

## **STUDENTS' PERCEPTION ON THE EDUCATIONAL MASTER PROGRAMME *EVALUATION OF RESOURCES AND SUSTAINABLE TERRITORIAL DEVELOPMENT***

ROXANA-MARIA BUŞ

Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, Faculty of Geography, e-mail: bus.roxana@yahoo.com

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### **Abstract**

*In the introduction of this article, I presented theoretical aspects concerning evaluation methods of students' perception. In the second part, I presented my research results on students' perception about the new educational master programme "Evaluation of Resources and Sustainable Territorial Development" (ERSTD). The main purpose of this paper was to identify the strengths and drawbacks of this master programme in order to improve it. My research was based on my own experience as a master student at ERSTD and on a questionnaire administered to my colleagues. The results reveal that students are generally pleased with the master programme, but there is need for improvement, especially regarding the teaching and learning methods. Furthermore, this study points out the necessity of advertising among undergraduates, in order to attract new students at ERSTD in the future, and suggests several methods for improving the quality of teaching and learning.*

**Keywords:** *students' perception, new master programme, questionnaire survey, improvement of university educational programmes*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the past decades, universities worldwide were confronted with the constant need of improving their educational programmes in order to meet both general public's and private sector's expectations (Browne *et al.*, 1998; Dulamă and Buş, 2016). Due to increasing competitiveness, educational institutions had to adopt marketing strategies in order to attract and retain

potential students (Elliott and Shin, 2002; Douglas *et al.*, 2006; Eagle and Brennan, 2007; Bedggood and Donovan, 2012; Woodall *et al.*, 2014). According to the "marketing concept", knowing the needs of your customer and satisfy him/her is of utmost importance for any business (Keith, 1960; Houston 1986).

The feedback questionnaire is a tool used by educational institutions for collecting data about students' perception on different aspects of academic life (Douglas *et al.*, 2006; Dulamă *et al.* 2015; Ilovan *et al.*, 2015, 2016a, 2016b; Osaci *et al.*, 2015). However, there is a large controversy on whether this tool measures students' satisfaction as "customers" or teaching quality (Bedggood and Donovan, 2012) and whether students should be called "customers" in the first place (Sax, 2004; Eagle and Brennan, 2007; Cuthbert, 2010; Bedggood and Donovan, 2012; Woodall *et al.*, 2014).

Students are often regarded as "customers" because they are paying tuition fees, thus purchasing services provided by universities (Douglas *et al.*, 2006). However, some scholars argue that treating students as customers will only transform universities in "a new breed of shopping mall" (Franz, 1998, p. 64), where educators' goal would be "attracting and retaining students for courses" (Franz, 1998, p. 63). Brookfield (1996), cited by Bedggood and Donovan (2012, p. 826), states that students may be more satisfied with professors who challenge them the least. Moreover, Athyiaman (1997) points out that consumer satisfaction is "an internal state similar to attitude" (p. 529), attitude being defined as an "overall evaluation of the goodness or badness of a concept or object" (Athyiaman, 1997, p. 529). Therefore, the results of satisfaction surveys may not be valid or reliable.

Nevertheless, whether it is for marketing purposes or educational improvement, students should be consulted regarding different aspects of academic life and their opinions should be taken into account since they are the direct recipients of the educational program. The main objectives of consulting students, according to Rowley (2003, p. 144), are: providing evidence that students could express their opinions and their level of satisfaction with learning experience; encouraging students to reflect on their learning and generating indicators of quality that universities can use for attracting potential students. Also, citing March and Roche (1993), Rowley (2003, p. 144) emphasizes other objectives, such as improving teaching based on students' feedback and helping students get the information they need for choosing the right courses for them. However, Bedggood and Donovan (2012) draw the attention to the danger of misinterpreting the data collected via the feedback questionnaire. They argue that even though students should be consulted, their opinion should not lead to major changes in teaching and learning, without further investigation over the problems they may rise.

In this context, the aim of my research was to present my opinion and my colleagues' perception on the Evaluation of Resources and Sustainable Territorial Development master programme and to analyse its strengths and drawbacks in order to offer solutions for improving it. In

addition, I wanted to find out the main reasons why ERSTD was not appreciated among students so that the 2014-2016 class was the only one.

Evaluation of Resources and Sustainable Territorial Development is a master programme set up at Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, in 2014, with the initial name of Integrated Management of Development Resources. This unique master programme wanted to connect the Faculty of Geography and the Faculty of Geology and Biology. There were 18 subjects taught by professors from both faculties (10 from Geography, 8 from Geology). According to the Admissions Office from the Faculty of Geography, in 2014, there were 11 students enrolled at ERSTD, and only 6 graduated. In 2015, two students chose this master programme, but they were assigned to another one, and, in 2016, no students had as their first option ERSTD. I was one of those 6 students who graduated in 2016.

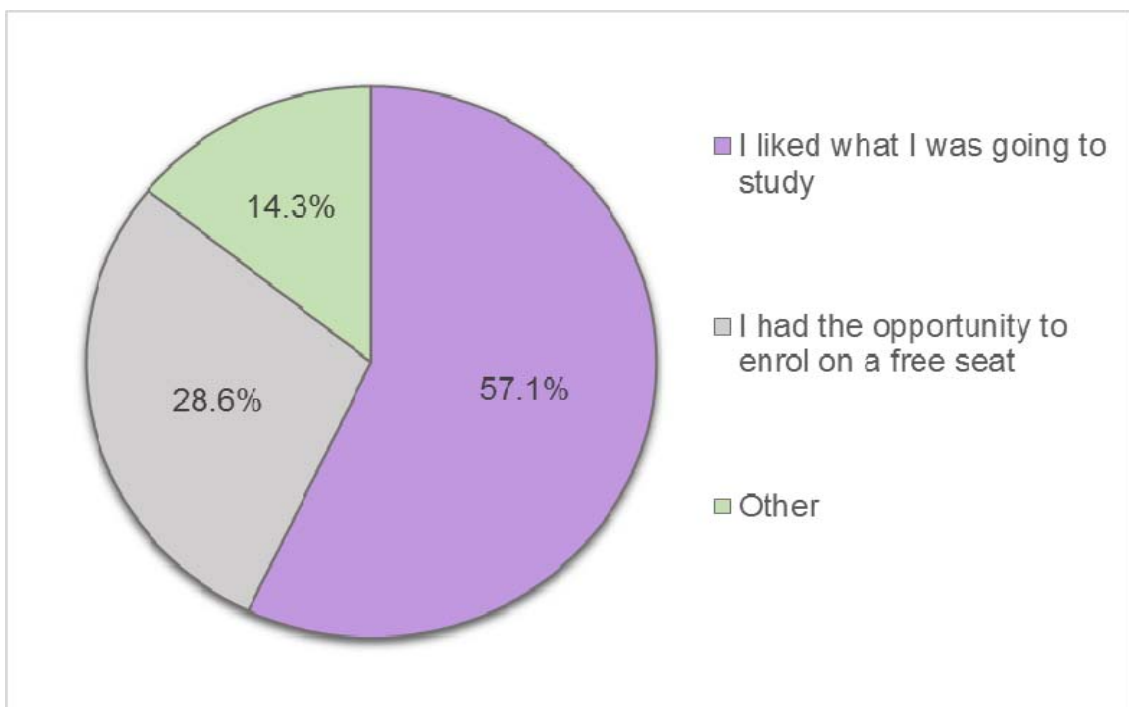
## **MATERIAL AND METHOD**

*Participants.* I conducted my research at the end of the 2015-2016 academic year, after the graduation. The participants were my colleagues, MSc students at the ERSTD master programme. I sent my request to 8 out of 11 students that have enrolled in the educational programme at the beginning of 2014 and I also completed the questionnaire as a student who was enrolled in that programme in 2014. In the end, I had only 7 of answers, thus the sample size may influence research results and data generalisation.

*Procedure, Data Collecting and Research Material.* In order to measure and analyse students' perceptions of different academic aspects, I drafted a questionnaire using Google Forms application in Google Drive. Subsequently, I asked my colleagues to fill in it online, on a voluntary basis. The questionnaire had 15 items, and the topics included: their reasons for choosing this master programme, and for quitting/graduating, the difficulties encountered during courses, the disciplines they liked the most or did not like, their perception of teaching/learning methods, their collaboration with the professors and colleagues, their evaluation of certain methods for improving the master programme, and their overall satisfaction with ERSTD. After receiving the answers to these items, I analysed them, and created charts and statistics with the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet.

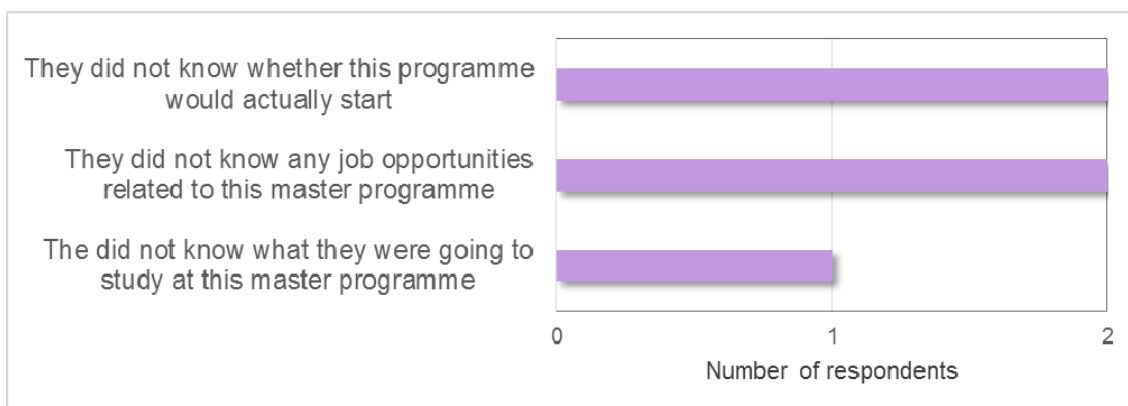
## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

At the first question – What was the main reason for you to enrol at this master programme? – there were five possible answers, from which the respondents could choose only one. The results are shown below in Figure 1. One student choose other, mentioning that she liked the collaboration between the two faculties of Geography and Geology. There were other options such as “Other friends enrolled as well” or “I did not have better options”, but there were no answers to these options.



**Fig. 1.** MSc students' opinions regarding the main reasons for choosing this master programme

The next two questions were about whether *they knew other students, who wanted to enrol at this master programme, but they did not and why they thought those students gave up*. Three out of seven respondents said they knew other students who also wanted to enrol at ERSTD, but they gave up the idea eventually. In the case of the third question, students could choose several answers (Figure 2).



**Fig. 2.** MSc students' opinions regarding the reasons why others did not enrol at this master programme (Multiple Answer Item)

Analysing the answers to question number three, we can deduce that these students were poorly informed about different aspects of the master programme. As students who eventually enrolled, we were in the same situation. We hardly knew any details related to the ERSTD master programme. The main cause of this issue was poor advertising. Being a new educational programme, it should have had an intense promotion among students, but it did not. We could receive a brochure with some details about the master programme (Figure 3), if we asked for one, but other than that, professors did not give us any information and were sceptical on whether the master programme would actually start and function in the next years.



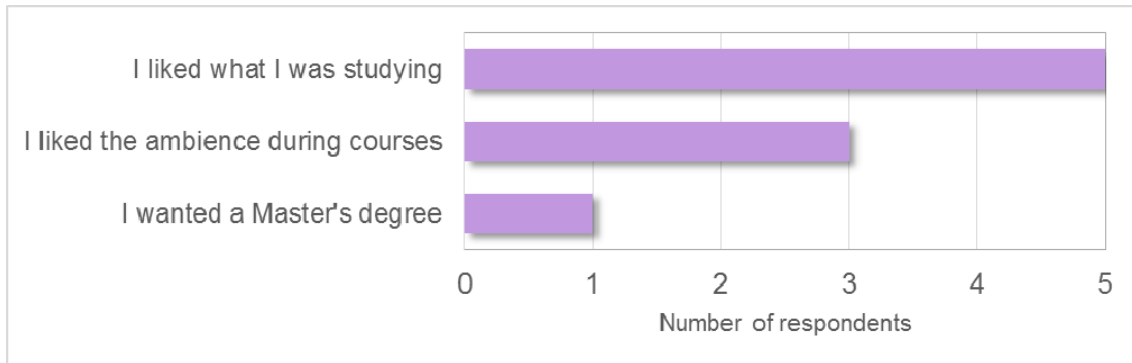
**Fig. 3.** Brochure with details about the master programme

The fourth question was about whether the respondents graduated or not the master programme. Six out of seven students said they did. The next two questions were for those who did not graduate, asking them to respond when they quit and why. The only student who said he did not graduate quit

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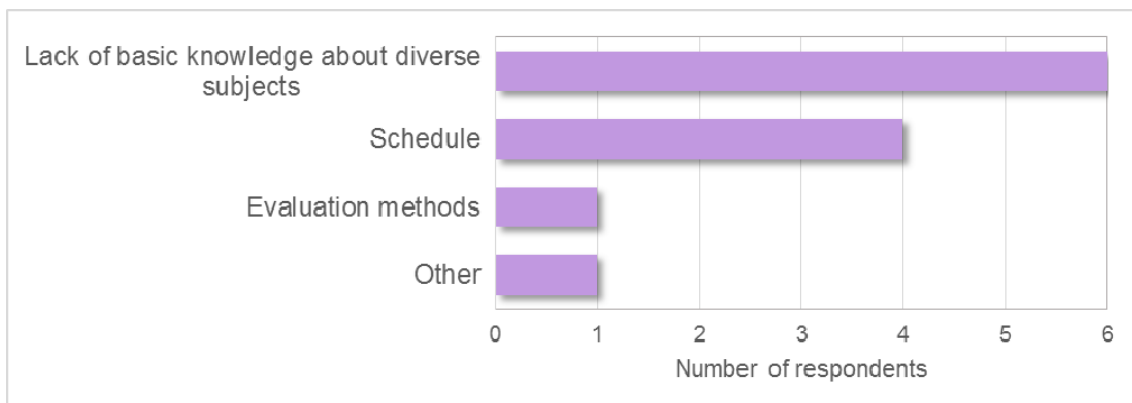
after the first year of study, because he got a job in another city and could not attend classes.

At question number seven, on what determined the students to graduate, there were four possible answers shown in *Figure 4*. Respondents could chose more answers.



**Fig. 4.** MSc students' opinions regarding their motivation for graduating the master programme (Multiple Answer Item)

At the question, *What difficulties did you encounter during courses?* there were five possible options (Figure 5). The main reason why six out of seven respondents said they found difficult their lack of basic knowledge about diverse subjects was that students from Geography did not have the Geology background and vice versa. Four students said the schedule was a problem because most of the courses were held during the weekend and/or from morning till dawn, so it was very tiresome and difficult for both the professors and students to concentrate. One student picked "other", mentioning that some coursers were the same as those already studied during their Bachelor studies and thus were rather uninteresting. The only option that was not chosen by any students was "Teaching methods".

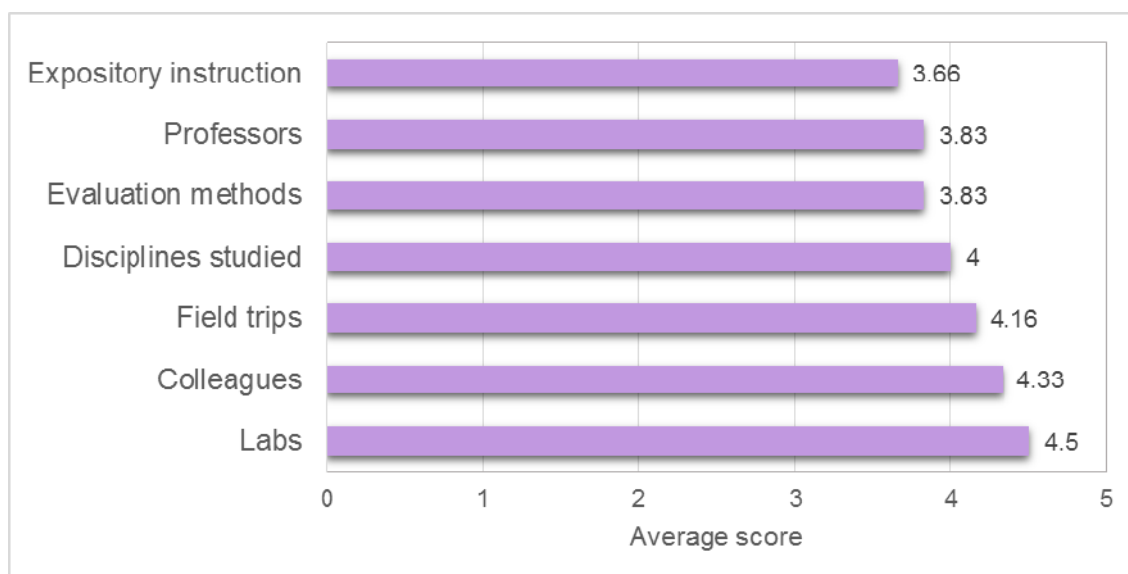


**Fig. 5.** MSc students' opinions regarding the difficulties they encountered during the master programme (Multiple Answer Item)

At the next question, respondents had to evaluate how much they liked certain aspects of the master programme, on a scale from 1 to 5. As shown in Figure 6, expository instruction has the lowest average score. According to Swaak *et al.* (2004), "*expository teaching creates a fairly passive role for learners who are expected to receive information and reproduce them at some point*" (p. 226). Therefore, it is no wonder that students do not find this method as being attractive. By contrast, teaching based on discovery, during labs, has the highest score, of 4.5.

The field trips, another teaching method based on students' involvement, had maximum score, five, from four students, and from another two a score of four. Only one student gave field trips one point, thus lowering the average score. Collaboration with colleagues has an average score of 4.33, not necessarily because of conflictual relationships, but also because there were few students (see answers to question no. 14).

Questions number 10 and 11 were open-ended, completely unstructured. Respondents had to write which subject they liked the most/did not like and to support their answers. Most appreciated disciplines were *Non-Metallic Resources* (three answers) and *Geological Resources* (two answers). Appreciated were also *Protected Geological Sites* and *Landscape Reconstruction of Mining Sites*.



**Fig. 6.** MSc students' assessment of different aspects of the master programme

Three out of these four disciplines were taught by the professors from the Faculty of Geology and Biology. Students appreciated these courses because they learned new practical things during labs and field trips (Figure 7), and also because of the teaching method. As one respondent stated: "I

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liked Non-Metallic Resources because the professor had a very good method of combining the useful with pleasure". I personally liked projects as a method of evaluation, where we had to apply everything we learned during the semester, both theoretical and practical. We had these kind of evaluation at *Protected Geological Sites* and *Landscape Reconstruction of Mining Sites*.



**Fig. 7.** MSc students during labs (*Geological Resources*) and field trips (*Protected Geological Sites*) (Photo: Roxana-Maria Buş, November 2014)

The most unappreciated courses were *Unrenewable Geological Resources* (two answers), *Agroforestry Resources*, *Territorial Planning*, *Development and Resources: Paradigms and Conditionings* (with one answer each). Those were unappreciated for being "boring", "without practical teaching methods", "vague" and for having "ridiculous methods of teaching and evaluation".

At question number 12, I asked students to tell me if they had ever completed professors' evaluation on UBB AcademicInfo platform. At Babeş-Bolyai University, students can evaluate courses and professors' performance, at the end of each semester, before examination sessions, on the online platform AcademicInfo. However, few students took their time to fill in the feedback questionnaire. Two out of seven respondents said they did, but not always. Only a few professors reminded the students that they could use the platform to evaluate courses and teaching methods, therefore most of the students were not aware that this possibility existed, or they did not consider it as being relevant.

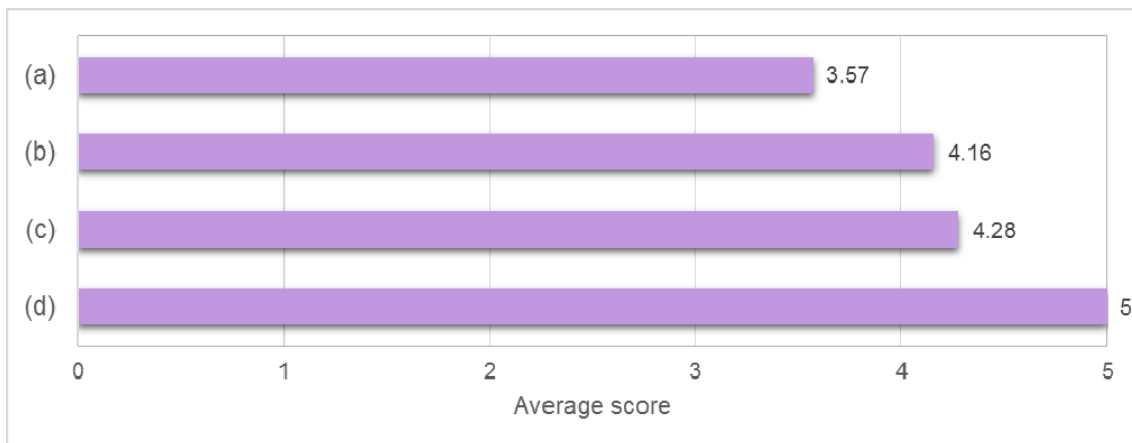
Question number 13 was a Likert scale, where students had to assess four methods of improving this master programme in the future. The methods were identified by me, based on previous discussions that I had with my colleagues. The results are shown in Figure 8. Even though the first measure (a) has the lowest average score, five out of seven students gave



it maximum points, agreeing that a new theoretical discipline, taught at the beginning of the first semester of study, might help students understand better what they are going to study during the master programme. Explaining very basic concepts at each discipline is not only time consuming and unproductive, but also tedious for the students who already know a lot about the subject from previous years in university. As students, we felt that many professors struggled with this problem (i.e. of teaching each and every one of us something new).

A problem that can be solved in an easier way is the advertising among undergraduates. This can be done before enlisting begins, in a conference held by the professors, where students could clarify all their concerns regarding this educational programme. The ERSTD master programme has a lot of potential, and MSc graduates are generally pleased with it (Figure 9), so it should attract more new students.

Afterwards, I asked my colleagues to come up with other ideas for improving the master programme in the future, in another completely unstructured open-ended question. I got only four answers. Most respondents agreed that professors should stimulate students to participate actively at courses. Prince (2004) states that "active learning is generally defined as any instructional method that engages students in the learning process" (p. 223) and it "is often contrasted to the traditional lecture where students passively receive information from the instructor" (p. 223). Respondents suggested several methods of active learning such as: brainstorming, debates or class discussions, projects and visual-based active learning (watching documentaries or slideshow presentations).

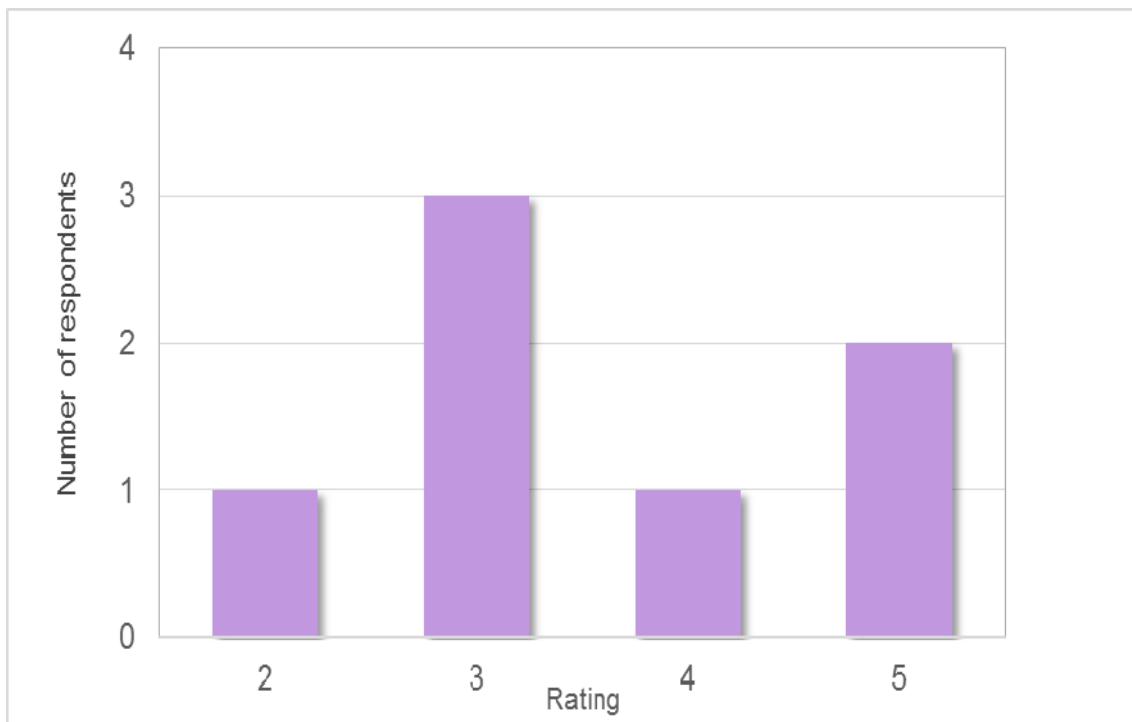


**Fig. 8.** Respondents' assessment of the methods for improving the master programme: (a) introducing a new theoretical course, at the beginning of the first semester of study, with basic concepts students need during the master programme; (b) normal schedule – without courses held during the week ends and/or from morning till dawn; (c) informing students completely and correctly before enlisting begins; (d) more practical courses with field trips, labs and GIS methods

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Nowadays, a university degree is moving swiftly from being a fad to being a necessity (Svensson and Wood, 2007). But, at the same time, companies want their potential employees to have some sort of experience, even though they are fresh graduates. In this context, it is not surprising that many students pointed out several times the necessity of being able to cooperate with specialised institutions and companies in order to get the experience needed for obtaining the job they wanted. In order to do that, faculties should invest more in finding potential co-operators, and make this a priority for students' educational training.

Being few in number was also an issue that needs to be improved. According to one respondent: "we should have been more students in class, because it would have been easier for us to exchange ideas and experiences or simply socialise". Really important for one of the students was the bibliography and more diverse information sources. Many also agreed that both the professors and students should be more involved in this master programme, and it should be taken more seriously, even though it was a new experimental one.



**Fig. 9.** Respondents' assessment of how pleased they were with the master programme

Finally, at the last question about how pleased they were overall with the ERSTD master programme, on a scale from 1 to 5, the average score was 3.57 (Figure 9). Elliott and Shin (2002) state that students' overall

satisfaction with an educational programme is shaped not only by what happens during the courses but also by experiences related to university life. Therefore, the final score was influenced not only by the teaching/learning methods, but also by the collaboration with colleagues and professors, and by the universities' environment. We can also argue that students' prior expectations exceeded perceived performance since they enthusiastically enrolled at ERSTD for what they were going to study (see question one), but, overall, they were not totally pleased with this educational programme.

## CONCLUSIONS

Analysing students' perception of the Evaluation of Resources and Sustainable Territorial Development master programme, I have identified several issues that need to be solved in order to attract more students and to retain them at this educational programme. These issues are: poor advertising among future MSc students, tiresome schedule, but, most important, the teaching/learning methods. I have also identified that the strengths of this master programme are the collaboration between the two faculties of Geography and Geology, the practical courses, especially at the Geology department, and the courses/subjects studied.

MSc students consider that, at this level, evaluation and teaching, should be rather practical than theoretical, that they should be more involved during classes. This can be done by introducing more field trips and laboratory courses, but also by giving students projects and engage them into debates or class discussions, where they can apply everything they learn. In order to have a wide view over the topics, students also consider important a vast bibliography and sources of information more or less conventional, such as books, journals, documentaries, etc. A theoretical course could be introduced at the beginning of the first year, so that students could learn basic concepts about what they will going to study during the master programme. This course is needed because students come from both faculties (Geography and Geology) and they have different educational backgrounds and training.

To attract potential students, professors from both faculties should organise a Conference and promote this educational programme for everyone interested. They should be able to answers all students' questions on what they are going to study, how can this master programme help them get a job after graduation, what teaching methods are available, etc. This is every important because many potential students gave up the idea of enrolling at this master programme because it was surrounded by scepticism.

Overall, students who graduated the Evaluation of Resources and Sustainable Territorial Development master programme are generally

satisfied with it, but there is need for improvement. It is important to listen to students' opinions and consult them during the semesters as well, in order to improve the quality of the educational programme, minimise their dissatisfactions and thus keep them and bring new students in the future.

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