

GEOGRAPHY MASTER'S STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND REPRESENTATIONS ABOUT THE EVALUATION SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents several aspects regarding the legislative context in which paradigm shifts occur in the Romanian university education and which have influenced the process of students' evaluation system. The premise and the research objectives are also depicted. In order to achieve these objectives, a

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questionnaire was conducted among the master's students at the Faculty of Geography, Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, in the academic year of 2012-2013. The study has analysed the master's students' perceptions and representations about the evaluation forms of a discipline, the share played by the results obtained at seminars in the final assessment, the assessment methods and techniques students consider effective for a written exam, the type of results a student should prove in order to achieve the maximum grade, the grading correctness, the importance of evaluation and re-evaluation in the process of training and development of professional skills and the feedback provided by the professor, the clarity of evaluation criteria.

Keywords: *evaluation in high education, types of evaluation, evaluation criteria, assessment tools, assessment methods*

INTRODUCTION

Since the adoption of *the Bologna Declaration*¹ on 19th of June 1999, the reform in the Romanian university system has been carried out, aiming to achieve several objectives such as the compatibility of the Romanian education system with the European education systems; reorganisation of university studies to match the Romanian academic qualifications to the ones from other countries according to the market needs; introducing ECTS (the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System); ensuring quality.

Against this background, the *Law of National Education* (2011)², Article 137 (1) states that "the academic educational program represents a group of teaching, learning, research, practice and evaluation curricular units, planned so that they lead to an academic training certified by a diploma and a diploma supplement" (p. 30). We notice the importance conferred to evaluation through this law.

In the same article, item (2) it is specified that "the curriculum of the education program matches the profile of the training, defined in the National Training Framework" (p. 30). According to the law, the goals of high school and academic education are expressed in the form of professional skills and transferable competencies. Thus, we remark a paradigm change through the transition from an education focused on objectives to a competency-based education.

The study was initiated with the desire to increase the quality of students' assessment, with the aim to improve the process of competence development and to involve students in the process of self-evaluation and

¹*The Bologna Declaration*, <http://bologna.ro/a/upfolders/bologna99.pdf>

² *Law of National Education* (2011), http://www.dreptonline.ro/legislatie/legea_educatiei_nationale_lege_1_2011.php

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evaluation. The research also started from the observation that students, including master's students, encounter difficulties in the perception and representation of assessment forms, evaluation methods and tools, as well as evaluation criteria, aspect which might have consequences on self-evaluation and emotional competence. Therefore, during the study, we analysed certain aspects concerning the way in which the endeavour to evaluate the master's students' results was perceived (namely the master's students at the Faculty of Geography, Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca).

The objectives of the research are the following:

- Analysis on the perceptions and representations of master's students regarding the evaluation types practised in a discipline;
- Analysis on the perceptions and representations of master's students regarding the share played by the results obtained at seminars in the final assessment;
- Analysis on the perceptions and representations of master's students concerning methods and techniques that they consider to be effective for a written exam;
- Analysis on the perceptions and representations of master's students about the type of results a student should prove in order to achieve the maximum grade;
- Analysis on the perceptions and representations of master's students about the grading correctness;
- Analysis on the perceptions and representations of master's students regarding the importance of evaluation and self-evaluation during the process of training and development of professional skills and the feedback provided by the professor;
- Analysis on the perceptions and representations of master's students about the clarity of evaluation criteria.

In order to achieve these goals, we conducted a questionnaire on all master's students who have attended the courses of the Faculty of Geography, Babeş-Bolyai University, in the academic year of 2012-2013.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The specialist literature in Romania comprises several studies about evaluation. Regarding this matter, Opre (2010, p.43) argues that "appealing to the activity of evaluation does not represent a mere goal, but it should be seen as a valid tool of certifying the quality of teaching and recommends that evaluation is carried out so as to analyse the quality of the scientific content and the competencies acquired by the student during the learning

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process". This expert in evaluation states that "periodic procedures of evaluating the teaching, research and professional service of the academic represents the main proof instrument a university may offer to ensure its quality and prestige" (Opre, 2010, p. 43).

Experts in the field of evaluation imply that if we assess the quality of the teaching act, then we should directly verify the quality of the information taught to students. The appraiser should follow other aspects as well: the clarity and firmness of the arguments invoked by the appraised, the language used and the innovative character mentioned within the exam. The evaluation activity should be oriented towards the quality of the information invoked by the student and not towards certain aspects of subjective nature (Opre, 2010).

Within the evaluation system an important role is played by forms, methods and instruments through which the aim is being achieved. Among the most frequent forms of evaluation and collecting information regarding students' results we list: written editing exam; test grid and written editing exam; test grid; oral exam; placement; semestrial paper / project (Opre, 2010).

Concerning the evaluation system in the field of geography there are few studies in the Romanian specialist literature (Nicula et al. 2012; Osaci-Costache et al., 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). The study conducted by Nicula et al. (2012) is focused on students' perceptions on evaluation at the Faculty of Geography, Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, which were revealed by the questionnaire filled in by the master's students as well.

The three studies developed by Osachi-Costache et al. (2013a, 2013b, 2013c) were conducted at the Faculty of Geography, University of Bucharest. These studies regarded the analysis of developing and assessing several competencies specific to geography: the competence to elaborate a column diagram both manually and by using a computer, the competence to construct topographic profiles manually, the competence to make a tourist city plan by using a computer. These studies depict the aimed competencies, their formation, and then present the tools which were used to evaluate these competencies. Aspects such as students' errors when elaborating different products specific to the field of geography, students' skills and their level of competence were investigated, as well. Ways of improving the learning process and students' results were also proposed. These studies provide an example of good practice for professors.

When considering the objectives of the Bologna Process (1999) and the Law of National Education (2011), we notice the specific objectives targeted by the project **"Strengthen higher education oriented towards competences"** (POSDRU Contract/86/1.2/S/60281) (2011, volume 2, p. IX): "strengthening the European conception regarding the professional development of students in the university system and respectively, the criteria adequacy, the standards and indicators of assessing the teaching process in the case of competence-oriented education".

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The Interdisciplinary Centre for Advanced Researches on Territorial Dynamics (CICADIT) within the University of Bucharest started the European funded project entitled Geoinstert three years ago (POSDRU Contract 86/ 1.2/ S/ 57462), which aimed to elaborate an applied model for optimizing the insertion process on the labour market of the geography graduates. The implementation of this project is fully justified, on the one hand by the great number of students in this field, on the other hand by the multiplication of insertion possibilities on the labour market. Therefore, a series of interventions have become necessary regarding the training system, in order to offer competencies that meet the new opportunities. Annually, the faculties of geography offer to the labour market about 5,000 first-cycle graduates and approximately 1,000 second-cycle graduates. Taking into account only these figures, we may appreciate the importance of their rapid insertion in the labour market. Despite the latest crisis, we estimate that the potential of labour absorption is and will remain very high.³

METHODS

Place of conducting the research

The research was conducted at the Faculty of Geography, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, on November 2012.

Participants

The research involved the 2008-2011 master's students attending the following specialisations: Tourism Development and Planning - 60% of the subjects; Regional Development and Planning - 19% of the subjects; Geomatics - 13% of the subjects; Risks and Resources in Hydro-Atmospheric Environment - 9% of the subjects. The gap between the highest share (Tourism Development and Planning) and the other specialisations involved in the survey is due to the large number of master's students from the first specialisation (100) in relation to the other three (approximately 30 students each).

³<http://geoinstert.fstr.unibuc.ro/prezentare-proiect>

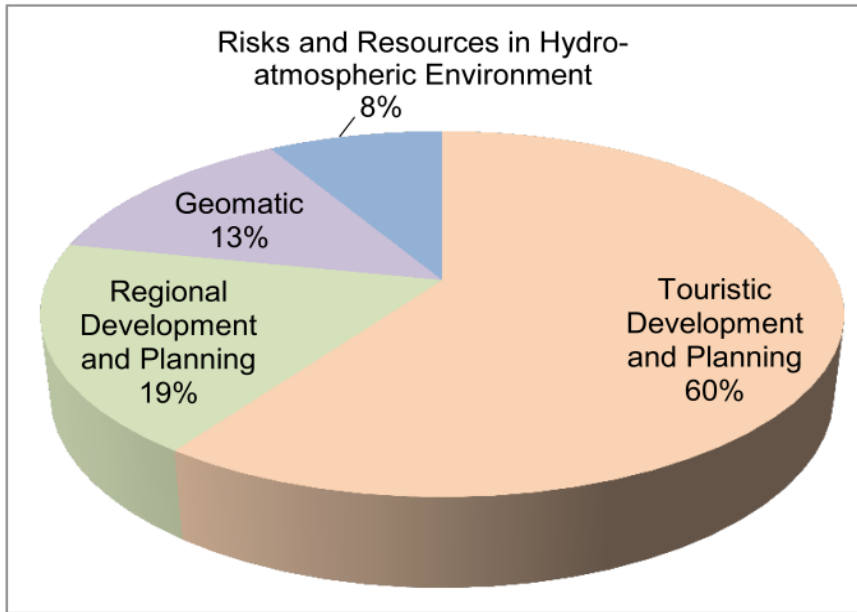


Fig. 1. The share of respondent students according to their specialisation

The participants in the survey are differentiated by the general average obtained in the previous year for each academic year. The average on all specialisations reflects the fact that the greatest amount (26%) belongs to the class 8-8.50, followed by the category 9-9.50 (with 21%). The share of students with average below 9.50 was of 16%. Almost similar shares are specific to the categories of 8.50-9 (17%) and over 9.50 (16%). On the opposite side, there are the categories of 7-7.50 (with 6%) and below 7 (2%), respectively.

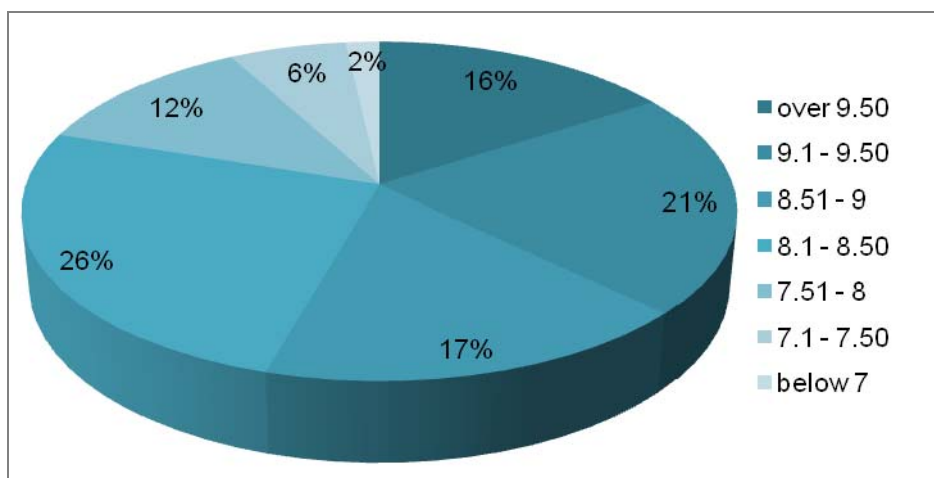


Fig. 2. General average share on categories (2011)

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The participants are also differentiated by the activities they undertake parallel to the master's program. The share of those who are employed while attending courses and seminars reaches 38%. As a result, it is likely that some of these master's students have low attendance, therefore, the perception regarding evaluation might have a high degree of subjectiveness.

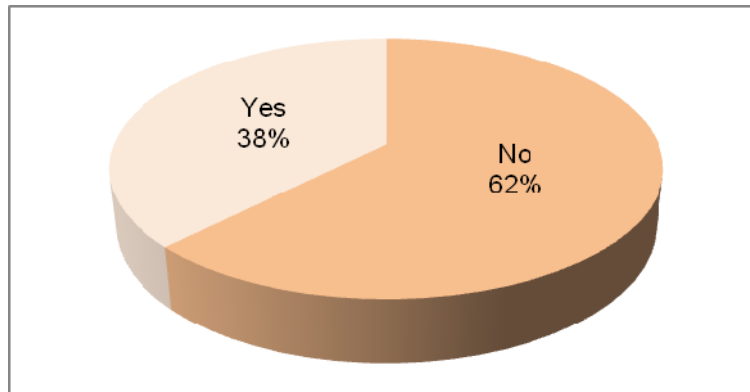


Fig. 3. The share of students who work during the master's program

According to figure 4, we note that within the investigated sample, the female subjects have a share of 84%. The share of 16% specific to the male subjects reflects an obvious unbalance between the two categories.

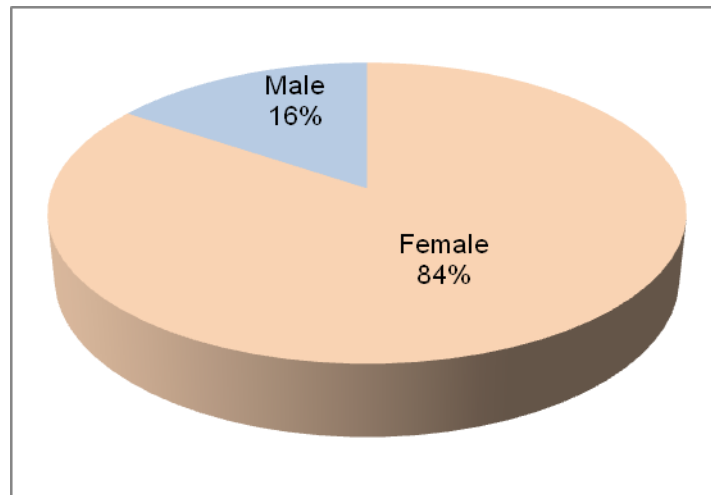


Fig. 4. Sample structure according to gender

Regarding the respondents' origin, the heterogeneity of the sample is high. The questionnaire was also applied to some students from abroad (1% from the Republic of Moldova). The master's students from Cluj County

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record the largest share, followed by the students from the counties of Maramureș (10%), Sălaj (6%), Alba (9%), and Bistrița-Năsăud (6%). Shares below 5% are specific to the master's students from the counties of Satu Mare and Mureș (4% each), Neamț, Sibiu and Bacău (2% each). The counties that record values of 1% and below hold together a share of 12%. The heterogeneity of origin areas indicates the educational polarisation of Babeș-Bolyai University at national and international level.

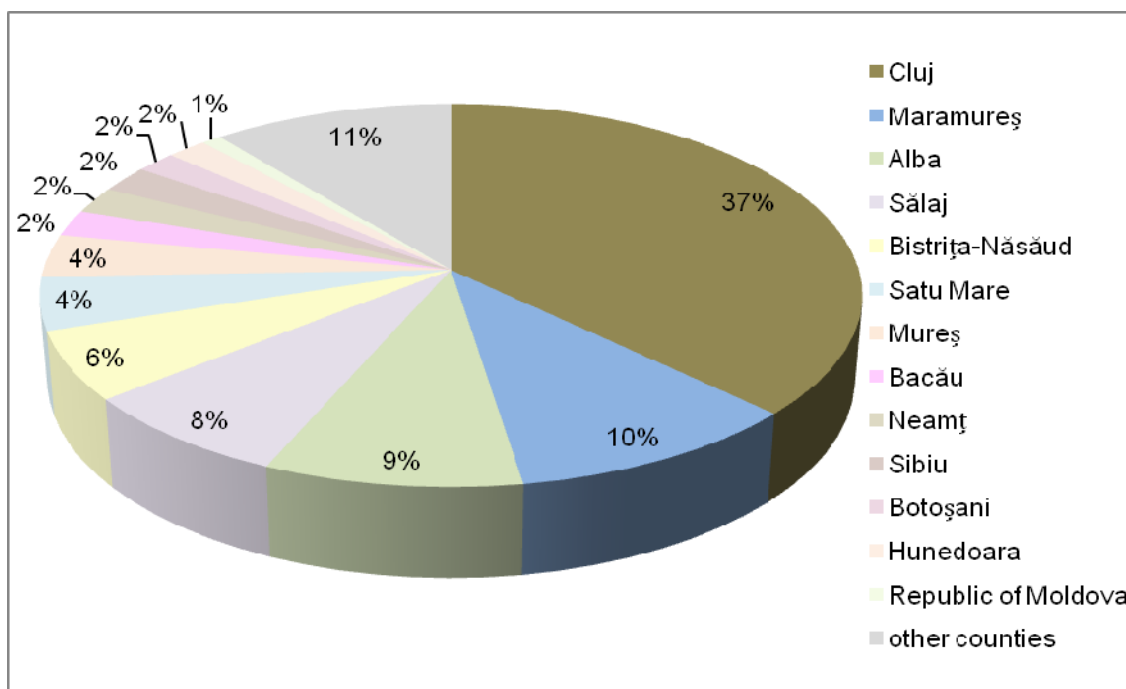


Fig. 5. Origin areas of the respondent students

Procedure

In order to achieve the research goals, we used a questionnaire-based survey (Appendix 1). The questionnaire comprised multiple choice items where students could choose one or several answers and items and for which the Likert scale was used. The questionnaire contained 11 items, each having more choice options, depending on the given answer. After collecting the data, their processing enabled the creation of graphic and cartographic representations. After analysing and interpreting the data acquired during the investigation, we framed the research report and drew the final conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

For the first item, most respondents (63%) considered that the final grade at a discipline should result from the average between the seminar grade

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and the final exam grade; hence, for them it is essential that the evaluation process is based on the regular results during the developed activities. A large share of students (21%) preferred the alternative according to which the final grade represents the result of continuous evaluation, which means they prefer to be evaluated for practical activities and these can be finalised at home and at their own pace. Only 15% of the master's students chose the possibility according to which they are evaluated just during the final exam, meaning that they would prefer the assessment of the theoretical knowledge and less of the practical one. It would have been interesting to investigate the reasons that lie behind their choices.

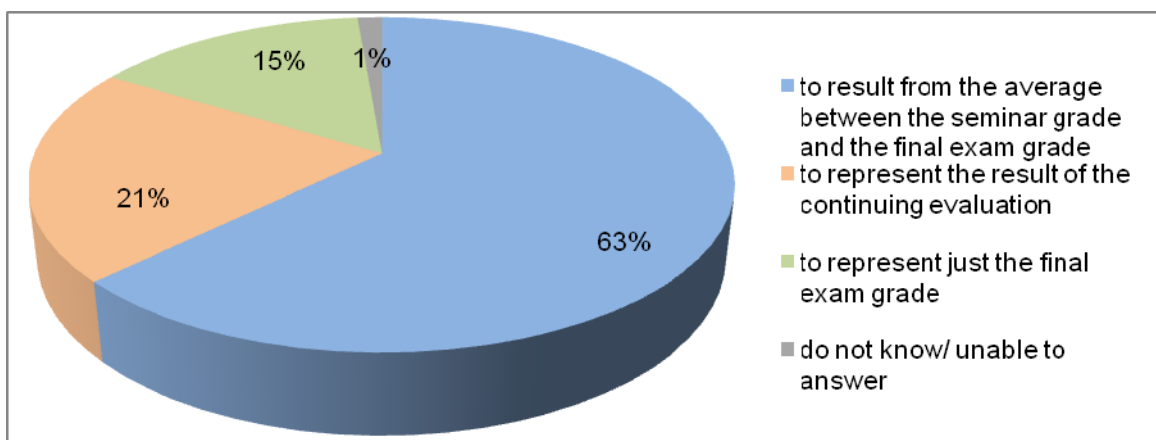


Fig. 6. Students' options regarding the compound of the final grade

In regard to the respondents' opinion on the forms of evaluation considered more effective, in the case of the second item, most master's students (45%) think that a combination of assessment types is more effective: written exam associated with semestrial evaluation, which means in fact, an evaluation within the semester. As in the case of the first item, master's students consider that it is convenient and that they are effectively appraised when taking into account their entire activity. 39% of the master's students think that the most effective evaluation is the written editing examination. This choice might be sustained by the fact that they probably see theoretical contents as being more valuable and appreciate that this evaluation form reflects their knowledge more objectively. We have noticed that only 8% of the master's students consider oral exam as an effective evaluation form, probably due to the fact that it involves a higher degree of subjectiveness from the assessor. An explanation for this choice derives from the fact that during the Bachelor's degree educational studies they were rarely evaluated in this manner. We consider that, in the future, it would be recommended for students to be assessed through oral exams more often, so that they develop their oral communication skills on a topic in the field of geography. Very few have chosen the colloquium (1%), the verification (1%), other types of assessment (4%) and only 2% gave no

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answer. It would have also been interesting to examine the reasons for these responses.

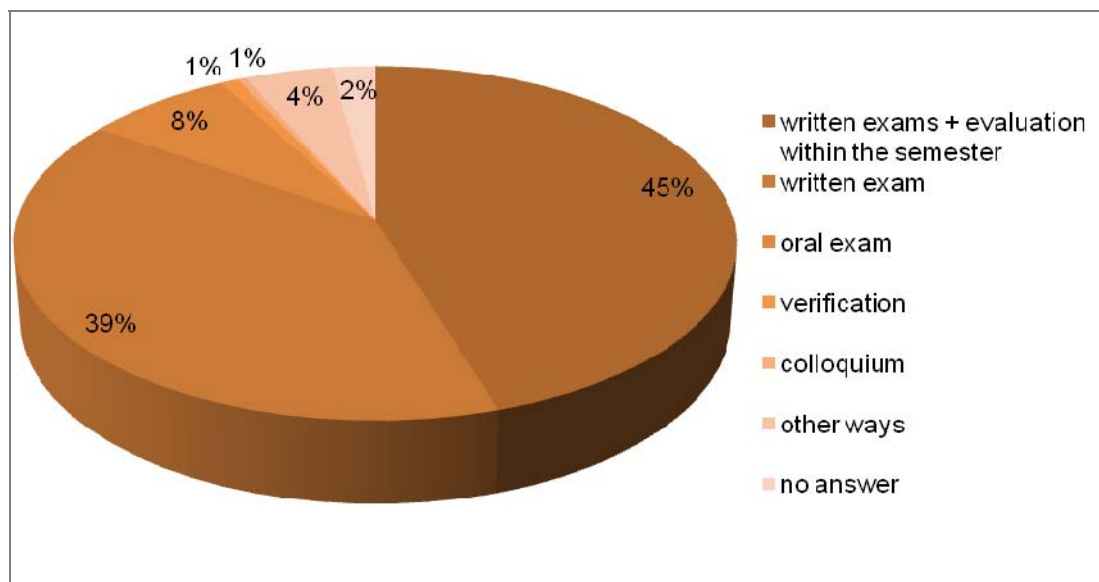


Fig. 7. Respondents' opinions regarding the most effective evaluation method

The third item – “What should be the share of seminars within the final evaluation?” – 78% of master’s students consider that this should have a share of 50% from the total number of courses. These master’s students are aware of the importance of undergoing activities centred on the student and the fact that during these activities they develop competencies specific to a graduate of the Faculty of Geography. 14% consider that seminars and practical activities should have a share of 40%, while 8% have in mind a share of 30%. These 22% of master’s students appear to be still unaware of the importance of seminars in the development of their competencies. It would have also been interesting to investigate the reasons for such answers.

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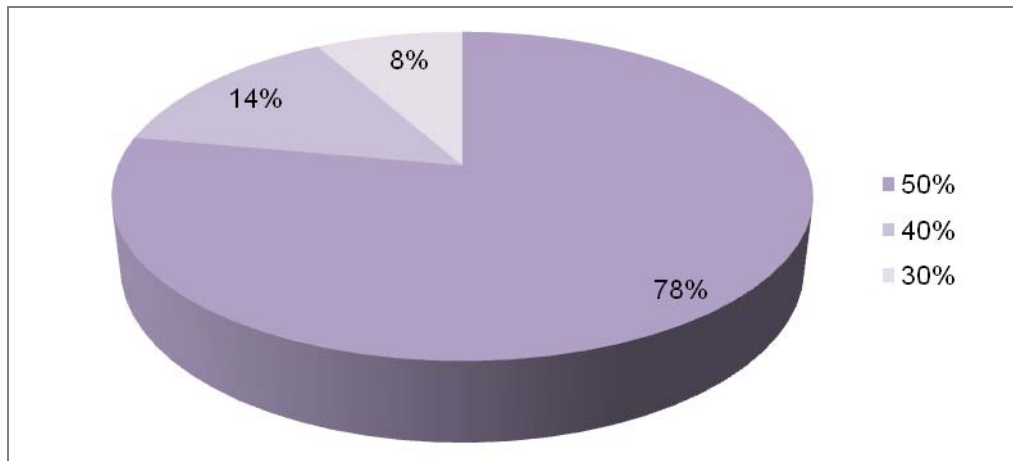


Fig. 8. The share of seminars within the final evaluation

Regarding the evaluation method that the master's students consider to be effective for a written exam, 64% of the questioned subjects prefer an assessment which includes more types of written exam: case study applying the exam discipline concepts, a set of questions with short answers, writing an essay on a given topic, the test grid. For 13% of the respondents, case study applying the exam discipline concepts represents the most suitable choice, while for 11% the best variant consists in formulating a set of questions with short answers. The analysis on the shares below 10% emphasizes the preference of the master's students towards an essay on a given subject (6%) or the assessment through the test grid (4%). The persons who did not provide any answer record a share of 2%.

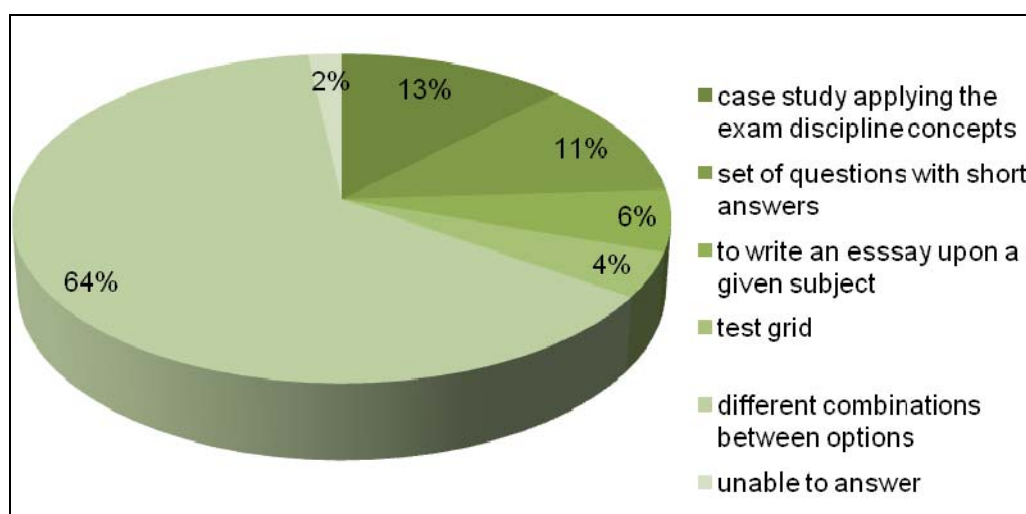


Fig. 9. Options regarding the evaluation form of the written exam

Respondents' perceptions on the optimum evaluation during a semester

The feedback provided by master's students concerning the optimum form of evaluation during a semester disclosed that a share of 65% is in favour of several combinations between the given options: written papers, paper presentation, projects presentation and answers provided at seminars. For 28% of the master's students, project presentation is seen as the most suitable evaluation form, while the remaining options have modest shares: 4% for writing papers, 2% for paper presentation and 1% for seminar answers.

The preference of the majority (65%) for a combination of evaluation forms during the semester is probably justified by the lack of confidence in only one assessment method, by the fact that master's students would rather be assessed for their entire activity during the semester or by their reservations about some of these evaluation forms. In this respect, the percentage of only 1% becomes conclusive.

The share of 28% specific to project presentations is, for a significant part of the respondents, the best choice from two reasons: on the one hand, due to the opportunity to develop a favoured topic (which indicates a high level of subjectiveness) and, on the other hand, due to the possibility to avoid certain "discordant" forms of semestrial evaluation, that do not concord with the personal wish. As the master program gives special importance to the practical nature of the studied domain, written papers are considered as an adequate choice for only 4% of the respondents.

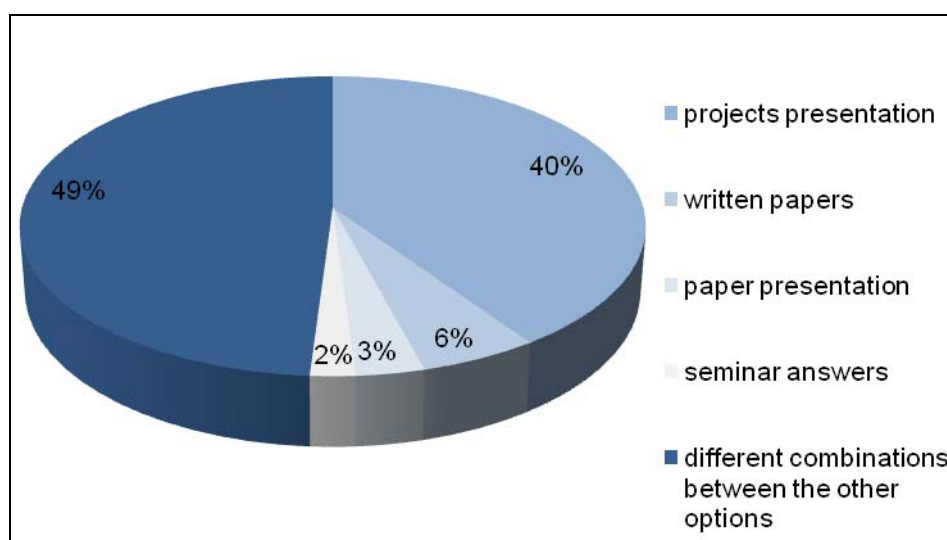


Fig. 10. Respondents' perceptions on the optimum evaluation form during a semester

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The answers to item six – “What do you consider a master student should prove in order to achieve the maximum grade at a discipline?” reveal the fact that, for most respondents (78%), it is very important to understand and use the concepts correctly. For 11% of the master's students, it is beneficial to possess a supplementary documentation on the problem and for 9% it is important to accurately reproduce the basic concepts of a discipline in combination with understanding and using the specific concepts correctly. The share of those who consider the idea of reproducing the basic concepts of a discipline accurately reaches only 2%. We might explain this result if we take into account the fact that the awareness of knowledge assimilation in a mechanical manner is relatively high.

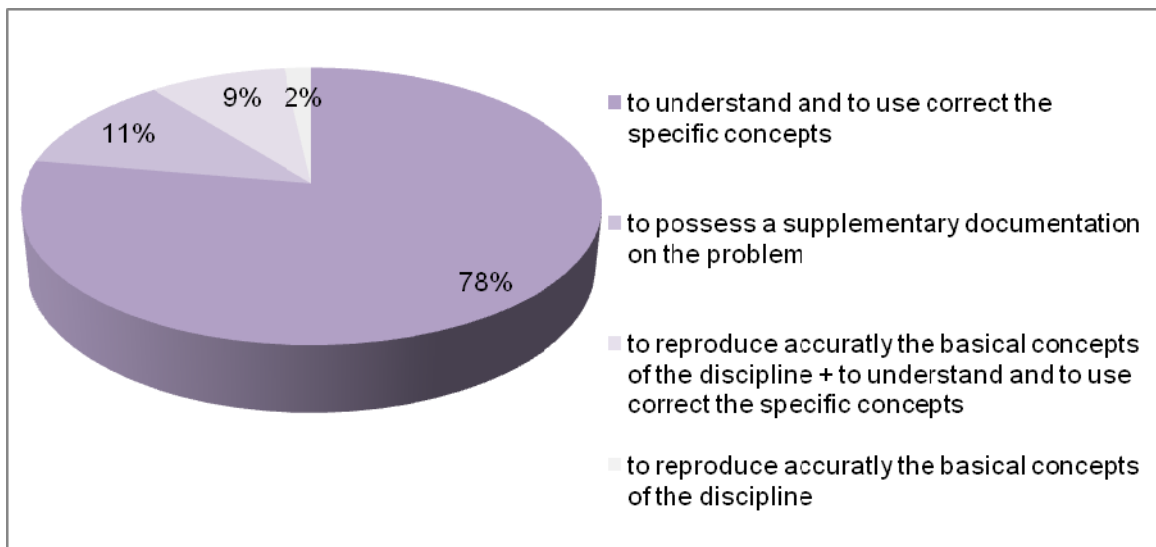


Fig. 11. Respondents' opinions regarding the evaluation criteria

The respondents' opinions with regard to item seven – “How important is the evaluation system in the development process?” reflects a certain balance between the first two views: 44% concluded that it is important, while for 38% it is highly important. We underline the fact that the master's students have become aware of the role of evaluation in the learning process. At the opposite side, we notice that 17% of the respondents appraised this item as medium or of little importance (1%). It would be interesting to further investigate whether these obtained good or poor results at their evaluation.

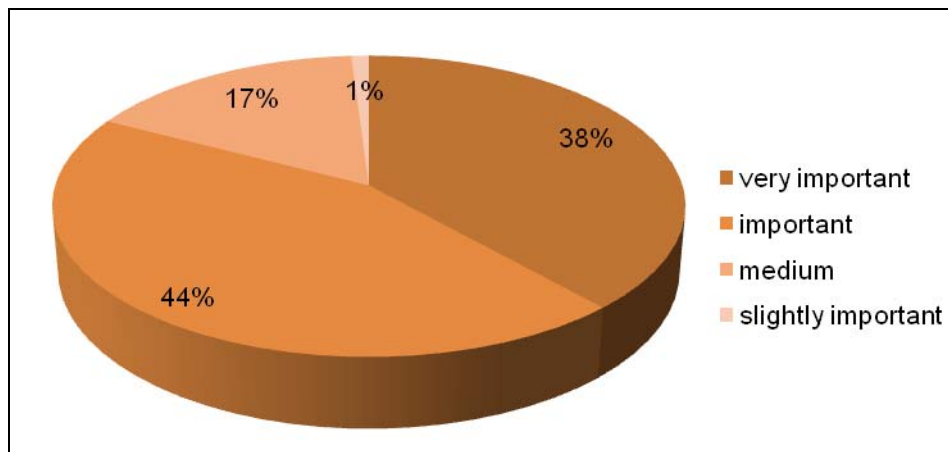


Fig. 12. The perception regarding the importance of evaluation in the training process

The answers received at item eight were used to highlight to which extent the respondents consider the exam results as being fair. Only 7% of the respondents considered that the exam evaluation was fair. Almost half of them (41%) rated *that the exam grades were fair to a great extent* and 48% appreciated the grading correctness as being satisfactory. For 4% the grading correctness was low. We notice that 48% of the master's students do not positively express their trust in the evaluation correctness, aspect which imposes a reflection on the professors' assessment.

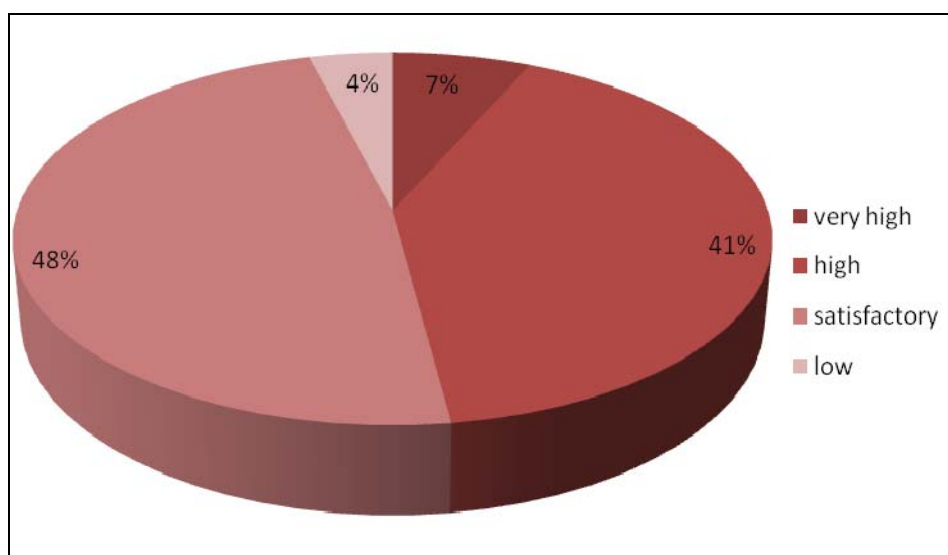


Fig. 13. The perception of the assessment accuracy

Responses to item nine – "To which extent do you consider you had precise evaluation criteria at the exams taken during the academic years so

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far?" pointed out that only 4% of the master's students consider that they benefited from clear criteria to a very high extent. 40% of the enquired appreciated the evaluation criteria as being clear to a great extent. Half of the interviewed (50%) declared that the evaluation criteria were clear to a satisfactory extent; it is likely that most of them did not trust the criteria clarity through which they were assessed. 6% of the respondents considered that the criteria were clear to a low and very low extent. To be noted that the majority of students considered that the criteria were precise to a high and satisfactory extent.

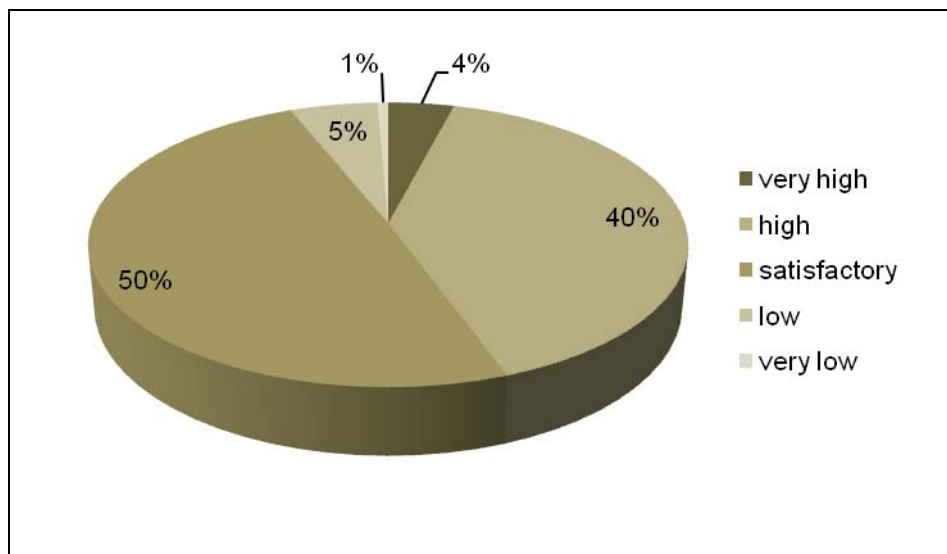


Figure 14. Master's students' perception regarding the precise evaluation criteria

Item ten refers to the importance and the usefulness of a feedback received from the professor after taking an exam, for the future development. For 22% of the interviewed, receiving feedback from the professor is very useful, while for 52% is useful. 21% of the respondents perceived the given feedback as being satisfactory, while the remaining 5% considered such an endeavour as less useful.

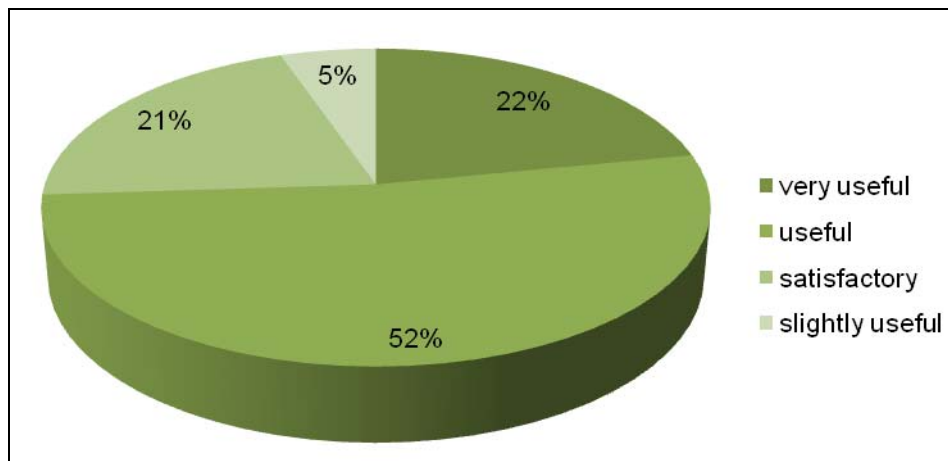


Fig. 15. The perception regarding the usefulness of a feedback from the professor after taking an exam

The answers to the last item referring to the usefulness of re-evaluation in order to increase the former grade also illustrate a high degree of subjectiveness. The majority of the enquired students (83%) consider the chance of reexamination as being auspicious. 17% of the master's students do not think that such an action is necessary, aspect which clearly reflects the high degree of subjectiveness.

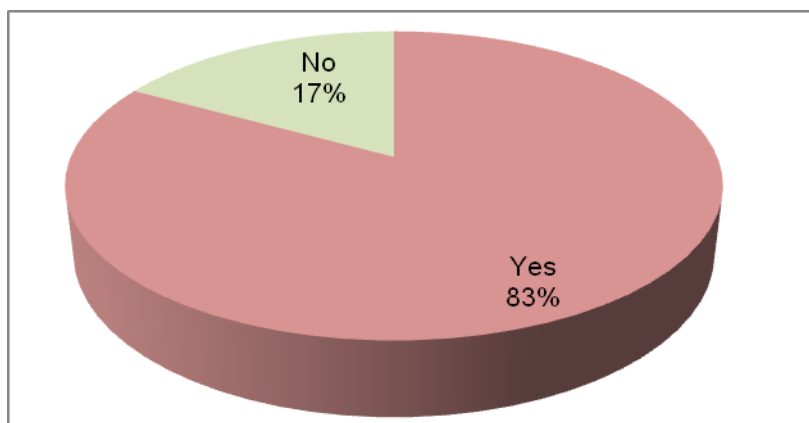


Fig. 16. Students' perception on re-evaluation

The main conclusions to be drawn from this study will be summarized as it follows. The majority of master's students have considered that:

- the final grade given at a discipline should result from the average between the seminar grade and the exam grade; therefore, the results obtained during the semester should be assessed (63%);

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- a combination between different evaluation forms (written exam associated with the semestrial evaluation) would be necessary for an effective assessment;
- seminars should have a share of 50% within the final evaluation (78%);
- an effective evaluation method would be represented by a combination within the written exam of the following: case studies, short answer questions, essays on a given topic, test grid (64%);
- the optimum evaluation during the semester would be a combination of written papers, paper and project presentations, seminar answers (65%);
- in order to receive the maximum grade at a certain discipline, a master's student should be able to prove the understanding and the correct use of specific concepts (78%);
- the evaluation system is important (44%) and very important (38%) in the training process;
- the grades obtained are fair to a great (44%) and satisfactory extent (48%);
- the evaluation criteria were considered as being clear in a satisfactory manner (50%);
- the feedback received from the professor after an exam is useful (52%);
- the re-evaluation for improving a grade is useful (83%).

The results collected by questioning the master's students are very important for rethinking the evaluation process of the students' results.

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The Bologna Declaration, <http://bologna.ro/a/upfolders/bologna99.pdf>

Annex1

QUESTIONNAIRE REGARDING THE EVALUATION SYSTEM OF STUDENTS FROM CYCLE II

I. General data

1. Specialisation:

Tourism Development and Planning

Regional Development and Planning

Geomatics

Risks and Resources in Hydro-Atmospheric Environment

Other specialisations _____

2. Educational form On-site learning/Distance learning/No frequency

3. Academic year

4. General average grade obtained in the previous year (approx.)

II. Students' evaluation system

1. Do you consider that the final grade for each discipline should:

- a) result from the average between the seminar grade and the written exam grade
- b) represent only the final exam grade
- c) represent the result of continuous evaluation
- d) do not know / unable to answer

**choose only one answer*

2. Which form do you consider as being effective?

- a) written exam
- b) oral exam
- c) examination + evaluation during the semester

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- d) colloquium
- e) verification
- f) other forms_____

**choose only one answer*

3. Which should be the percentage of seminars and practical works within the final evaluation?

30 % 40 % 50 % other.....

4. Which method of assessment do you consider to be effective for a written exam?

- a) test grid
- b) a set of questions with short answers
- c) essay on a given topic
- d) case study applying the exam discipline concepts
- e) do not know / unable to answer

**multiple answer possible*

5. What forms of assessment do you consider effective to be used during a semester?

- a) seminar answers
- b) paper presentation
- c) written papers
- d) project presentation
- e) other forms_____

**multiple answer possible*

6. What do you consider a master's student should prove in order to achieve the maximum grade at a discipline?

- a) to reproduce the basic concepts of a discipline accurately
- b) to understand and to use the specific concepts correctly
- c) possess a supplementary documentation on the problem
- d) other forms_____

IULIU VESCAN, DĂNUȚ PETREA, IOAN FODOREAN, MARIA ELIZA DULAMĂ,
CĂTĂLINA-MARIA BĂTEA, ALEXANDRU-SABIN NICULA

**multiple answer possible*

7. How important do you think the evaluation system is for the training process?

not important	slightly important	average	important	very important
1	2	3	4	5

8. To what extent do you consider that the exam grades were correct?

very little	little	satisfactory	high	very high
1	2	3	4	5

9. To what extent do you consider that you had precise evaluation criteria for the exams within the academic years so far?

very little	little	satisfactory	high	very high
1	2	3	4	5

10. In what way do you consider useful for your future development the feedback received from your professors at the exams?

not useful	slightly useful	satisfactory	useful	very useful
1	2	3	4	5

11. Do you consider that re-evaluation for getting a higher grade is useful? Yes No

III. Identification data

University ...

Age ...

Gender: F / M

City/Home district /.....

Are you employed? Yes No