

ADAPTING VETERINARY MEDICINE TO THE EHEA



INTRODUCTION

During the 2004/05 academic year, eleven UAB degrees were included in the Pilot Plan to adapt to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). This change process has introduced major innovations, such as a greater emphasis on continuous assessment and fewer face-to-face teaching hours.

This is the third consecutive year that first-year Veterinary Medicine students have been taking the degree as part of the Pilot Plan. Now is a good time to analyse and take stock of the results obtained, evaluate the adaptation process, and make necessary improvements and adjustments. To do this, we need to look at indicators of both academic achievement and the satisfaction of the various parties involved.

This paper presents a preliminary evaluation of the adaptation process based on students' academic results and the opinions of lecturers and students alike.

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PRELIMINARY EVALUATION OF THE ADAPTATION OF THE VETERINARY MEDICINE DEGREE TO THE EHEA

The Veterinary Medicine degree has been part of the UAB Pilot Plan for adaptation to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) since the 2004/05 academic year. By 2005/06, the Pilot Plan had been implemented for all first-year subjects and several second-year subjects. As the second year of implementation draws to a close, we can begin to analyse the academic results obtained, consider the opinions of the students and lecturers, and conduct a preliminary evaluation of the EHEA adaptation process.

Academic results

For most of the first-year and second-year subjects, academic achievement improved in 2005/06 with respect to the previous two academic years. In certain specific cases, academic achievement has been spectacular. The number of students who failed or did not take the final exam



first-year and second-year subjects have involved the introduction of various kinds of active learning, such as regularly solving problems and cases, writing and presenting papers on various subjects in groups or individually, and taking several assessment tests over the course of the semester. Furthermore, the number of

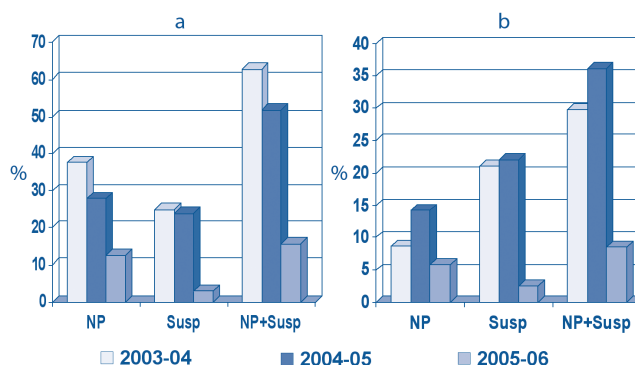


FIGURE 1. First-session marks for the first-year subject Animal and Plant Biology (a) and the second-year subject Microbiology (b) over the past three academic years. The percentage of students who failed (Susp) or did not take (NP) the subject – that is, the percentage that did not pass the subject – decreased dramatically in the 2005/06 academic year.

decreased dramatically in 2005/06 (Figure 1).

These good results may be due to teaching-strategy changes introduced in the various subjects following the implementation of the Pilot Plan. Although the UAB Veterinary Medicine course has for several years used active-learning methods in the second half of the course, these methods were not commonly used in the first half. Many of the educational changes made to

face-to-face teaching hours has been reduced – more in some subjects than in others – which has decreased dependence on traditional teaching methods based on lectures and the transmission of knowledge from the lecturer to the students. Logically, with these changes, the overall mark for a subject now depends less on the final exam and more on the various activities carried out over the course of the academic year. The new methodology also compels students to work continually

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throughout the year, which further improves academic achievement.

Opinions of the students and lecturers

Academic performance cannot be the only indicator used to assess the success of

In general, the lecturers have a positive opinion of the Pilot Plan. Nevertheless, although the Faculty had already introduced educational improvements in the form of active methods and case-based assignments, the lecturers' workload has increased as the courses have been adapted. With the creation of new materials, the monitoring of the students' activity and

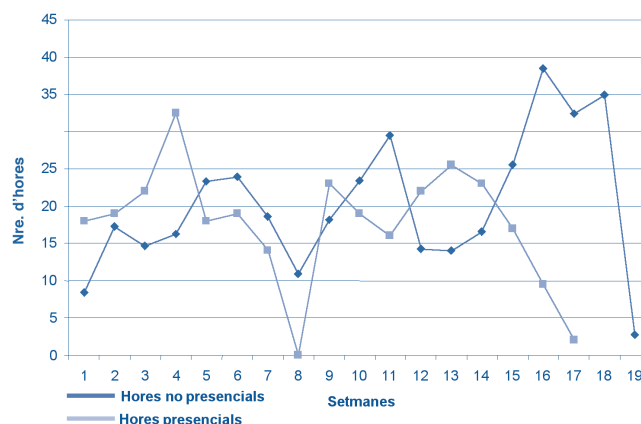


FIGURE 2. Face-to-face and distance workload over the 19 weeks of the second semester of the first year of the course. Week 8, which has no classes, is the Easter break.

the EHEA adaptation process. We must also consider the opinions of the students and lecturers with regard to these educational changes. As we all know, the introduction of the Pilot Plan has not been well received by many students. This is probably due to the excessive overall effort demanded of the students over the entire academic year. Studies of students' time dedication during the first year of the course revealed that, during certain weeks, they were spending more than 15 or even 20 hours on coursework outside of class (Figure 2). This course also requires a large number of face-to-face hours: around 20 hours for several weeks of the first year, and up to 25 hours for several weeks of the second year. The overall course workload, including both lectures and work outside of class, is therefore too heavy at times.

This situation has caused us to reflect on the actions taken at the Faculty. The excessive time dedication required of students may be related to any of several aspects currently being examined:

- The methodology-adaptation system.
- Coordination among lecturers.
- The perception of the time needed to complete the activities (on the part of both the students and the lecturers).
- Analysis of good practices.
- The balance between lectures and work outside class.

The process also requires an in-depth analysis of the opinions of the various stakeholders.

the introduction of continuous assessment methods, the lecturers have sometimes felt that the University and the students – who attend large classes – have failed to properly recognise their efforts.

Conclusions

Two years into the Pilot Plan for adapting the Veterinary Medicine degree to the EHEA, we can conclude that the students' academic results have been good overall, and in some cases, excellent. Nevertheless, in order to properly assess the success of the introduction of the ECTS system, we must use other indicators in addition to academic performance. We need to improve our measurements of students' time dedication in order to adjust the workload resulting from the application of ECTS credits.

In this transformation process, the University must look at developing new systems to recognise lecturers' teaching dedication that are not based solely on the number of hours they teach. Such a system would provide an incentive to reduce the number of lecture hours and introduce active-learning methods that do not require class time.

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