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ANALYSIS OF AND REFLECTION ON BACHELOR THESIS IN NURSING
STUDENTS: A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY IN SPAIN

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SUMMARY

Introduction: The bachelor thesis, a final year subject to obtain a nursing degree, presents an ideal opportunity for the development and assessment of professional competencies. Thus, it is necessary to specify that the structure of the bachelor thesis works as an element of review and reflection from both a pedagogical and professional perspective.

Objective: To analyse the main elements of the bachelor thesis in the nursing degree 2015-16 in Spain.

Methodology: A transversal descriptive study was conducted using a quantitative documentary analysis via study guides or grade reports. The variables were the main academic elements of the bachelor thesis subject (credits, competencies, learning outcomes, contents, methodologies, training activities and assessment). A probabilistic sample of 66 institutions was studied using descriptive statistics with statistical measures of central tendency and measures of variability.

Results: The results showed a maximum range of 12 and a minimum of 6 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System. The definition and number of competencies

to be developed varied and the learning outcomes were formulated in only 40.9% of the guides consulted.

The most widely used teaching methodologies and training activities were academic supervision (87.9%) and autonomous work (80.3%). Regarding types of work, basic investigation (34.8%), care plans (33.3%) and literature review (30,3%) ranked highest. No specific descriptors could be linked to the contents. Finally, two main assessment tools were found: process and product. The rubric is presented as a main element of the assessment.

Discussion and conclusions: The bachelor thesis is conceived as autonomous, personal and original academic work. But no homogeneity was observed in the key development elements such as competencies, teaching strategies, or type of bachelor thesis. Therefore, the findings from the analysis and the bibliographic review are presented as recommendations as regards the outcome, structure and/or teaching elements linked to the bachelor thesis.

Keywords: Bachelor's thesis; Nursing student; Nursing education

INTRODUCTION

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has led to myriad legislative and educational changes, presenting both a huge challenge but also an opportunity for improved nursing education (Collins & Hewer, 2014). Thus, from 2009 study plans in Spain saw the introduction of the bachelor thesis (BT) in all university degree programmes. Until this time, the BT was only included in some technical and technological degree studies. In this context, designing, developing and evaluating the BT is one of the great challenges faced by Higher Education (HE) (Rekalde, 2011).

The BT, which comes in the final stages of the degree programme, is an ideal opportunity for both the development and assessment of professional competencies. Unlike other degree course requirements, the BT has no predefined content area and involves new assessment and review criteria, making it a subject worthy of study (Lundgren & Halvarsson, 2009).

Given that the first BTs in Spain were not written until the 2012-13 academic year, this subject has been little explored in national and international research and papers. Thus, it is essential to specify the current structure of the BT as a subject. The aim of the present paper was to focus on the nursing degree in order to analyse the constituent teaching elements of this subject to ascertain in depth its current situation in Spain. This would allow for a framework document for possible curricular reviews and adaptations and, given the relevance of the BT, it could also provide a basis from which to undertake more in-depth studies from other perspectives, especially the international perspective.

PREVIOUS LITERATURE

Spanish legislation (Real Decreto 43/2015), establishing the ordination of official university studies, states that the BT is a mandatory subject that the student shall write and defend during the last stages of the course curriculum. The BT accounts for between 6 and a maximum of 12.5% ECTS European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) of the total credits of the degree. The nursing degree in Spain is a four-year-full-time programme with an academic load of 240 ECTS.

The aim of the BT is to demonstrate that the student has acquired the knowledge taught in the degree (Meneses, 2011), therefore, it is necessary to adapt and reassess the contents of training programmes, with a view to focusing them on the students' profession and learning (Rodríguez, Olivares, & López, 2015). As a final subject, its

integrative nature makes it possible to assess the students' acquired global competencies (Canet, Roca, & Gros, 2016). The generic and specific competencies to be developed in Spanish university students are set out in the current legislation (Orden CIN/2134/2008 and Real Decreto 1027/2011). While the concept of competency has been widely recognized in Spain, the concept of learning outcomes, identified as what a student will know and be able to do by the end of the degree, is gradually being introduced (ANECA, 2013).

The BT is based on a medium of instruction known as the project method, defined as a way a person (or group of individuals) applies acquired knowledge or skills to achieve a purpose that generally responds to a tangible object or product as a final outcome (Cortés, 2005). The BT is usually an individual work, although some research shows a highly positive appraisal of co-authorship (Lundgren & Halvarsson, 2009; Lundgren & Robertsson, 2013). The BT is centred around three axes: literature review, description of the research methodology, and discussion of findings and presentation of conclusions and/or recommendations (Feather, Anchor, & Cowton, 2013). These axes come in four phases: proposal (informed choice of topic), design, development of the BT and, finally, assessment (Canet et al., 2016).

In order to foster the student's personal, academic and professional growth, the BT must be focused on either research, intervention or innovation in a specific professional field (ANECA, 2009). The nursing BT, in particular, is defined as a professionally-orientated thesis that integrates and consolidates the knowledge acquired by the student during the degree. (Rodríguez et al., 2015). There has been some criticism regarding the attempts to unify the BT into a single type, since this would inevitably limit the research scope of some of topics, and would thus rob them of part of their value (Sánchez et al., 2015). Regardless of the type of BT, the student must be able to demonstrate a mastery of the

acquired skills by developing a scientific or professional report and delivering an oral presentation on it in public (Meneses, Pacheco, Diaz, & Blanco, 2012). The student is usually allowed to choose the topic they wish to develop (Meneses, 2011). Freedom of choice of topic appears to further instil interest and commitment in the student (Lundgren & Halvarsson, 2009; Rodríguez et al., 2015).

The BT plays a crucial role in the development and acquisition of generic competencies because it allows for the transfer of knowledge to the nursing profession (Lundgren & Robertsson, 2013). This view is corroborated by the students, who view the BT as substantive preparation for their future profession and as a way to work autonomously (Lundgren & Halvarsson, 2009; Lundgren & Robertsson, 2013). This, in turn, entails the deployment of skills in information search and management, a critical point of view and self-criticism, clinical reasoning, initiative and a decision-making capacity (Rodríguez et al., 2015), which all promote the development of deep versus superficial thinking (Roca, Reguant, & Canet, 2016). Due to their relevance, the competencies developed in the BT must have first been taught in the learning process, not only in the BT (Rullan, Fernández, Estapé, & Márquez, 2010).

In addition, academic supervising during the development of the BT is essential to encourage empowerment and new perspectives of self-regulation and self-determination for the students' training and professional practice (Lobato & Ilvento, 2013). Academic supervision is defined as accompanying, supporting and guiding the student during the process of developing and learning both professional and personal competencies. (Lobato & Guerra, 2014). Supervision entails establishing communication between supervisor and student on questions such as the scientific domain and stimulating positive attitudes towards the search for, and pleasure of scientific knowledge (García, 2008). Academic supervising, therefore, is a way to organise and achieve learning

processes. The fact that academic supervision of the BT tends to be more open and generalist (Ferrer, Carmona, & Soria, 2013) than postgraduate supervising gives rise to confusion among academic supervisors (Baker, Cluett, Ireland, Reading, & Rourke, 2014; Feather et al., 2013). Moreover, this may create further uncertainty, since these supervisors are not always experts in the subject matter they have been assigned to supervise (Canet & Violant, 2014).

The academic supervisor advises and facilitates resources during the development of the BT. As such, unlike the lecturers on the thesis committee, who can only assess specific competencies at a given moment, the supervisor has an overall picture of both the process and the finished work (Lundgren & Halvarsson, 2009). However, supervisors complain of having insufficient time to prepare and carry out the supervision as well as achieving sufficient student involvement (Fuertes & Balaguer, 2012). From the students' perspective, the scientific dialogue between them and their supervisor generates a high degree of confidence and is a source of inspiration (Lundgren & Halvarsson, 2009). The rapport between student and supervisor, which promotes a climate of mutual trust, is viewed as an essential condition to achieve a significant learning outcome for the student (Rodríguez et al., 2015).

Assessment should be on-going across the entire learning process of the BT; as such it is necessary to relate the assessment process to said process (Mateo, Escofet, Martínez, & Ventura, 2009). The assessment of the BT must be based on the evaluation and development of competencies as well as on the recognition of the student's on-site and distance coursework. A range of evaluative techniques should be used with the active participation of the students (Ibarra & Rodríguez, 2010). The BT is crucial as a process and a product (Rekalde, 2011), which both demand the establishment of qualificative criteria. Since evaluation of competency is based on performance, there is a need for

indicators, particularly descriptors that foster an objective and accurate assessment. Therefore, it is essential to have tools to evaluate competencies, as much for the complexity of their evaluation as for the participation of different lecturers (supervisors and members of the thesis committee) in the different processes (Canet et al., 2016). Specific tools need to be adapted to each course in the form of rubrics. (Rullan et al., 2010). The BT is assessed mainly by the academic supervisor and the thesis committee. The supervisor decides whether the work fulfils minimum quality criteria, and submits a report to the thesis committee so that the student can proceed to the defence (Rodríguez et al., 2015). The thesis committee assesses both the thesis and its defence (delivery, ability to respond and reasoning) (Rodríguez et al., 2015).

It is also important to note that the BT involves a higher proportion of autonomous work than that of any of the other subjects. This perception, shared by students and lecturers alike (Feather et al., 2013), causes anxiety in the student carrying out the BT (Lundgren & Halvarsson, 2009). Another cause for anxiety is the knowledge that student must acquire the credits of BT in order to graduate (Canet et al., 2016).

METHODS

The aim of this study was to analyse the elements comprising the nursing BT during the 2015-16 academic year in Spain. To this end, a descriptive transversal study was conducted of the study guides and grade reports of the BT, which are publicly available on the internet.

Descriptive studies are useful to accurately show the angles or dimensions of a context or situation at a given time (Hernández, Fernández, & Baptista, 2010). They also identify factors that influence the reality being studied and the frequency with which certain phenomena occur (Martínez, 2007).

Sample and data collection

The data was gathered from this organisation from the Spanish Association of Deans of Nursing Faculties (CNDE) (<http://www.cnde.es/>). This organisation joins the formative centres in Spain (N=79). The sample was taken from schools that share the same grade record (affiliated schools, campuses and others) and those whose guides showed no specificity were grouped. No differentiation was made between private and state learning institutions. Subsequently, a probabilistic sample of 66 institutions was made (margin of error of 5% and confidence level 95%).

The variables analysed were the elements that make up the BT according to the parameters of the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation of Spain (ANECA): ECTS, competencies and learning outcomes, contents, methodologies and training activities and evaluation.

Data analysis

Data analysis was performed with quantitative content analysis (Hernández et al., 2010) using Excel 2007 for the descriptive statistics of central tendency and measures of variability. This type of analysis quantifies data and determines the frequency and comparisons of the occurrence of the elements kept as units of information (Gómez, 2000).

Ethical aspects

There are no ethical conflicts or conflicts of interests because the documents are in the public domain. The confidentiality of the training schools has been preserved throughout the process.

RESULTS

The results show a maximum ranking of 12 ECTS and a minimum of 6 ECTS spread over the two semesters of the 4th academic term of the nursing degree, with an average

of 7.75, an SD of 2.22, and a mode of 6 ECTS with a percentage of 56.1% (37 out of 66).

Because the competencies to be developed in the BT set out in the study guides vary in definition, number and choice, it was difficult to establish common criteria of choice and development. The designation of said competencies is dissimilar; they are presented as generic competencies (also known as core, general or transversal); specific competencies of the degree; and generic competencies of the degree. Regarding global competencies, the minimum were 2 competencies and the maximum 70, the average being 13.65 with a very high SD of 12.84, which highlighted the disparate values among schools. Moreover, 7 schools out of 66 (10.6%) name – broadly or partially – all the competencies developed in their degree programmes. It should also be noted that the learning outcomes figure only in 40.90% (27 out of 66) of the study guides consulted, presumably because they are mandatory.

Due to this discrepancy, we provide a summary table (see Table 1) of the core concepts associated with both competencies and learning outcomes. By core concept, we understand the most prominent or chief concept in the development of the competency. The choice of core concept helps to determine a more concrete and useful vision.

Table 1: Core concepts of the competencies and learning outcomes associated with the BT

The methodologies and training activities related to the BT are divided into on-site learning (seminars, theoretical classes, supervising, defence, exam) and autonomous work (information search, online activities, drafting of the thesis). Academic supervision, accounting for 87.9% (58 out of 66), is the most frequently used teaching activity in the development of the BT. While academic supervising is interpreted to be implemented in all schools, this is not explicitly stated in all the documents consulted.

The purpose of the supervisions is to guide and oversee the development of the BT in order to ensure the accomplishment of the objectives. Only one school provides for the possibility of co-supervising between lecturers and an external professional, and complementary group supervising. Academic supervising as a methodological axis is as essential as autonomous work 80.3 (53 out of 66), attendance at seminars 40.9% (27 out of 66) and, to a lesser extent, information search sessions 30.3% (20 out of 66) plus other methodologies (see Table 2).

Table 2: Percentage of methodologies and training activities related to the BT

Of the numerous wide-ranging types of BT (see Table 3), the five most frequent ones used are: basic research 34.8% (23 out of 66), nursing care plans 33.3% (22 out of 66), research protocols and literature review 30.3% (20 out of 66) and clinical cases 25.75% (17 out of 66). It should also be noted that the wide range of possible topics has led some faculties to limit such projects to their lines of research, although they respect the students' freedom of choice.

Table 3: Percentage or modalities of works related to the BT

In terms of contents, it was not possible to pre-establish content prescriptors for this subject, since each student chooses the topic, problem or field of inquiry that he or she wished to undertake or develop in their BT, which may take on diverse forms or modalities, as outlined in the previous section. The professionalised nature of the BT means that the contents are professional-orientated (study of professional situations via designs, diagnostics, critical review of literature, reflection,...).

Three of the 66 universities analysed do not explicitly or publically name the assessment strategy; therefore we worked on a sample of 63. Our analysis of the study guides confirmed two moments of evaluation: process and completion. The evaluation process included: the supervisor's evaluation 93.65% (59 out of 63), seminars 4.76% (3

out of 63), self-evaluation 3 % (2 out of 63) and peer evaluation 3 % (2 out of 63). The academic supervisor's evaluation is kept in the range of 10% to 80%. This difference is partly explained by the fact that the evaluation may appear in the two evaluative moments (process and/or completion), and be presented comprehensively or separately. The academic supervisor's evaluation is linked to supervising, understood as a follow-up and scoring of the developed work. Four schools do not follow this system and evaluate only the final paper and/or the defence. Moreover, it is not explicitly stated whether the supervisor takes part in the process. In the schools where there is effectively a supervisor's assessment, it is specified that the supervisor must pass the thesis with a positive report for it proceed to defend the thesis.

DISCUSSION

As a starting point, it should be noted that the results of this study show that all schools comply with the legal regulation Orden CIN/2134/2008 and Real Decreto 43/2015. Competency-based training is the backbone of higher education, therefore the development of core competencies must help to develop and manage work performance (Pérez & García, 2015). In line with other studies, the results show there is great diversity in the development of competencies related to the BT, (Canet et al., 2016). Confusion precludes comparability. Some studies indicate a need to develop transversal competencies (Canet et al., 2016; Mateo et al., 2009; Pérez & García, 2015). Chief among these competences that are common to these studie are : decision making, basic and specific knowledge of nursing, problem solving, verbal and written communication skills, critical thinking and basic research skills (Gonzalez, 2001; Pérez & García, 2015; Roca, Morera, Roldán, & Ramió, 2016; Rodríguez et al., 2015; Toraman, Hamaratçilar, Tülü, & Erkin, 2017). Another element worth highlighting is the number of competencies to evaluate. Learning outcomes help the lecturer to assess learning;

however, this planning must be realistic: not all the competencies in the degree can be evaluated.

In relation to teaching strategies, academic supervising is the teaching activity that appears most frequently in the various study guides, as corroborated by other studies (Roca et al., 2016), and that the objective is to provide guidance and continuous follow-up to the student during the preparation and development of the BT. However, the traditional lecturer-student model should be replaced by a more inclusive model that would integrate the personal, academic and professional domains (Rodríguez et al., 2015). While there is no research indicating the best model to follow, it would be advisable to adopt follow-up and control measures of the supervisions, using standardized performance criteria and standardised records (Guerra, Lima, & Lima, 2016). The results suggest that in most cases the supervisions are carried out individually, but the bibliography in some studies highlights the benefits of group and/or multidisciplinary supervisions based on the advantages of teamwork (sharing, supporting, mutual progress) (Lundgren & Halvarsson, 2009; Kangasniemi, Ahonen, Liikanen, & Utriainen, 2011; Lundgren & Robertsson, 2013; Baker et al., 2014).

Another key element is autonomous work (Canet et al., 2016). The BT is conceived as an autonomous, personal and original work. No other subject in the degree programme requires so much autonomous work and has such an integrative nature. Autonomous work calls for a well-structured plan that is guided and supported by supervision with the aim to bolster personal growth and adaptation to personal needs and aspirations (Romero, Zurita Ortega, & Zurita Molina, 2010).

The analysis undertaken shows there are no specific contents linked to the BT, although it is clear that the contents must be professionally-orientated. The contents are left open in order to give preference to developing competencies (Mateo et al., 2009).

The five most frequently used types of BT are: basic research, care plans, research protocols, literature review and clinical case; although there is a considerable variability. This reaffirms the BT as an introduction to research (Gonzalez, 2001). While experimental research appears in the present study, the BT should essentially be an introduction to the basic instrumental skills and not those more suited to a master's degree or a doctorate (Gallart et al., 2015). It should also seek to motivate students to conduct future research projects or/and to take active an role in events of a scientific nature (Toraman et al., 2017). Although the BT has not yet been explored as a pedagogical intervention for the development of Evidence-Based Practice (EBP), this would seem to be an optimal space in which to undertake such research. The facilitators, such as information management and research (Aglen, 2016), would converge perfectly in the BT.

The types of BT described in this study do not respond directly to those of a more conceptual nature or nursing theories (Silén & Johansson, 2016). Although they are certainly included in the development of care plans and clinical cases, in which they would be an opportunity to lend practical and clinical value to the more conceptual elements of nursing.

Lastly, and in line with the literature, the evaluation outlines two moments: process and completion (Rekalde, 2011), which shows a more formative rather than summative assessment. Summative assessment consists of a more final evaluation, focusing on the results and on the impact of educational action (De la Orden & Pimienta, 2015), thus, little aligned with the objective of the BT. On the other hand, the analysis of the study guides shows a lack of the participation by the different assessment agents, since only supervisors and experts (members of the committees) take part. The students or their peers should also take an active role in other forms of evaluation such as self- and

hetero-evaluation (Mateo et al., 2009). This is consistent with learning assessment that is characterised by the integration of the three constituent elements: teaching, learning and evaluation as well as student involvement, and immediate and continuous feedback (De la Orden & Pimienta, 2015), which should be actively descriptive and critical (Tuvesson & Borglin, 2014). The most frequently used assessment tool in the BT is a 3-moment rubric system: supervision, written product and defence. All these tools are specific and adapted (Rullan et al., 2010), which have already been tested in the nursing context (González et al., 2016; Onieva, 2016).

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the results that emerge from the present study, in addition to the inclusion of the bibliography, allow us to draw up several recommendations for the development and revision of the BT, both in Spain and abroad.

- There is a need for a homogenous and comparable structure in the presentation of the study guides. The following sections should be included: ECTS, competencies and/or learning outcomes, methodologies and training activities, contents, assessment and bibliography. The type of BT that the student must or may undertake should be clearly stated.
- Terminology associated with the BT and the elements of the process should be unified. A lack of unification of words precludes the search for documentation and causes confusion.
- Terminology associated with the competencies must be clarified; there is considerable confusion between core, transversal or generic, and specific competencies. Regulation is needed through external bodies linked to university education.

- Study guides must establish the learning outcomes, since they give effect to the competency.
- Thus integrated -academic, personal and professional- supervision should be fostered, and group supervisions should be increased as opposed to individual ones. This should all be carried out under a comprehensive central supervisory plan. Criteria should be established of performance and standardised records.
- Types of work should be developed that are more professionally in order to enable the transfer of knowledge and motivate students towards EBP. In addition, theories and conceptual models must be integrated. The BT must be regarded as an introduction to research and even an incentive to pursue post-graduate studies.
- It is important to deploy the assessment model as an integrated element and aligned with the entire learning process, which involves the participation of all the agents involved.
- Regulate through specific regulations the requirements, aspects for development, presentation, evaluation plus all the pedagogical elements agreed by the group of lecturers involved. The idea of a certificate or pedagogical contract related to aspects linked to responsibility is taken as an example: originality or ethical declaration.

Finally, in order to guide this process, we believe a specific guide for the nursing BT should be drawn up in the same way that other initiatives have been carried out in the social or legal sciences in the Spanish context, and above all of more a international nature to support educators.

Conflict of interest

The authors have not manifested any conflicts of interest.

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