UNDERGRADUATE FINAL PROJECT: LEARNING STUDENTS’ OPINION

S. de Juana Espinosa, J.A. Fernández Sánchez, V. Sabater Sempere, J.J. Tari Guilló, J. Valdés Conca

Business Management Department, University of Alicante (SPAIN)

Abstract

Since the 2013/14 academic year, undergraduate students have to prepare and submit a final project (known in Spanish as TFG: “Trabajo Fin de Grado [End-of-Degree Project]”) as a requirement to finish their degree. In this paper, we have analyzed our students’ satisfaction both with their own work and with that of their TFG advisor, and revealed areas for improvement of the process by means of a structured survey. The survey was addressed to students and alumni of the following undergraduate degrees of the University of Alicante: Business & Management (ADE), Tourism, Public Administration Management, Labor Relations & Human Resources, the double degree in Tourism and Business & Management, and the double degree in Law and Business & Management.

The survey was first prepared by the authors of this paper, all of them TFG advisors, based on the works of García & Martínez (2012) and Ferrer, Carmona & Soria (2012). Afterwards, two TFG students commented on it, which provided interesting and useful insights. The final instrument was divided into four parts: control variables (degree, gender, and type of essay/project); level of agreement with a number of TFG aspects and features; assessment of lecturers, learning programs and advisors; and level of achievement in terms of competences to be learned. The last three were assessed using a 5-point Likert scale.

The results obtained show that our students are, overall, fairly content with their own work, and also with that of their advisors. An outstanding finding is that a majority of students considered that the advisor had done a good job with regard to the choice of a TFG topic, the determination of its research aims, the drawing-up process, and the preparation of the final public presentation. In addition, they felt supported and adequately guided throughout the process. The most highly valued aspects were promptness and availability when answering students’ questions. It seems logical that these factors should be considered essential by students, because if the advisor is sluggish and unresponsive, the completion of the TFG will be delayed, making their work difficult.

Concerning areas for improvement, TFG students think that they should receive more comprehensive and understandable information at the beginning of the year, and also that the project management application provided in the corporate intranet, called UAproject, should be easier to use. Besides, they are aware (and we concur) that they lack training in data analysis, as well as in the use of practical tools for their chosen professions.

Keywords: Undergraduate final project, Students’ opinion, Satisfaction, Areas for improvement.

1 INTRODUCTION

Royal Decree 1393/2007 establishes the obligation to carry out an End-of-Degree-Project (TFG for its Spanish initials) in order to finish Degree studies. The 2013/14 academic year was the first one in which students had to submit and present the aforementioned TFGs. That first year, it seemed interesting for us to ask students about the process of development of those projects. The conclusions obtained provided us with a first element to improve our work as advisors. Since it continues to be something new and there is still a long way to go, we carried on with our work during the 2014/15 academic year, collecting our students’ opinions for the purpose of gathering more data which could help us improve our TFG-supervision-related tasks.

Even though it is true that this constitutes a relatively new field, a number of highly interesting works already exist which have served as a reference for us with regard to the TFG. Amongst them, we would like to highlight five which proved particularly useful to us: Bonilla & Martín [1], Fondevila & Olmo [2], García & Martínez [3], Gutiérrez & López [4], and Bartolomé et al. [5]. Other researchers have tried to identify aspects which can be improved according to the views expressed by teachers and/or students (e.g. Valderrama et al. [6], Tur-Viñes et al. [7] and De Pro, Sánchez & Valcárcel [8]).
In this respect, it is worth highlighting the study carried out by Tarí et al. [9] and focused on students’ opinions about various aspects of TFGs/TFMs [the Spanish acronym TFM stands for End-of-Master’s Project]. The conclusions drawn from this research showed that students made a highly positive assessment of advisors’ effort and work, but also complained about the educational center’s performance and the academic development of the subject, stressing the lack of clear information about the process as a whole.

In view of the above, the present paper has as its aim to analyze the opinion of students as well as their degree of satisfaction with the TFG development process, the center’s performance and the training program, the advisor’s role and the achievement of specific competences established in the syllabus.

2 METHODOLOGY

A working network made up of five lecturers from the Business Organization Department of the Faculty of Economic and Business Sciences of the University of Alicante (UA) and two undergraduate students enrolled in the ADE [Spanish initials for Business & Management] degree taught at the same university was created to undertake this research.

As already explained in the Introduction, this is the second academic year in which our students’ opinion about TFGs was analyzed. This topic constitutes a novelty not only for students but also for us lecturers, who need to carry out supervision and coordination tasks, and form part of assessment boards as well.

Having been able to count on the participation of students turned out to be very interesting, since they helped us with the surveys to be made and, above all, they gave us their point of view as students.

Seeking to achieve our aims, our working network designed a survey addressed to TFG students of the undergraduate degrees in ADE, Economics, Tourism, Labor Relations and Human Resources, GAP [Spanish initials for Public Administration Management], TADE [Spanish initials for the double degree in Tourism and Business & Management], and DADE [Spanish initials for the double degree in Law and Business & Management]. This work was undertaken through a number of periodical meetings to plan, develop and supervise the tasks to be performed by network members.

Questionnaire design was based on teamwork carried out by the five lecturers belonging to the network (we all supervise/coordinate TFGs). The papers written by García and Martínez [3] and Ferrer, Carmona and Soria [10] were consulted during its preparation. The survey was then revised by the two students who formed part of the network and subsequently sent by electronic mail to the 39 students from the Business Organization Department who had presented their TFG in the ordinary exam period of June 2015. The interviewed students were consequently those supervised by lecturers belonging to our own department. Due to the low response rate obtained, we sent the questionnaire again early in July 2015, which ultimately allowed us to obtain 21 responses (54%).

The questionnaire is divided into five parts. The first part includes a set of control variables (degree; gender; and type of essay/project). The second part consists in four statements about the TFG in which the students must specify their level of agreement or disagreement. The following three sections allowed students to evaluate the center and the training program, the advisor and, finally, the degree of compliance with the competences developed in the degree. It all measured and assessed on a five-point scale.

3 RESULTS

The questionnaire utilized, together with the complete results, can be consulted on the following links:

- Questionnaire:
  https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1zqMMXzK2E7jchItKltTTeARTcH0PrRoG97J4xlck0/edit#
- Results:
  https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1zqMMXzK2E7jchItKltTTeARTcH0PrRoG97J4xlck0/viewanalytics

Starting with result analysis, it must be pointed out that ADE and Tourism students were the ones who showed the highest response rates in the survey, whereas no response was obtained from DADE and GAP students. The response rates corresponding to Economics, Labor Relations and Human
Resources, and TADE were very low. This makes it quite difficult for us to draw a comparison of results according to the degree.

It can additionally be stressed that almost the same number of men and women answered the survey. Out of 21 responses collected, 11 came from females and 10 from males.

Most students carried out a theoretical project or an empirical one based on qualitative data (52.4% and 57.1% respectively). It becomes visible that there are twice as many studies of that kind as those related to quantitative analyses and business plans, even though students were allowed to give several answers at the same time (by way of example, there could be a business plan based on a theoretical review). In our view, one of the reasons justifying this could be the greater ease regarding both data collection and the preparation of the project as such.

As for the section with questions referring to how students assessed their advisors, Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4 allow us to examine a variety of aspects related to the way in which each advisor guided their students.

Beginning with Figure 1, it becomes evident that a majority of students (71.4%) consider that their advisor guided them satisfactorily in relation to the topic of their TFG and the aims to be achieved.

![Figure 1. Opinions about the advisor's guidance concerning topic and aims](image)

Beginning with Figure 2, associated with the guidance received concerning both the methodology and the procedure to be followed, showed that 66.7% and 23.8%, respectively, ‘totally agree’ and ‘agree’ with the supervision received, and also that none of the students ‘totally disagree.’ This apparently suggests that advisors did a good job in this field.

![Figure 2. Opinions about the advisor's guidance concerning methodology and procedures](image)

With regard to advisors’ guidance in matters related to statistical analysis or other types of analyses, Figure 3 reveals that 60% of students ‘totally agree’ with the advisor’s work, 15% ‘agree’ or are neutral, and only 1% ‘disagree’ or ‘totally disagree.’ In our opinion, these data are slightly worse than those corresponding to the previous section, not so much because of a problem linked to the advisor
but rather by the difficulty of the topic and by our students’ obvious lack of training in data analysis implementation.

The advisor guided me in statistical analysis or other types of analyses [With respect to the ADVISOR, on the whole, how would you describe the supervision of your TFG? Assess that supervision on a 1 (totally agree) to 5 (totally disagree) scale]

Figure 3. Opinion about the advisor’s guidance concerning statistical analysis and/or other types of analyses

As for the drawing-up and presentation of the project, it can be seen in Figure 4 that 71.4% ‘totally agree’ with their advisors’ supervision. Once again, these data seem to suggest that the advisor did a good job in this context.

The advisor guided me with regard to the drawing-up and presentation of the project [With respect to the ADVISOR, on the whole, how would you describe the supervision of your TFG? Assess that supervision on a 1 (totally agree) to 5 (totally disagree) scale]

Figure 4. Opinions about the advisor’s guidance concerning drawing-up and presentation

Figures 5, 6 and 7 below enable us to analyze the results obtained in relation to the advisor’s availability and his student monitoring. Firstly, with respect to the availability of advisors (Figure 5), it becomes obvious that they largely met students’ expectations.

The advisor was available (either in person or by telephone or e-mail) to help me [With respect to the ADVISOR, on the whole, how would you describe the supervision of your TFG? Assess that supervision on a 1 (totally agree) to 5 (totally disagree) scale]

Figure 5. Opinions about the advisor’s availability
With regard to the attention given to the calls or messages received (Figure 6), advisors obtain ‘totally agree’ answers from their students in 90.5% of cases. In fact, this was the question where we received the highest assessment score. This seems to suggest that we are actually providing fast attention to our students, and it is an aspect that they especially appreciate too.

The advisor answered my calls/messages/e-mails, etc. promptly [With respect to the ADVISOR, on the whole, how would you describe the supervision of your TFG? Assess that supervision on a 1 (totally agree) to 5 (totally disagree) scale]

![Figure 6. Opinions about promptness in the advisor’s response](chart)

Figure 7 shows the results with regard to the support and corresponding guidance provided by advisors to their students throughout the process of development and preparation of their TFGs. Note once again that the assessment is highly positive (76.2% ‘totally agree’), though not so much as in the preceding case.

I felt supported and adequately guided by my advisor during the development/preparation of my TFG [With respect to the ADVISOR, on the whole, how would you describe the supervision of your TFG? Assess that supervision on a 1 (totally agree) to 5 (totally disagree) scale]

![Figure 7. Opinions about the support and guidance offered during the TFG development process](chart)

Judging from the results obtained in the previous sections, our students’ response with respect to their overall assessment of the advisor could be predicted and it was indeed as expected (Figure 8). 81% of students gave their advisor the best score, which leads us to think that the lecturers belonging to our department are doing a great job.

Specify the overall assessment that your TFG advisor deserves in your opinion [With respect to the ADVISOR, on the whole, how would you describe the supervision of your TFG? Assess that supervision on a 1 (totally agree) to 5 (totally disagree) scale]

![Figure 8. Overall assessment of the advisor](chart)
To finish this result analysis section, a brief summary will be provided of the opinions expressed by students in relation to other topics, such as their educational center or faculty, the UAProject application for TFG management, and the acquisition and usefulness of the competences learned in the degree, amongst others (these figures can be consulted on the link specified above).

With regard to the opinions about the center, widely distributed proportions appear when it comes to whether or not students received sufficient information about the TFG (19% and 42.9% consider that they had enough information for their work, whereas 19% totally disagree with that statement, and another 19% express a middle-of-the-way opinion).

As an aspect to be improved, the results make us highlight the ease of use in the UAProject application. Only 38.01% of students ‘totally agree’ with this statement and about 15% either ‘disagree’ or ‘totally disagree.’

It can additionally be said that the program did not live up to students’ expectations, even though the expectations regarding the topic developed were fulfilled, since none of the students assesses it negatively. The opinion about the number of hours dedicated to TFG preparation is highly varied, since 47.6% and 19% believe that the number is correct, but over 10% thinks just the opposite. The public presentation of the TFG is considered useful by 65% of students.

In relation to the competences which must be achieved thanks to the degree, and focusing our attention on the example of ADE (the highest percentage of responses to the survey came from students enrolled in this degree), it stands out that a majority of them believe that they have acquired the competence of ‘information search and analysis’ as well as that of ‘capacity for teamwork.’

The data are less good in relation to the analysis of professional problems based on handling technical instruments. This may be due to the fact that the importance of theoretical knowledge sadly continues to outweigh that of practical knowledge in university studies, and students can check that shortcomings exist when it comes to learning how to use professional instruments. Nevertheless, 60% of the sample positively assess their capacity obtained in decision-making through the application of knowledge to practice, which is positive but can also be further improved in the future.

Also 60% of students are of the opinion that ethical behavior and social responsibility exist within ADE competences. Only half of them consider that the ADE degree makes it possible to acquire critical and unbiased reasoning skills based on accuracy and rigor when it comes to analyzing problems. This is another aspect which can be improved because it represents an important element for both personal and professional development. As regards the competence of ‘oral and written communication,’ 70% think that they have acquired it.

The rest of responses given by students enrolled in other degrees can be consulted on the aforementioned link.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Based on our findings, the first conclusion which can be drawn is that our students consider that we are suitably performing our task as advisors. This pleases us and encourages us to keep striving and improving.

Going into greater detail, it is worth highlighting several particularly positive aspects. Most students claim that their advisor offered them good orientation with regard to the topic of their TFG, the aims to be achieved, the drawing-up, and the presentation of the project. Furthermore, their advisor gave them all the necessary guidance and support throughout the process.

The two aspects with the highest scores were promptness in responses to students and advisors’ availability. This is something that students naturally appreciate to a great extent (if the advisor takes too long to answer, the completion of the project by the student is delayed) and the good results obtained suggest that we are providing attention to our students fast enough.

As for the aspects which can be improved, four of them stood out in particular. More precisely, students argue that a need exists to receive clearer information about the TFG at the beginning of the academic year, and they also demand a greater ease of use in the UAProject application. Furthermore, students realized (and we checked it too) that they lack training in data analysis and the use of practical tools to exercise their profession.
Finally, it is worth highlighting that we have faced two major difficulties, namely: finding previous questionnaires about the TFG; and the lack of responses to these questionnaires. Little can unfortunately be done about the first one; however, an effort has been made to alleviate the second difficulty through the participation of two students in our network –and the collaboration of the ‘students’ delegation.’

REFERENCES


