

# EFFECTIVENESS OF TEACHING METHODS USED IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY OF EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY OF MADRID, SPAIN

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this research was to determine the effectiveness of various teaching methods used in higher education and the perception of the students regarding these methods. In order to determine the possible ways to obtain strategic advantages and benefit from the strengths, the university has to know what drives foreign students in choosing a certain study program, even if it is outside their country of origin. At the same time, knowing the disadvantages that prevent them from doing so, helps the university include ways to correct the weaknesses or to offer solutions to them. The students, participating in this research, are enrolled at the European University in Madrid, from different study programs and degrees (license, master and doctoral programs) and were asked to answer a questionnaire about the use of teaching methods, about their perceptions upon effective teaching and the reasons that have determined them to choose to follow a study program. The results were in favor of a higher use of projects, group activities and case studies during classes and seminars at the European University of Madrid and of using new technologies in the educational system (e-learning, simulations, use of intranet, and activities in laboratories). As a primer characteristic searched for when choosing a study program, the students mentioned practice, mainly for developing abilities useful for applying for a job as soon as possible.*

*It is, therefore, important to analyze the teaching methods and this research helps us understand how students see the teaching process and which are the methods that help them to better understand and to be more active during classes.*

**Key words:** *creativity development, innovative teaching, practical activities, teaching methods.*

## Introduction

The opinion of students is very important in the way that it can determine the future of a certain educational program and of a university. If the students see the characteristics they search for, they are most likely to apply to that program. Afterwards, if this is amplified by innovative teaching methods and practice, the overall experience should produce trained students, future successful employees who will further recommend the program and become real promoters for the university on a long term basis.

There is substantial research linking student satisfaction to the effectiveness of a teaching system. Research indicates that students are the most qualified sources to report with certitude if the learning and teaching experience was productive, informative, satisfying, or if it was worthwhile. These opinions are not direct measures of instructor or course effectiveness, but they are legitimate indicators of student satisfaction (Theall & Franklin, 2001).

The students nowadays call for new, innovative teaching methods. So, the universities should respond in the sense of becoming more innovative (Cottrell & Jones, 2003), more flexible and grant importance to quality teaching (Biggs, 2001; Gibbs, 1995; Harvey, L. & Green, D., 1993).

### *Problem of Research*

The current situation of higher education is one of adaptation to the needs of the society in general, of the companies and of the students who require a level of practical abilities to be included in the curriculum. Mainly higher education is in search for answers to questions such as:

- How imperative is the modernization of the educational system?
- How can the quality be improved?
- What are the main characteristics that students search for in a study program?

The problem of inactive participation in courses and seminars is a current problem and creativity stimulation techniques have recently begun to be used in higher education in order to solve this issue. The research tends to conclude that creativity and innovation are key determinants of competitive advantage for the European University of Madrid, Spain. In order to solve the problem of inactive participation and of migration of students to foreign, more qualified universities, researches, that can provide an overview of what students really seek and desire from the educational system, need to be conducted.

### *Research Focus*

Following the trend of a decrease in number of high school graduates, small and medium sized universities can face extinction if they cannot adapt their programs and attract more students. The fight for gaining competitive advantage is fiercer at a global level. High rated universities are no longer focused on attracting local students; they extend educational offers all around the world. And the students' mobility increases from one year to another.

This has led to an interest in studies that can determine the new needs of students and their desires when choosing to follow educational programs.

The conducted research has focused on obtaining responses regarding the following:

- The importance of innovation and creativity for students in their academic training;
- The reasons for choosing the analyzed university for academic training;
- The opinion of the students on the strengths and weaknesses that the analyzed university may have regarding the teaching methods used.

This research gave answers needed in order to solve the problem of inactive participation during classes and seminars and to suggest the best practical activities and teaching methods to be used in order to increase the interest of its students.

#### *Objectives:*

O1: Determine whether creativity and innovation can become potential source of competitive advantage in universities from the point of view of students.

O2: Determine the weight of the training activities that stimulate creativity in all the educational activities used in the European University of Madrid.

O3: Discover the training activities in the European University of Madrid which are seen by students as strengths.

O4: Determine ways of differentiation in the eyes of students, after centralization and interpretation of the questionnaires.

O5: Determine the advantages that students see at European University of Madrid in comparison with other universities they know.

*Hypothesis:*

H1: Innovation is one of the first positive characteristics that students see in the European University of Madrid.

H2: The training activities most used in the European University of Madrid are practical and participatory activities.

H3: Training activities seen as positive points in the eyes of students of the European University of Madrid are participatory activities and practices.

H4: The practical educational programs, innovation and creativity included in curricula and adaptation to the market needs, creating opportunities for employment, are among the top reasons that can and have given students reasons to follow European University of Madrid courses.

H5: The main advantages that students see at European University of Madrid when compared with other known universities are the use of practice, innovation of teaching and creativity.

The importance of methods that stimulate creativity in order to create a student-centered learning system is increasing. The information obtained through this research has established an increased use of these methods and thus increased student interest and participation in activities.

The information obtained from the research can be used in decision-making, encouraging teachers to use techniques to stimulate creativity in courses and seminars and to motivate students to participate more often and more actively in the activities within the university. It may also constitute a form of differentiating from other universities, making a process more practical and engaging learning.

## **Methodology of Research**

### *General Background of Research*

Four years ago a survey was conducted, in order to analyze the utilization of teaching methods that encourage creativity in Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Romania, upon students of the Faculty of Economics. In the same year a research was developed to determine the importance of these methods for the teachers from the same university and the frequency of usage of these methods in the economic area. The scope of the research was to determine if the methods which stimulate creativity are used by teachers during classes and if students are interested in such methods. The type of the research conducted was a practical one, using a questionnaire, applied to the students enrolled at Lucian Blaga University at the Faculty of Economical Science in the academic year of 2008-2009. The type of the research methodology used was a quantitative one, in the form of a paper survey.

The results of these two studies have shown that over 80% of teachers who responded to the survey believe that the methods of stimulating creativity are very important in the learning process of economy as a subject and 60% of them use these methods in class. Most students surveyed (60%) consider that these methods determine a more active participation and stimulate interest.

What has been pointed out to us is the importance of these methods, the benefits seen by students and teachers.

The construction of the current questionnaire used upon the students at European University of Madrid is based on receiving information in order to reach the following objectives:

- The qualities that students can gain and develop if creativity is stimulated;
- The opportunities found by the students and how you can include them in a strategy

which would gain competitive advantage for the university.

### *Sample of Research*

Research sample: Students enrolled for the year 2014-2015 at the European University of Madrid

Period: November 2014-August 2015

Location: European University of Madrid, Spain, campus Villaviciosa de Odon.

Sample size needed for these values is of 59 students and 65 valid responses to the questionnaire were obtained. (The sample size along with the representativeness was calculated using the statistical formula and program found at <http://www.surveysystem.com/sscalc.htm>)

Selection: Students enrolled at European University of Madrid, sending an online questionnaire to their e-mail addresses.

Representativeness: 90%

Confidence level 95%

Confidence interval 12%

Sample description: most of the students reside in urban areas (85.94%), regularly attend classes (83.08%) and the number of men (46%) is almost the same with that of women (54%) who have responded to the questionnaire.

The profile of the student that answered the questionnaire: The student enrolled at the European University of Madrid, Spain resides in urban areas (85.94% of all respondents admitted that they have as their place of residence urban) and regularly attends classes (83.08% admitted they regularly attend classes). Regarding the sex of the respondent, the number of men (male students 46%) is almost the same with that of women (female students 54%) who have responded to the questionnaire.

### *Instrument and Procedures*

A questionnaire was applied to students who choose to pursue educational programs in European University of Madrid, Spain, and a private university, located in the capital of the country and with an intense activity in the education market.

The type of the research was conducted using a questionnaire, applied to the students enrolled at the European University of Madrid, from different study programs (Economics, Social sciences, Business administration).

The period in which the enrolled students had time to complete the online questionnaire was from October 2014, until July of 2015. The type of the research methodology used was a quantitative one, in the form of an online survey, posted online at [www.freeonlinesurveys.com](http://www.freeonlinesurveys.com) and then sent to the students via e-mail notification.

Instruments used to analyse data: SPSS 16.0 software, Microsoft Excel

The questionnaire, developed in order to achieve the stated objectives, was conceived with the help of psychology teachers from the Educational Department at the European University of Madrid and was first pretested upon students enrolled at the analyzed university. A questionnaire was realized for this presentation and students were asked to answer it during classes and seminars in order to see their response and to act accordingly. After a few additional changes regarding the form of the questions, respecting the methodology in the field, it was then sent in an online form to the students enrolled at a different study program at UEM. The answers received are anonymous and were stored with the help of an online survey program which guarantees the representativeness and the fact that a student can answer the questionnaire only once. ([www.freeonlinesurveys.com](http://www.freeonlinesurveys.com))

### *Data Analysis*

The collected data received from the students that had completed the online questionnaire was analyzed using SPSS program and Microsoft Excel. Viable answers were considered only

the ones coming from students that were enrolled at the European University of Madrid in the year 2014-2015.

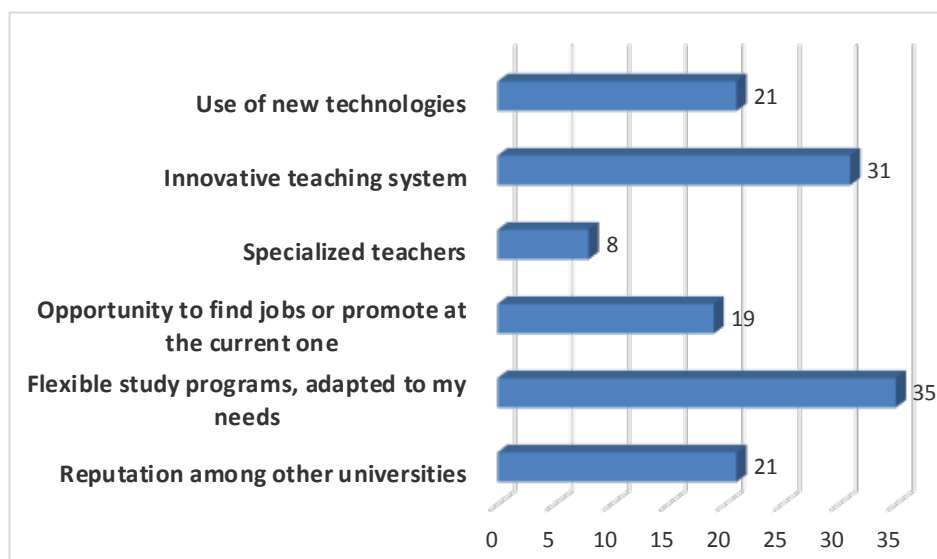
Main statistical methodology used in data analysis: descriptive statistics.

## Results of Research

The evaluation of student's opinion regarding the effectiveness of teaching methods used during classes and seminars is an important point in the undergoing research.

To the question: Mention the main reason that made you choose the university for its current studies (Figure 1), most students chose the options: flexible educational programs tailored to their needs (35 of the total answers, representing 25.92%), innovative teaching and learning (31 answers, representing 22.96%), use of new technologies (21 answers, representing 15.55% from the total) and reputation among other universities (21 answers, representing 15.55%).

These main reasons students have chosen are sources of competitive advantage in the market by focusing on creativity, innovation, use of new technologies. What students need in the future from their university, according to the obtained results, is to form the ability to use knowledge and theory in practice, in order to solve problems and to integrate at the workplace.

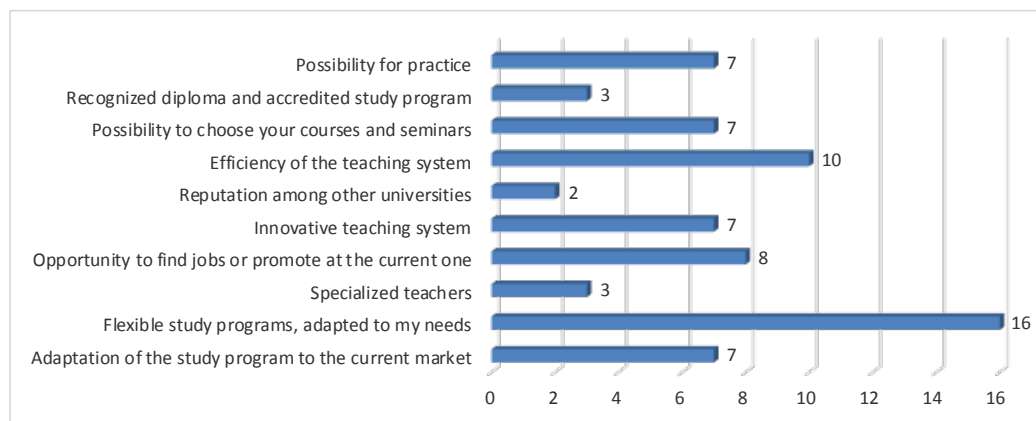


**Figure 1: Main reasons that have determined students to choose European University of Madrid.**

From the obtained results, it is observed that 25.92% of students choose a university based on flexible program. This is due to the fact that students undertake different jobs during college. Perhaps using innovative teaching system facilitates combining theory with practice.

It is interesting to see if this feature of innovation is perceived by students as a decisive choice when it comes to selecting the study program to follow. For this you can correlate the answers to the question discussed above with the answers to the question Mention which is the main feature that you look for when choosing your study program (Figure 2). So it appears that the main reasons that made students choose the European University of Madrid are the same with the main features they were looking for before choosing it. As seen in the figure below, these are: flexibility of the curriculum, courses and seminars (16 of total answers, representing 22.85%), efficiency of the educational system (10 of total answers, representing 14.28%), the possibility to find jobs or career progress (8 answers, representing 11.42%), innovative

educational systems (7 answers, representing 10%). This means that students found at the European University of Madrid the main characteristics sought and that the university has focused on the strengths that meet the requirements of the students.



**Figure 2: Features that students look for when choosing a study program at a university.**

In the research conducted on students enrolled at the European University of Madrid, an important point focuses on training, practical activities, because it was one of the main characteristic pointed out by its students.

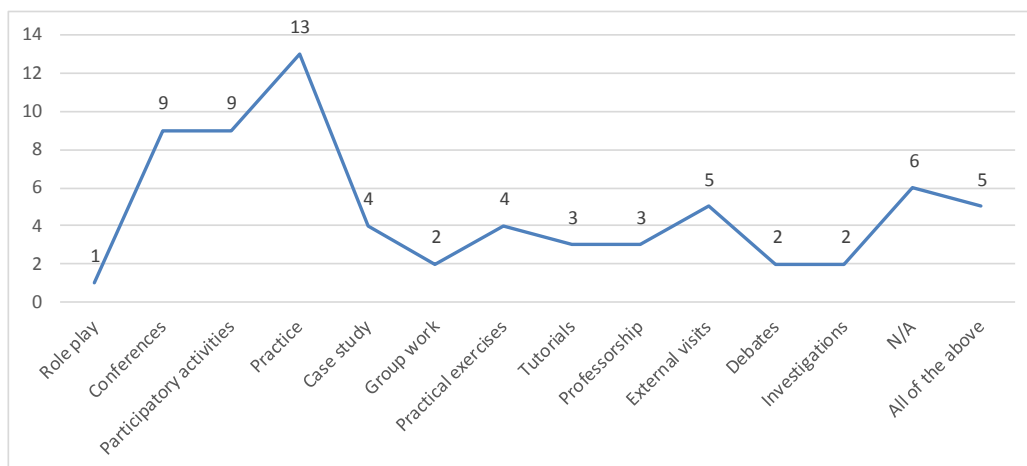
This research was conducted in order to find out which methods and activities are most commonly used to determine if the educational system is one that produces results and if it is tailored to the needs of students. A point of evaluation (strengths and weaknesses) of these methods and activities was introduced in our questionnaire to determine possible strategies to improve the overall educational system at the European University of Madrid. Figure 3 shows the trend of use of the training activities. Training activities focus on developing the practical and creative abilities of students and are used in a wide range according to the figure below. In classes and seminars at the analyzed university participatory activities, such as practical exercises, case study, practices are all used, earning a rating between 3.5 and 4 points from a maximum of 5 point (Table 1).

**Table 1. Ratings of practical activities according to their usage in classrooms at the European University of Madrid (1-least used, 5-most used) (measurement units f / %).**

Practical activities	1-least used f/%	2 f/%	3 f/%	4 f/%	5-most used f/%	Standard deviation	Weighted Average (measurement units average points/total points)
Case study	6 (9.23)	9 (13.85)	<b>25</b> <b>(38.46)</b>	15 (23.06)	10 (15.38)	6.06	3.22/5
Conferences	12 (18.46)	9 (13.85)	<b>19</b> <b>(29.23)</b>	14 (21.54)	11 (16.92)	3.41	3.05/5
Debates	13 (20)	8 (12.31)	<b>20</b> <b>(30.77)</b>	16 (24.62)	8 (12.31)	4.65	2.97/5
Strategies/ intervention plans	15 (23.08)	11 (16.92)	<b>23</b> <b>(35.38)</b>	11 (16.92)	5 (7.69)	5.93	2.69/5
Exercises	3 (4.62)	5 (7.69)	6 (9.23)	<b>28</b> <b>(43.08)</b>	23 (35.38)	10.37	3.97/5
Participative activities	1 (1.54)	5 (7.09)	12 (18.46)	<b>25</b> <b>(38.46)</b>	22 (33.85)	9.32	3.95/5
Investigations	8 (12.31)	12 (18.46)	<b>20</b> <b>(30.77)</b>	17 (26.15)	8 (12.31)	4.82	3.08/5
Lecture	11 (17.19)	9 (14.06)	<b>19</b> <b>(29.09)</b>	15 (23.44)	10 (15.63)	3.71	3.06/5
Practice	6 (9.23)	5 (7.69)	12 (18.46)	<b>22</b> <b>(33.85)</b>	20 (30.77)	6.99	3.69/5
Problem solving	6 (9.23)	5 (7.69)	<b>23</b> <b>(35.38)</b>	16 (24.62)	15 (23.08)	6.72	3.45/5
Role playing	14 (21.88)	9 (14.06)	<b>18</b> <b>(28.13)</b>	13 (20.31)	10 (15.63)	3.19	2.94/5
Laboratories	15 (23.44)	9 (14.06)	<b>21</b> <b>(32.81)</b>	10 (15.63)	9 (14.06)	4.66	2.83/5
Tutoring	7 (11.11)	12 (19.05)	10 (15.87)	<b>19</b> <b>(30.16)</b>	15 (23.81)	4.13	3.37/5
External visits	11 (17.19)	<b>21</b> <b>(32.81)</b>	8 (12.5)	10 (15.63)	14 (21.88)	4.53	2.92/5

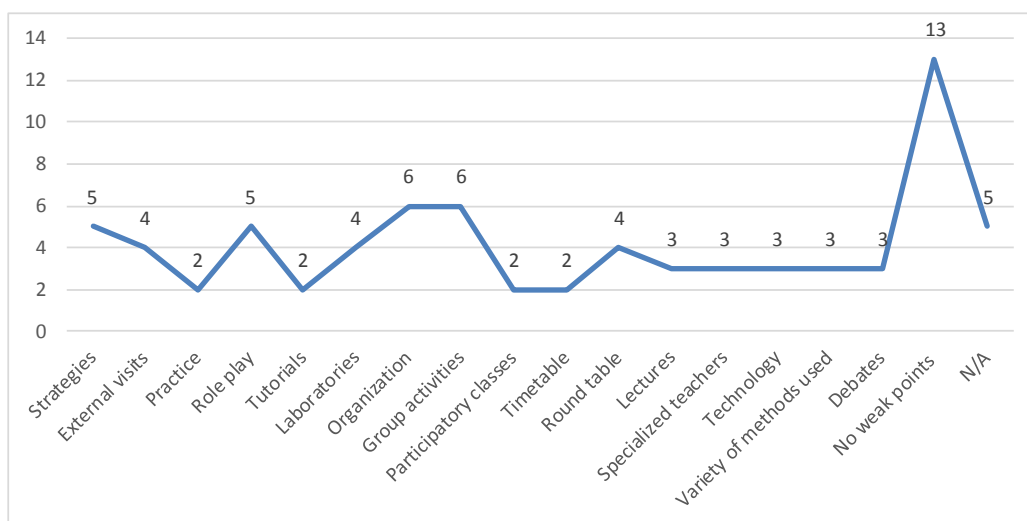
None of the training activities included in the questionnaire has obtained a score greater than 4 and less than 2.6, meaning that each of them is being broadly used. The average of the results of all formative (practical) activities included in the questionnaire is of 3.23 from a total of 5. The activities with the lowest score are: external visits (2.92 out of 5 points maximum, most of the student 32.81% giving it a low grade of 2 points) and activities in laboratories (2.83 out of 5 points maximum, most of the student 32.81% giving it a medium grade of 3 points). These are the activities which should be more used and developed during classes and seminars.

The research conducted does an appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses when it comes to analyzing the training activities. This part of the research has been chosen because training activities are very important when a university wants to focus on innovation, creativity and when it wants to attribute these qualities to their students. As strengths in this respect, as it can be seen in Figure 3, are situated activities such as practice (13 answers, representing 19.12% from the total answers given to the question), conferences (9 answers, representing 13.23%) and participatory activities in general (with 9 answers given, 13.23% from the total).



**Figure 3: Practical methods and activities perceived as strengths by the students at the European University of Madrid.**

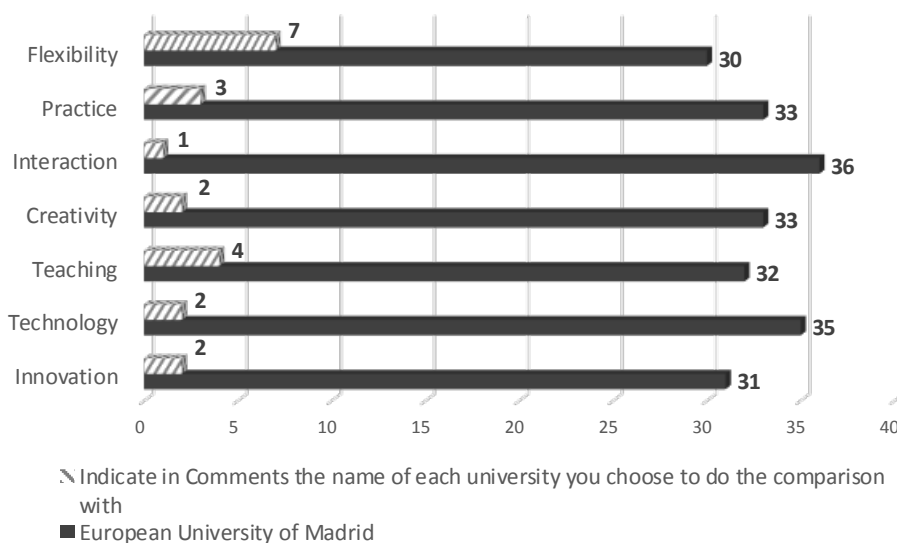
To sustain the interest of the students and trying to meet the educational needs of students, the analyzed university has to try to develop and use more activities such as collaborative ones (6 answers were pointing out group activities as a weak point, representing 8% from the total and also 8% of the students stated that the organization, planning of activities in general is a weak point). As seen in Figure 4, the students mentioned here as weak points the organization of these activities, design plans and strategies, role playing, external visits and roundtables. A percentage of 18.33% of the students who responded to this question have claimed that the European University of Madrid has no weak points in classifying the training activities used.



**Figure 4: Practical methods and activities perceived as weaknesses by the students at the European University of Madrid.**

If we have seen the views of students on the methods used, especially on the practical ones, the research has also focused on a comparison with other universities known by its students. Students who participated in the research have been able to select any known university and compare it to the European University of Madrid on a few key points. They have positioned the European University of Madrid as superior in all the features selected for this study, and with a rather substantial difference, greater than 80% (Figure 5).





**Figure 5: Comparison of 7 attributes between European University of Madrid and other known universities (chosen randomly by its students).**

Students have chosen for this comparison universities where they have taken courses in the past or simply known universities. Their elections have focused on the Complutense University of Madrid (in 12 cases), the Carlos III University (5 responses) and Alfonso X University (in 4 of the elections). The other options are divided between other universities in Spain, with only one or two selections (Polytechnic University of Valencia, Rey Juan Carlos University, University of Vigo, University of León, University of Sevilla, San Pablo CEU University of Santiago, and University of Navarra).

## Discussion

As it can be observed from the results obtained from this study, the concentration of students' needs is upon innovative teaching and learning techniques (see Figures 1 and 2).

According to the results of the research, 25.92% of students stated that the main reason that made them choose European University of Madrid is flexibility and 22.96% of them answered that they have chosen it for its innovative teaching and learning system.

They want to be able to find jobs and to evolve quickly at the work place; this is why they need a study program capable of capturing the essence of practical abilities, with an emphasis upon communication skills, computer skills, teamwork, flexibility, creativity and problem solving (see Table 1 and Figure 3).

When choosing the reasons that have or can determine them to choose a study program in general, 22.85% of the interviewed students mentioned flexibility, 14.28% mentioned the effectiveness of the educational system, 11.42% answered better job opportunities and 10% opted for innovative teaching system.

These are key components that stand out after the interpretation of the results of the research, components to be taken into consideration in order to increase the quality of teaching. The training activities most used in European University of Madrid are practical and participatory ones. As weaknesses in training activities used, students have pointed out design plans and intervention strategies. The main advantages however, compared with other universities, are practice and technology (see Figure 4). This means that the European University of Madrid can continue to base its strategy on innovation and technology. These two characteristics are among the first positive ones that student's remark (see Figure 5).

The flexible educational programs, innovation and creativity included in the curricula, the opportunities for employment, are among the top reasons that can and that have determined students to follow courses at the analyzed university. All of this results show that all of the stated hypothesis have been accomplished (H1-H5).

The university is oriented towards a more experiential education system and it appears to attract those students who want to gain practical capabilities which can help them find work more rapidly.

The students' perception and ratings received from this research are important because it helps us find ways to improve the teaching/ learning process and also to increase the interest of students in certain program and/or university. This study helps the analyzed university to see if the strategies used are in coordination with the needs and expectations of its students. In the same time, it offers an overall perception upon the main characteristics that students look for when choosing a study program and helps us see the importance of new technologies and the imperative for the modernization of the teaching system.

According to the result obtained, innovation is one of the first positive characteristics that students see in the European University of Madrid and the training activities most used are practical and participatory ones. Also, the practical educational programs, innovation and creativity included in curricula and adaptation to the market needs, creating opportunities for employment, are among the top reasons that can and have given students reasons to follow study programs at the analyzed university. The main advantages that students see at European University of Madrid when compared with other known universities are the use of practice, innovation of teaching and creativity. (More than 80% of the students see the European University of Madrid as superior to other known universities regarding practice, innovation, flexibility, creativity and training of teachers)

These results concur with ones from other recent studies undertaken by different universities or organizations that have studied the migration of students to other countries for study and for better practice activities and internships. One of these studies highlight the fact that of the active learning approaches, those most often cited by students included discussions, presentations, problem-based learning and cooperative learning (Cottrell & Jones, 2003). When referring to the instructors, a wide range of assessment methods have been used as well, such as papers, exams, participation and presentations among others (Cottrell & Jones, 2003).

Also, this research taken upon European University of Madrid shows the fact that the use of new technologies and the integration of practical activities during classes and seminars is a must for the nowadays students. Innovation and creativity are characteristics which the European University of Madrid has, according to the obtained results. This is a requisite in order to obtain competitive advantage, fact that concurs with the results obtained by Conil, L., Y. and Hernández de Velazco, J. in 2010, where it is stated that innovation is the bridge between science and technology which has the property be applied to new products, services and processes. From a competitive point of view, innovation is the most powerful weapon to face the competition and achieve the sustainability of competitive advantage, however, for its implementation requires several sectors contest involving a continued commitment to innovation (Conil, L., Y. & Hernández de Velazco, J., 2010). Regarding European University of Madrid, innovation was one of the first positive points observed by its students, so it is advised to use it as a key strategy in order to gain competitive advantage.

## Conclusions

The results of the research emphasize that improving the quality of teaching does not necessarily mean huge investments and funding, but it can be easily achieved by introducing teaching and learning methods that respond to the needs of its students. It is important to mention here:

- an increase of teaching methods that stimulate creativity;

- better use of technology in the educational process (e-learning, portals, simulations);
- focus on activities at seminars that determine development of practical abilities;
- create partnerships with companies and other universities (including partnerships abroad to increase the mobility of the students);
- better correlation between the study program and the workforce market in the area.

The quality of teaching and learning determines how effectively they fulfill these demands and needs of its students. Therefore, the university should develop and implement a strategy for the support and on-going improvement of the quality of teaching and learning and implement it so it can convert itself in competitive advantage.

According to the objectives and hypothesis stated, H1, H2, H3, H4 and H5 have been proven by the obtained results. This means that the analyzed university has already implemented new teaching methods and practical activities and has obtained a positive response from its students. According to H1, innovation is one of the first positive characteristics that students see in the European University of Madrid, alongside flexibility. The training activities most used in the European University of Madrid are practical and participatory activities (H2). These are also the activities seen as positive points in the eyes of students of the European University of Madrid (H3). The practical educational programs, innovation and creativity included in curricula and adaptation to the market needs, creating opportunities for employment, are among the top reasons that can and have given students reasons to follow European University of Madrid courses (H4). The main advantages that students see at European University of Madrid when compared with other known universities are the use of practice, innovation of teaching and creativity (all of them obtaining more of 80% each, showing the fact that the analyzed university is superior in all the 7 attribute measures to other universities chosen for the comparison by the students).

These are the directions to continue in order to increase the interest of students, according to the obtained results. It is interesting to continue this investigation with a study oriented upon recent graduates from colleges in different European countries in order to establish a trend of potential reasons that may determine them to choose a private university such as the one analyzed here.

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