

## **FOCO GENERACIÓN UJA: A NOVEL LIFE-LONG LEARNING PROGRAMME FOR TRAINING KEY SOFT COMPETENCES IN STUDENTS OF THE UNIVERSIDAD DE JAÉN (SPAIN)**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

One of the main goals of any university is to prepare its current students for the professional future they will face after graduation. Reaching this goal has become increasingly complex, as current students will be facing a changing job market, quite different from the traditional one. The main feature of the world in which the ongoing university students will develop professionally is its changing and uncertain character. To cope with this situation, it will not be enough to count on a "classical" academic training, focused on the specific knowledge of each degree. Counting on this knowledge will still be essential, but it will need to be complemented with other key soft skills allowing future graduates to achieve excellence as professionals and as responsible and committed members of society, through their ability to adapt to change.

### **About the Universidad de Jaén**

The Universidad de Jaén (UJA) is a public institution founded in 1993, that has its main campus in the city of Jaén, where most faculties and schools are located (Health, Experimental Sciences, Humanities, Social Work, Social and Law Sciences, and Polytechnic); and a second Scientific-Technological campus in the city of Linares with a Polytechnic School, both based in Jaén province (Andalucía, in the south of Spain).

UJA has a wide offering of degrees, with 38 BSc degrees, 42 MSc degrees and 20 PhD programmes. These official programmes are followed by about 15,000 students, mostly from nearby areas. Also, nearly a thousand international students from countries worldwide are studying in UJA, engaged in different exchange programmes. In addition, a significant number of UJA-endorsed degrees, both at graduate and postgraduate levels complement the academic offering of UJA. The university belongs to the Top 50 best young universities in the world (from the Times Higher Education Ranking) and has been awarded with the European seal of excellence EFQM 500+, among other recognitions. Besides the high degree of commitment to research and to social regional development, the main mission of the university is the education of their students.

### **Soft skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

Studies carried out by different institutions show a great coincidence in the type of transversal competences that students need to incorporate into their curriculum. With little difference, studies published by diverse sources agree on the key competences that will be essential for the professional of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Of particular interest are the similarities between the recommendations of the European Parliament and the European Council about the key competences for life-long learning (2006) and the ones selected by Spanish employers as the competences new graduates need to function adequately in the workplace (Fundación Everis, 2016). A recent internal study conducted at UJA reached similar conclusions. The study explored the competences most valued by different focus groups (students, teaching staff, deans, and area employers), and all of them made reference to the need for training in work-related skills (teamwork, preparation for job interview, problem solving, etc.) and communication skills (professional writing, public speaking, proper verbal communication, etc.). Combining the results of these studies with the missions of UJA, we articulated the list of key competences that every student of our university should incorporate in his or her curriculum. These competences are listed in Table 1, divided in six main areas: (1) Performance in the workplace; (2) Employability and entrepreneurship;

(3) Civic and social values; (4) Digital competence; (5) Cultural competences; and (6) Performance as a university student (see also Robinson, 2015).

Second-language proficiency among its students has been the focus of UJA over the last years, with an important offering of subjects in a second language within bachelor programmes (mostly in English, but also in Italian, French, and German). Additionally, there is an increasing incorporation of visiting faculty in the graduate programmes, which complement the specific language training offered by the Centre for Advanced Studies in Modern Languages of UJA. This Centre is mainly focused on the training and certification of the language competences students need to obtain their official degrees and to participate in exchange programmes. Similarly, there are a large number of complementary activities offered by the different Departments and Schools of the university that cover many of the skills presented in Table 1. However, this training is not structured within a single programme, and it is offered to small groups of students, taking the risk of being overshadowed by training in the specific technical abilities developed in each formal degree.

**Table 1. List of key soft competences intended to be developed by all the students of the Universidad de Jaén**

Field	Code	Key Soft Competence
Performance in the workplace	C1	Developing skills for cooperative work and team participation, negotiation and leadership. Ability to work in multicultural and multidisciplinary environments
	C2	Incorporating the values of commitment, honesty, responsibility, cooperation, effort and respect in the workplace
	C3	Orientation to results and problem solving
	C4	Learning capacity and adaptation to change. Ability to start and persist and organize their own learning
Employability and entrepreneurship	C5	Knowing and applying the tools for an active job search, and for developing entrepreneurship projects
Civic and social values	C6	Knowing and applying Human Rights, and the principles of equality, solidarity and citizen participation
	C7	Developing an attitude for environmental sustainability and responsible consumption
Digital competence	C8	Knowing and using the Information and Communication Technologies of general interest for all degrees (office, internet, computer security, etc.).
Cultural competences	C9	Cultural expression and awareness
Performance as a university student	C10	Analysing, reasoning critically, thinking creatively and evaluating the learning process by assertively and structurally discussing their own ideas and ideas of others
	C11	Communication skills (oral, written, non-verbal, preparation and defence of reports, presentations, end-of-title projects, ability to debate among peers, in a court or in an interview, etc.), both in the mother tongue and in a second language.
	C12	Knowing and applying study techniques and effective management of time and information

## THE CHALLENGE

The main challenge the university was facing was to design a training programme on soft key skills able to reach the roughly 15,000 students currently engaged full time in one of over a hundred BSc, MSc or PhD study programmes offered at UJA. This programme should be a structured programme, easy to find and follow by students, sustainable, and compatible with their regular activities and academic duties as university students.

## THE GOAL

The main goal of the programme is to ensure that every student of UJA has the opportunity to develop the twelve key competences outlined in Table 1 above as the main soft skills most demanded by employers and society in university graduates.

## THE MEANS

The programme has been named as Complementary Training in Academic-Professional Competences, and it is part of the more ambitious programme *FoCo Generación UJA* (Complementary Training UJA Generation). The *FoCo Generación UJA* programme focuses on providing UJA students with a complementary training in both transversal competences and competences specific to their official degree, so that every student has the opportunity of designing his or her own tailored *curriculum vitae* during his or her stay at UJA.

As stated above, the main challenge of the programme is that it is intended to reach every student of UJA; assuming that most students remain at the university for four years, the programme had to be designed so that it can end up potentially reaching about 4,000 students each year. In order to reach that number of students with a training programme compatible with their regular academic tasks, the programme was designed as a set of courses that combine online and face-to-face learning.

Every course includes three different modules and it is designed as a 1.5 ECTS course and prepared for attending about 250 students:

- Presentation module. The course starts with a motivational presentation session for all students. The session is scheduled so that it involves the participation of relevant and compelling lecturers, and it is intended to capture students' attention and get them involved in the following parts.
- Online module. The second section of the course is developed as an online course, with a MOOC-like structure. This module is designed so that it can be offered as a stand-alone course if the programme were to be extended to the general public.
- Workshops in small groups. The final section of the course is devoted to training in the specific skills, with practical sessions conducted in groups of 15 to 25 people, depending on the skill type.

The programme includes initially the fifteen courses that are listed in Table 2. Each course is devoted to training in a given soft skill as a main goal, and involves complementary training in other skills from the ones listed in Table 1. Collectively, all the courses train the complete list of defined skills. Students can schedule their training by choosing different courses over several years during their stay at the university.

Each course is independently evaluated and certified. However, the completion of specific combinations of courses may be certified as an UJA-endorsed University award named "*University Extension Diploma in Communication and Interpersonal Management Skills*". To obtain the award a minimum of 5 credits achieved within the programme are required.

Depending on the courses taken by the student the diploma may be endorsed with one or several itineraries on Leadership and Motivation of Work Teams, Effective Communication, or Training for Social Equality.

One key feature of the programme is its flexibility and adaptability. The programme is designed to be under continuous evaluation, and it includes a quality assurance system based on surveys. The programme is open to modification, substitution and inclusion of new courses, based on regular interaction with and feedback from students, teaching staff and society. The offering is completed with other complementary activities, such as workshops, seminars and professional talks.

**Table 2. List of courses in the initial version of the Programme of Complementary Training in Academic - Professional Competences during the years 2107-2018 and 2018-2019 at the Universidad de Jaén**

Course Name	Competences		Itinerary / UJA- Endorsed Degree
	Main	Secondary	
Applying emotional intelligence in the workplace. Social skills and assertive communication development	C1	C2, C3, C11	Leadership and motivation in work teams
Motivation, leadership and conflict and negotiation management	C1	C2, C3, C5, C11	Leadership and motivation in work teams
Teamwork and efficient communication	C1	C2, C3, C11	Leadership and motivation in work teams
Written expression workshop	C11	C10	Effective communication
Preparation of end-of-degree papers, reports, and articles	C11	C1, C2, C3, C10	Effective communication
Fundamentals of oral communication: course on speech and communication strategies	C11	C1, C5, C9, C10	Effective communication
Preparation of a presentation to the public	C11	C1, C5, C9, C10	Effective communication
Equality and non-discrimination	C6	C2, C11	Training for social equality
Human Rights: political, legal, social and work dimensions	C6	C2, C7	Training for social equality
Ethics and security on the Internet. ICT tools for teamwork	C8	C1, C2, C3, C11	
Prepare yourself to successfully pass the personnel selection interview	C5	C2	
Create your curriculum vitae	C5	11	
Study techniques and exam preparation	C12	C4, C10	
Effective management of time and information	C12	C1, C2, C10	
Environmental Sustainability: everyone's responsibility	C7	C2, C3, C6	

Note. Competence codes corresponds with the competence codes listed in Table 1.

The programme is fully funded by UJA and is offered as complementary training to all students of the official degrees, including international students. No tuition is charged. The composition of the teaching staff of each course is mixed, with the course prepared and taught by the teaching staff of the university coordinated with specialists from other public and private institutions and businesses.

The annual budget of the programme is about €100,000. Expenses are politically justified as the programme is part of the features that make UJA unique, allowing the university to singularize its offering with respect to other competing universities. The programme is intended to be one of the key features of the UJA Generation, and it is being used already in all institutional marketing campaigns.

## THE RESULTS

The programme started during the academic year 2017-2018, with an initial offering of 10 courses. Over 1,800 students enrolled in the programme during this academic year. The number of students enrolled in each course ranged from 120 to 250. About ninety percent of the enrolled students were undergraduates. This distribution is explained because undergraduates outnumber graduate students with a distribution of 6 to 1 at UJA, because graduate students are more likely to have already developed the soft abilities throughout their education, and also because the first programme marketing campaign was mainly focused on undergraduate students during the launch of the programme.

Students' and teaching staff's evaluation of the programme has been excellent. The result of the satisfaction polls for the 10 courses taught this academic year ranges around 9 points out of 10, with little variation among courses. However, this year's experience has also shown that there is a significant drop-out rate, with 30 to 50% of enrolled students not finishing the course for which they were registered. Analysis has shown that the main abandonment occurred before the beginning of the course, mostly due to conflict with other activities of the students, but a significant abandonment occurred during the online module in some specific courses. In this second case a further analysis of the content, timing and organization is required in order to reduce this rate in new editions.

## THE FUTURE

The complete programme will be available during the academic year 2018-2019 with the full offering of the 15 courses listed in Table 2. The results of the first edition of the programme are very encouraging, though they also show some aspects that need to be improved in future editions. Among the positive aspects and strengths of the programme which stand out are the engagement of the teaching staff with the programme, the interest shown by students, and the flexibility of the programme which will allow it to be adapted as needed in a simple way. The fact that the programme allows students to design their own academic itinerary, building their own individualised tailor-made *curriculum vitae* is something that has been highly valued by them as one important feature of the programme.

The main weakness of the programme is the desertion rate, which may be related to the fact that the courses are free for students, and that there are no actual consequences of dropping the course. Reducing the desertion rate by increasing the quality and the interest of the programme, along with an optimization of the organization will be the main challenges of the programme in the near future. Another important challenge that should be soon tackled is the compatibility of the programme with the official degrees offered by UJA. As an initial approach in that direction, the website of each study programme at UJA has been remodelled so that the student can easily see now which is the complementary training that the university offer for that specific study programme.

This complementary training includes the courses presented here, as they are intended for all the students of UJA, but also comprises other complementary courses and activities that specifically pertain to a particular degree.

Altogether, the implementation of the first edition of the programme can be considered a success. In its first edition, the partial implementation of the programme has reached over 12% of UJA students. The interest shown in the programme by students, society, and employers is quickly growing, so that the programme is becoming a distinct feature of studying at UJA. The programme may be easily transferred to other medium size universities. In parallel, the programme will be extended to graduates and the general public in a more classic LLLP format, through the design and implementation of open online courses, developed as spin-offs of the *FoCo Generación UJA* programme.

## REFERENCES

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