students who already form part of the labour market. On-line degree courses are an appealing option for professionals who are seeking to resume or begin tertiary studies - for the obvious reason that the timetable is flexible.

In fact, the chance to combine studies with a regular job is the main reason why on-line students of journalism at the URJC chose that format, as opposed to the classroom-based one (and not that the entrance requirement is lower - which was one hypothesis, given that it is lower in the on-line format than the conventional degree). Neither can it be shown that living away from Madrid (or any other city) is another factor (an allegedly stronger hypothesis which had been put forward). As it happens, only 30% of students claimed that one motivation for choosing to study on-line was the distance from campus – as opposed to 90% who said their main reason for choosing an on-line course was that it allowed them to combine their studies with another activity.

As was to be expected, many students also work. But *where* they work is a relevant and significant fact, because students already working in the world of communication account for almost half of all students who work. This can be explained by the fact that in order to work in journalism it is not necessary to have the appropriate qualification (as opposed to other professions where entry requirements are stricter). However, many of those who are already working without any qualification are eager to obtain one – and the on-line option affords them better possibilities. So then, almost half of on-line students of journalism at the URJC are already working in the field for which they are training with a goal of obtaining official qualification and so progress in their professional career.

As a consequence of this, another socio-demographic trait of URJC journalism students is age. Students from all courses are mainly in the 18-23 age group. That is the natural age. However, the results of our study indicate that this age group accounts for only half of students in this field of study. The other half are older. That means that on-line education is an opportunity for students who, in their day left university for whatever reason, to go back and resume higher education.

However, it should be pointed out that that opportunity has a "deadline" because these "older" students are not much older – only several years older than the "natural" age. The vast majority are under 30. These data, whilst not conclusive, may be useful for people who organise or teach on-line courses because although these courses are available for students of any age or stage of life, if UNED (Spanish Open University) students are anything to go by, with almost 40% over the age of 40, as a general rule, students tend to come from the younger age bracket. On-line students are younger students who go to university or young people who have failed at school but the world of work has persuaded them to take advantage of their last chance to gain tertiary studies. Whether it be as a result of the technology barrier or the type of qualification, the on-line university does not have the same target public as the non-classroom-based university par excellence – the UNED (Spanish Open University).

3.2. The on-line learning experience

One thing which is more significant than the somewhat predictable socio-demographic trait of the students of journalism on-line at the URJC is the information about their educational experience. This is because, beyond the theorising about the benefits and challenges of on-line education and of what (we) teaching professionals research and experience in the area of educational innovation, is the perspective of the students themselves and what they feel about the experience.

This experience has been, by and large, very positive. Firstly, because expectations have been met. So say three of every four students – not only the initial expectation but also additional ones too.

Another positive indicator is the fact that, when asked directly for their overall assessment of their experience, only 3% had a negative opinion. Just over 30% were neutral but more than half (about 65%) were positive. To be precise, half of the students in the 4th scale of the semantic differential and no less than 13% classified their experience as very satisfactory.

One additional piece of data should be added to this excellent rating for the education process: the vast majority would do it again. Almost 96% of currently registered students would sign up again.

However, not everything is so positive when it comes to assessing the education experience. The survey brought to light other data – which, interpreted with the appropriate caution, allows us to point out some shortfalls in the system. That is because, even though on the whole the interviewees felt the on-line format – at least in journalism – is at least as demanding as the classroom-based model, they feel that conventional classes are an important part of the teaching process. This is the essence of the new on-line education system. It is true that there are no classes in the literal sense – and that is one of the major advantages as it means students can combine their studies with other activities and go at their own pace. Having said that, they are still important and on-line students miss them. For all the educational resources available to virtual classrooms: forums, chats, videos, virtual classes, etc – these cannot substitute what for centuries has been the traditional (classroom-based) format. Perhaps it is simply a matter of time – or perhaps it is a question of working to improve the systems which are taking the place of lectures.

There is one further, perhaps more pessimistic detail in the students' evaluation in this case study:- the relative inability of the university qualifications to prepare future professionals in the area they specialise in. Whilst almost half the students interviewed said that the on-line mode trained students as well as the classroom-based

one, of the remainder, more are of the opinion that it prepares students worse than those who say it prepares them better. This opinion is not unsubstantiated given that these are the students who are working.

Finally, there is one question for which the study offers up an opinion trend which could be worrying:- the students' opinion of teaching staff is not very flattering. In effect, only a small minority of around 10% say that teachers in the on-line option are more dedicated than their counterparts in classroom-based learning. This is worrying precisely because virtual teaching is more demanding for teachers. However that is not what students perceive: almost 25% think there is no difference but almost 65% believe teachers are less dedicated on-line than in conventional education.

To these data regarding how much time teachers spend we must add the assessment of the teachers themselves. Half of all those students interviewed believe teachers are neither good nor bad. This neutrality is far from ideal as the teaching and learning process should be centred on the teacher and it is particularly frustrating that, having given such a high score to the learning experience itself, they do not think the same of the people responsible for their tutoring. Not only that, but of the remaining half, even though more give a positive rating to their teacher-student relationship (30%), it cannot escape our notice that a considerable proportion of students (20%) rate it negatively. This may mean that – as one hypothesis suggests – half of the teachers are not particularly outstanding. But it could also mean that of the rest of the teachers of journalism at the URJC, a considerable proportion stand out for positive qualities – they work hard at their profession. But there are other teachers (and not just a few) who fail the assessment and it may be that these are the ones to blame for the perception which students have of the lack of dedication on the part of the teachers in their profession.

4. Conclusion

Even though the research carried out has certain limitations – particularly given that it is a case study – certain trends can be detected which give us some useful and reliable insight into a new phenomenon in the field of education. A phenomenon which will no doubt gain importance as it is expected to become a major player in university life and to feature strongly on curricular syllabi. The aim of this study was to find out more about what the first ever on-line students are like and how they think and the results - while they should not be generalised beyond the on-line. Journalism Degree at the Rey Juan Carlos University - speak for themselves and can be used as a launchpad for further research into this new format for teaching communication. In particular they allow us to reflect on what we are doing, bearing in mind that those of us who are part of the university system are committed to change, and to show us how to vastly improve current practice.

One thing which should not be forgotten is that on-line degrees, at least in journalism, are particularly geared towards professionals who, in the face of the established system which requires class attendance which for them is untenable due to work commitments, opt for the on-line format as the best possible way of combining the two.

It should be pointed out that many of these students who are already working in the field of journalism, are only trying to gain the degree to strengthen their professional prestige. This means there is a niche in the market as a consequence of the characteristics of the journalism profession, made up as it is of many professionals with no official qualifications. On the other hand, this also means that the teaching content and methodologies should be adapted to the professional expertise which the student has already obtained.

One of the other more outstanding features of the student population is they tend to be young, albeit a little older than students who attend class. Whether as a consequence of the new technologies employed or for other reasons, students enrolling for on-line degrees tend to be no older than 30 years old. Teachers should bear this in mind and adapt their teaching methods to students of that age, particularly in terms of their knowledge and use of communication in the context of new technologies.

In terms of teaching expertise, the positive feedback reflected in the study may serve to reinforce the educational system used for on-line Journalism studies at the Rey Juan Carlos University. Another, rather more critical explanation would be to say that initial expectations are not particularly demanding for on-line degrees – not only as a consequence of the newness of the offer but also because demand is low when compared with classroom-based degrees. Expectations have been met but this may be because there were not many to begin with and not much faith placed in this new and innovative format for obtaining a qualification. Whatever the case, with or without the original expectations, it is true that it has been a positive, satisfactory and beneficial experience for the students involved. That is a good result in every sense, not least because it serves to promote a product (in this case on-line education) which is still in its infant stage and has yet to generate positive publicity. Here, as in all advertising, what works best is "try it and see" - many universities are already using this method by offering subjects on-line so students can discover for themselves the benefits of the system.

But the system must be perfected. To do so, criticism must be levelled at teaching staff who have failed to adapt to these changing times, particularly those who simply made no adjustments when it came to moving from conventional practice to the virtual scene. Those of us who have experience of on-line teaching know

that that is of no use and we also know that to say the on-line format requires less work is simply not true; rather, even more effort, dedication and commitment is required. Students are particularly sensitive to this attention, which, if it is not given properly, may jeopardise the very viability of the whole education process.

This should not lead to worry but rather to action and precisely now when we are at the beginning of this change in paradigm, we should take note and foresee future problems. There are important features and players in virtual teaching – the platform itself, the fit of demand and supply, the correct planning and programming to name but a few, but the key to it all, as in any learning process, is the teacher. It is not only a question of finding good teachers. Professionals from the field of virtual technologies are also required, as too are teachers whose skill, time and availability allow them to commit to this activity. It is not only a responsibility of the teaching professional – the university, itself, must be aware of and aid in this task, be it by reducing the teacher-student ratio or being more considerate when it comes to allocating the teaching load for this type of course.

On-line education may be a way of saving costs elsewhere and a source of added value for reaching other target "markets" - and this is vital as students become fewer and fewer in number – but it cannot be done for free. Universities must be aware of the stakes and aim to offer a quality service. Obviously this means selecting the best teachers and giving them as much help as possible for the task in hand. It is only by doing so that on-line degrees will reach the level of excellence which we all hope for in order to compete with the conventional system.

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