



Rosabel Roig-Vila (Ed.)

# El compromiso académico y social a través de la investigación e innovación educativas en la Enseñanza Superior

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## **19. Monitoring a case study of the level of English and the degree of awareness of the group of high academic performance**

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### **ABSTRACT**

During the academic year 2010/2011, the Department of Education of the Valencian Government promoted an academic teaching program focus on the use of English as a medium of instruction for outstanding students. This program was articulated through the creation of High Academic Performance groups ('Alto Rendimiento Académico', ARA groups) in most of the Valencian Public Universities. The objective of this work was to assess the degree of awareness regarding the existence/way to work of the ARA groups of both teachers and students belonging to different degrees of the Faculty of Sciences of the University of Alicante, in which there is an ARA group in the degree of Biology. Furthermore, they were aimed to be aware of the different English levels between the degrees surveyed and if there are differences over the years, besides others aspects as the advantages of belonging to ARA groups, among others. Our results indicate that the level of English of the students has increased with respect to the last year in all groups and the ARA group still has the highest level. Finally, the degree of awareness has not changed almost anything, so improving the visibility and dissemination of ARA groups is still necessary. These types of monitoring studies are necessary and prior step to define strategies to increase the awareness and promotion of ARA groups.

**KEY WORDS:** ARA group, English, high academic performance, monitoring

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

English is the most widely used language in international communication. On the one hand, in the framework of the European Union, and as reflected in various documents of the European Commission, there is a clear commitment to move towards a multilingual society. These documents suggest that each individual know at least two foreign languages in addition to their mother tongue (Soler, 2011). On the other hand, in the field of university teaching, due to the constant globalization and internationalization of universities, English is becoming increasingly important because it is used as a *lingua franca* (Morell et al., 2014; Echezarreta-Pérez et al., 2016a). In fact, Coleman (2006) identifies seven reasons why English is becoming more important in the university environment: Content and Language Integrated Learning, internationalization, exchange of students, research and teaching materials, job mobility, departures professionals of the graduates and attract international students. Therefore, acquisition and accreditation in a foreign language, often in English, both by students and teachers, has become a priority objective of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), and therefore, of the Spanish University (Real Decreto 412/2014, de 6 de junio, por el que se establece la normativa básica de los procedimientos de admisión a las enseñanzas universitarias oficiales de Grado, BOE 06/07/2014).

Fulfilling with this, the Agency for Education, Culture and Sports of the Valencian Region created the so-called ARA groups, with the aim of developing the academic potential of the most outstanding students. These groups are characterized by having a small number of students and classes are taught in English. As of the year 2010/11, this program was created in most of the public universities of the Valencian community: University of Valencia (UV), Polytechnic University of Valencia (UPV), University of Alicante (UA), University of Miguel Hernández (UMH) and University of Jaime I (UJI) (Ceice.gva.es, 2015).

Monitorization of the study we present here will help in later years to observe the evolution of awareness and the perception of the university educational community about the ARA groups, which will allow evaluating if the management measures to give visibility are effective or how to improve them. The way to carry it out has been through conducting surveys aimed at teachers and students belonging to different degrees of the Faculty of Sciences of the University of Alicante, in which there is an ARA group in the degree of Biology.

The main objective of this study was to monitor the evolution of the degree of awareness of the ARA group of the Biology degree in the Faculty of Sciences of the University of Alicante on students and professors of the different degrees of this Faculty. Additionally, we assessed the evolution of the level of English of the students and professors with regards previous academic years. Our hypothesis was that that the degree of awareness of the ARA group in the University of Alicante, as well as the level of English certifications, has increased in comparison with previous academic years.

## 2. METHODS

### 2.1. Description of context and participants

The students and professors of the degrees of Biology, Marine Sciences, Geology and Mathematics were surveyed about the ARA Group. They were divided into 5 groups, each one having different questions (see annex):

- Students undertaking a degree without an ARA group: Geology, Marine Sciences and Mathematics.
- Students undertaking a degree with an ARA group, but attending another group: Biology.
- Students undertaking a degree with an ARA group, attending this group: Biology.
- Professors teaching an ARA group: Biology.
- Professors not teaching an ARA group: Biology.

### 2.2. Tools

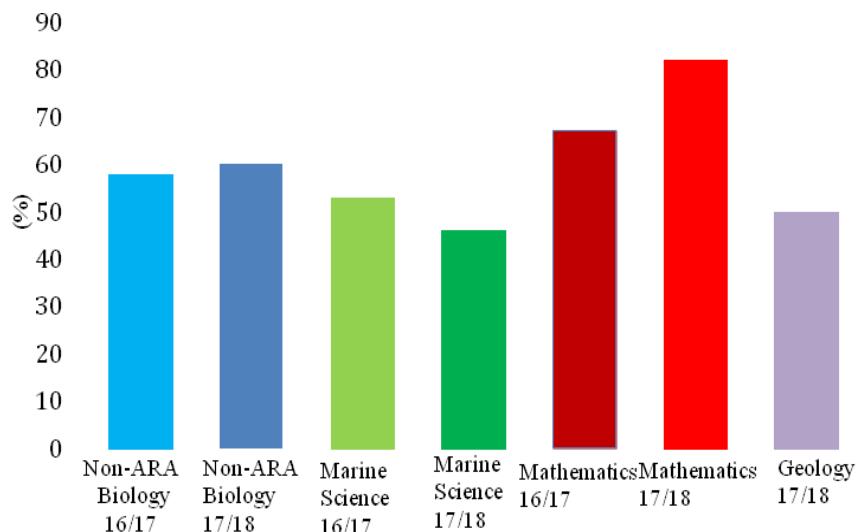
The surveys were carried out using Google Forms. Their dissemination was made through email and WhatsApp to professors and students respectively, and the analysis and graphs through Microsoft Excel.

### 2.3. Process

The main selection criteria for the questions of the survey was reusing the questions of the study of the academic year 2016/2017 to facilitate the comparison. Some of the questions were changes and few questions were added to obtain more relevant information this and coming years. The surveys were opened from March to May of 2018. Once the results were collected, they were analysed and presented by different graphs to compare between years.

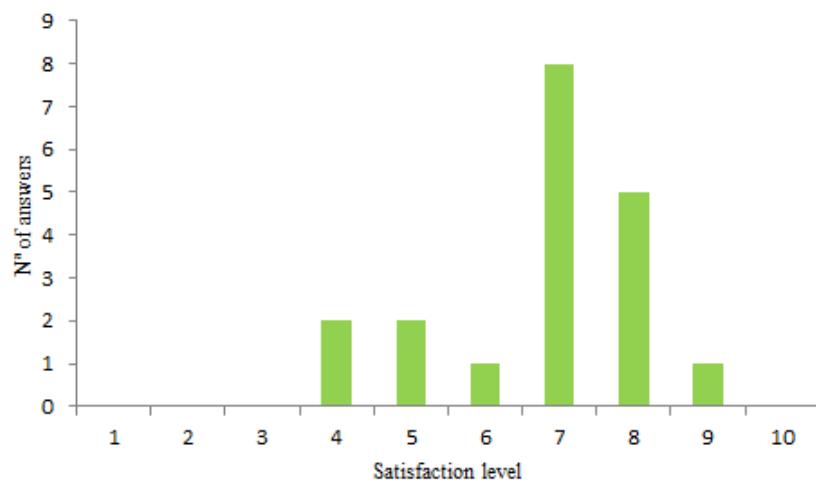
### 3. RESULTS

As regards, the degree of awareness of the ARA students among Non-ARA students in the degree of Biology, values have remained similar to the previous year, whereas in Marine Science it has decreased a 7% and in Mathematics has increased over a 20%. The degree of Geology was only surveyed this year, showing that a 50% of the students are aware about the existence of the ARA group (figure 1).



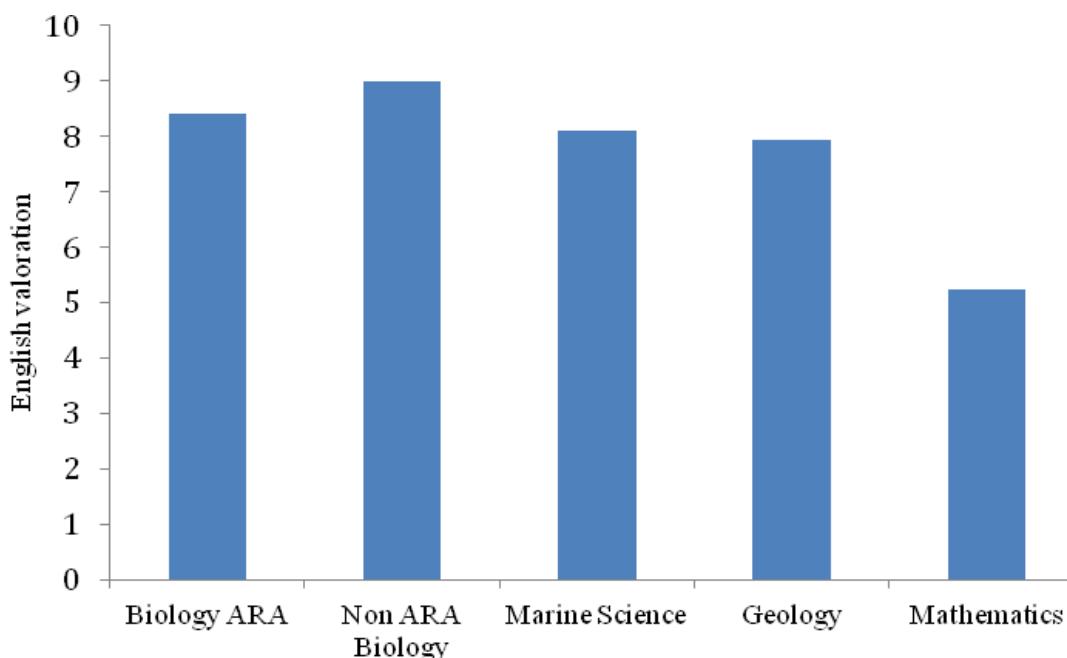
**Figure 1:** Survey of the degree of awareness of the ARA group in all degrees.

As regards the level of satisfaction of the students from the ARA group in Biology, most of them are quite satisfied with the awareness or classes given, evaluating this with a value of 7 or 8 (over 10) in a 27 and 23% of all the surveyed ARA students. Nevertheless, a small group of 4 persons demonstrate their dissatisfaction evaluating this with a value of 4 and 5 (figure 2). Compared to the 2016/2017 academic year, the percentage of students in the ARA biology group who chose a score between 7 and 10 to assess their level of satisfaction is lower. Besides, last year a mark of 9 and 10 were obtained by a 14% each one, while this year only a 7% marked a 9 and no one marked a 10. Anyway, we must bear in mind that the number of respondents this course doubles the previous one.



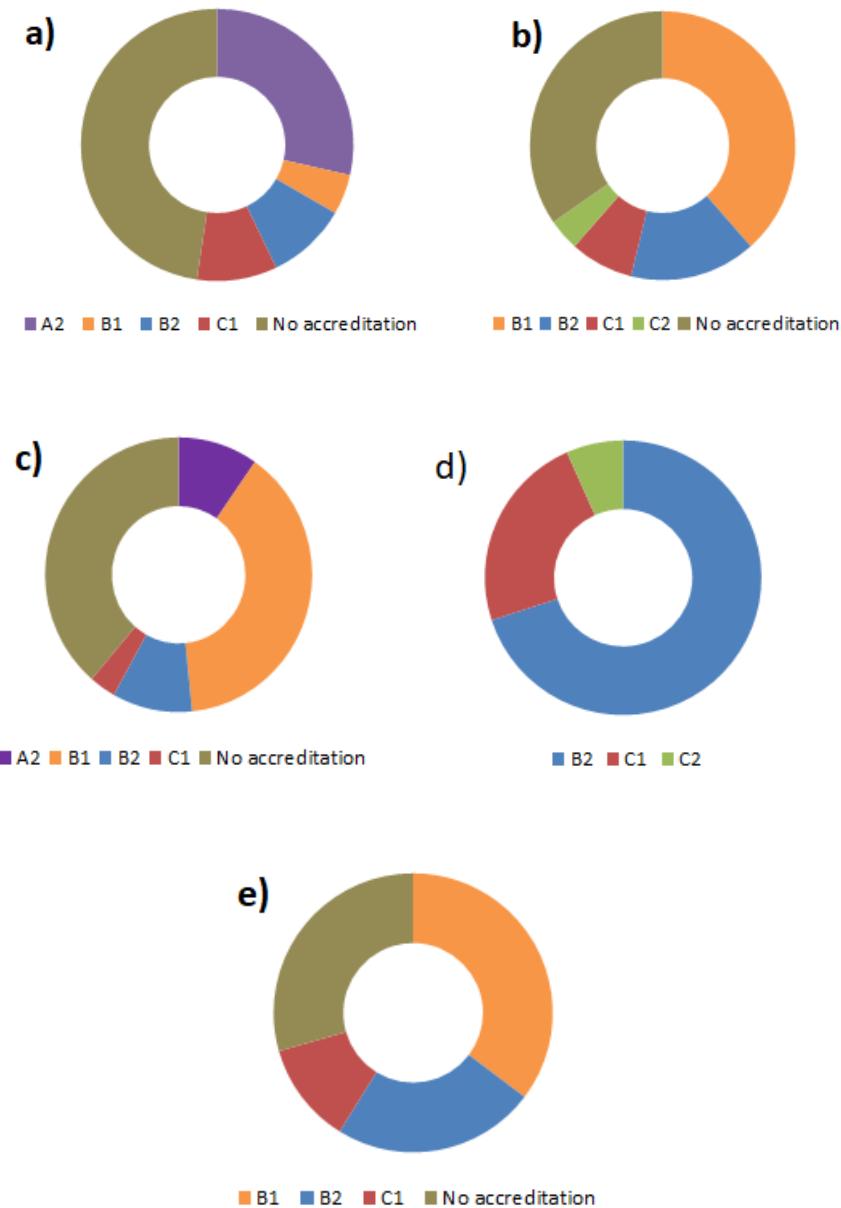
**Figure 2:** Survey on the level of satisfaction of the 30 students from the Biology ARA group.

In the case of assessing the importance of English, in mathematics the average almost does not reach 5, whereas in the other degrees does not come down of 8, being the Non-ARA Biology group the one that gives more importance to English with an average of 9 (over 10). All the degrees except one give lots of importance to English (figure 3). Nevertheless, last year Mathematics gave more importance to English with a mark of 6.9, the same as Marine Science with a 9. ARA and Non-ARA Biology groups obtained almost the same score.



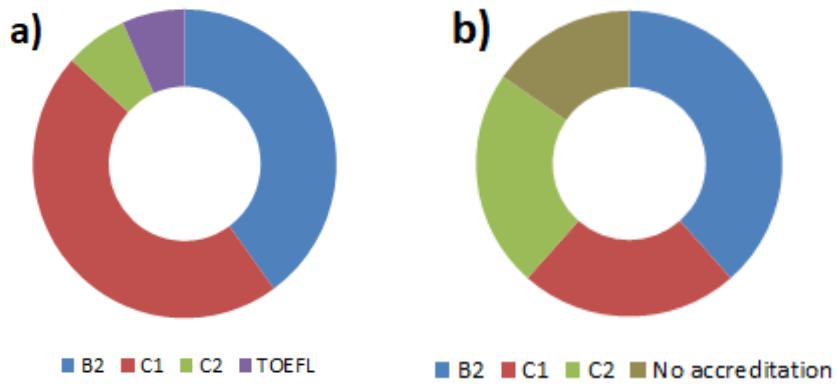
**Figure 3:** Survey on the Importance of English in Science Degrees.

To assess the different levels of English in the degrees surveyed in the Faculty of Science of the University of Alicante, 175 students and teachers from different degrees were surveyed. With 30 students surveyed, the ARA group of Biology presents the highest English level, with 73.3% of students having the B2 level while 23.3% and 3.4 % have the C1 and C2 levels, respectively. Moreover, B2 is the lowest level of these students. On the contrary, the most common levels in both the other surveyed degrees as well as the Non-ARA group of Biology are A2 and B1. As example, 21% of the Mathematics students have A2 and 36% of Marine Science a B1 (both with 28 students), whilst 69% of Non-ARA Biology students have the A2 and B1 certifications (with 36 students surveyed). Surprisingly, around 35% of the students of the degrees of Marine Science, Mathematics and Biology (Non-ARA) have no English level accreditation. In Geology, however, although 29% of students do not have a English level accreditation, and a 13% of them possess the C1 level, whereas B1 and B2 are the most common levels with a 35 and 23 % respectively (figure 4). Unexpectedly, the English level has slightly lowered in comparison with the students surveyed last year. For example, the average percentage of students without any kind of accreditation in English of the degrees of Mathematics, Marine Sciences and Biology Non-ARA group has increased. In the ARA group of Biology, the percentage of students accredited with C1 has decreased a 13%, increasing the minimum level B2 by almost 10%. Although it should be noted that this course 3% have recognized the C2, while last year there was no one.

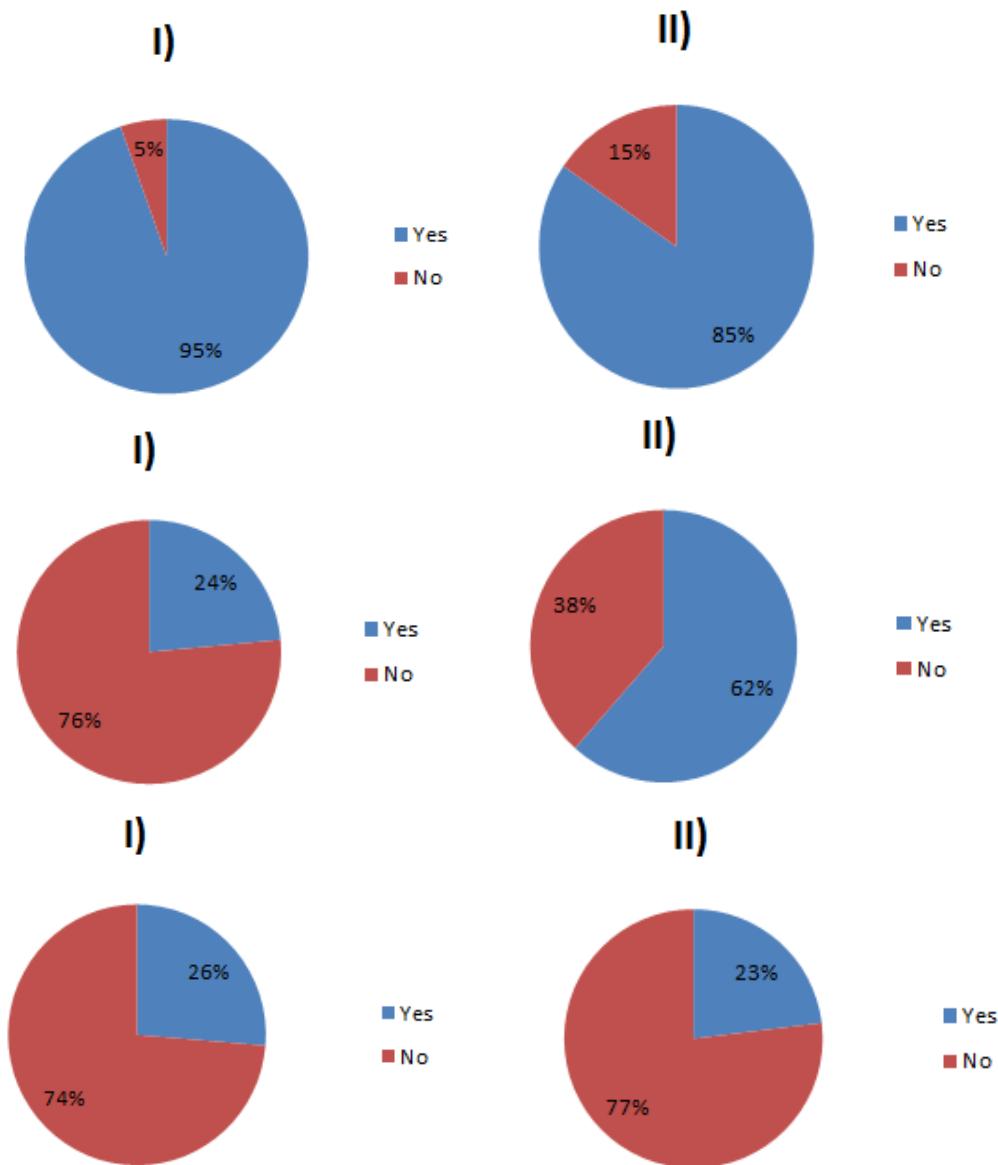


**Figure 4:** Survey on the level of English in the degree of Mathematics (a), Marine Science (b), Non-ARA Biology(c), ARA Biology (d) and Geology (e).

Surveys to professors, show that there is a small difference of English level between professors related to the ARA and Non-ARA groups (considering high level of English to C1 and C2). In the first group, we find more professors with a B2 and C1 level (43.75% and 43.75%, respectively) and a 6.25 % for TOEFL and C2 levels. In the case of professors of the Non-ARA groups, there are more professors with C2 level (23%), but less with C1 level and B2 level and 16% with no accreditation level. Nevertheless, the number of professors surveyed was not the same (16 ARA professors, AP, versus 13 Non-ARA professors, NAP) (figure 5). In any case, the English level of both AP and NAP professors has increased considerably in comparison with the last academic year. In fact, the AP and the NAP have increased the percentage of accredited with C1 by 18 and 23% respectively. In the group of the AP, 6% of them have the C2 level and the amount of NAP without accreditation in English has decreased by 20 %.



**Figure 5:** Survey on the level of English of professors in the degree of Biology: ARA Biology professors (a), Non-ARA Biology professors (b).



**Figure 6:** Survey carried out to professors in the degree of Biology: ARA Biology professors (I), Non-ARA Biology professors (II). a): One of the major advantages of the ARA groups is the reduced number of students per class. b): Being part of an ARA groups helps to obtain a better job. c): teaching in English does not lead to a delay.

We find that both groups of teachers believe that one of the major advantages of the ARA groups is the reduced number of students per class (figure 6a). ARA professors in a big percentage (74) think that being part of the ARA group does not mean you would obtain a better job, whereas the Non-ARA professors in a 62% think the other way around (figure 6b). Finally, both groups of teachers agree in more than a 70% with the fact that teaching in English does not lead to a delay (figure 6c). Making a comparison with the results obtained from the teachers surveyed in the 2016/17 academic year, we can observe that the general agreement, regarding the advantage of the reduced number of students per class continues this course. 10% of teachers of both groups consider that English is not a delay in teaching.

Apart from these advantages, 78.9% of AP believes that students in ARA groups show a greater predisposition to learn than other group. Besides, a 84.2% consider that ARA groups have a higher level of teaching. However, although a slightly higher percentage of 70% for the two groups of teachers believes that teaching English is not a delay at any time and 73.7% of AP would rate their level of satisfaction with teaching in a group ARA with a grade equal to or higher than 7 on a scale of 1 to 10. This last group, does not feel as comfortable giving classes in English as in Spanish (72.2%) and 62.5% would prefer to teach a non-ARA group rather than an ARA group.

#### 4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Despite the fact that English Medium Instruction is increasingly being used in universities, secondary schools and even primary schools, in many countries the educational infrastructure does not support quality English Medium Instruction provision, mainly due to a shortage of linguistically qualified teachers (Dearden 2015). However, as shown in the study by Rubio-Astorga et al. (2017) the level of English of the teachers of the surveyed grades is good, and it has even improved regarding to the 2016 year. Regarding to the students, language immersion in Spanish universities is still deficient, despite the fact that English is compulsory at the primary and secondary levels (Linares et al., 2017) which is in good agreement with the 52.6% of the AP that consider that the level of English of the students is not in line with what is requested in the high performance group. Thus, Spanish universities offer teaching in English in an optional and very punctual manner, contrasting with the requirement of accreditation of a medium level of a foreign language that they impose to obtain a university degree (Echezarreta-Pérez, 2016b), and also with the favourable opinion of the teachers in the survey. Giving more weight to English in the degrees could improve some of the most worrying data that we have obtained, such as the general drop in the level of English among students and the low level of importance given to it in some degrees, mainly in Mathematics. It is expected that these results are not part of the long-term trend, but only a one-off episode on which no action has to be taken.

In order to observe these long-term trends, it is very important to continue monitoring university students and teachers in order to evaluate the applied measures and to propose new improvements for the next years. Another important point to evaluate and improve is the degree of diffusion of the program among the potential students. From the participants experience, it has been suggested that students from the province of Alicante could be better informed about the existence of ARA groups thanks to the visits they make to the university in the high-school. For this reason, we propose for future surveys to ask about how they first came to be aware about this program, as well as to take a series of measures to increase dissemination among potential students that live outside Alicante, such as informative triptychs at strategic points, better exposure on the website of the university, instruction to the secretarial staff to inform.

In conclusion, by maintaining this monitoring study it would be possible to better evaluate the trend of all the points studied. Thus, we will observe if the level of English keeps improving as it happened this year in general in all the groups surveyed, and if the opinion about the best advantage of the ARA group is maintained (the reduced number of students), which is the true tendency of the satisfaction level of the students or how the awareness and visibility of the ARA evolves.

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## **6. ANNEX**

The questions for each category were:

- Students undertaking a degree without an ARA group:
  1. Did you know about the existence of ARA groups before starting the degree?
  2. Do you know the advantages of studying in an ARA group?
  3. Would you be interested in studying in an ARA group if you had the choice?
  4. Do you think you have the right level of English to join an ARA group?
  5. Do you consider you have the same level of education than ARA groups?
  6. Do you know someone from an ARA group? Do you believe that the bilingual education that person has received gives him/her a better academic training than yours?
  7. Do you agree with the curricular advantages of the ARA group?
  8. Please rate the importance you think English has in your degree. (1 to 10)
  9. Would you say that there are teachers capable of teaching in English?
  10. Do you have an English language accreditation? Which one?
  11. Do you think it would be easier for you to find a proper job after being part of an ARA group than if you were part of a Spanish speaking group?
  12. Do you think that more students will attend the ARA group if it would be named in another way?
  13. If your answer is yes, which of the following names would you choose?
    - i. The name should indicate that is a reduced group.
    - ii. The name should indicate that classes are in english.
    - iii. The name should indicate that classes are in english and in a reduced group.
  14. Did you answer this survey last year?
  15. Do you have any suggestions or proposals to make regarding ARA groups?
- Students undertaking a degree with an ARA group, but attending another group:
  1. Did you know about the existence of ARA groups before starting the degree?
  2. Do you know the advantages of studying in an ARA group?
  3. Do you think you have the right level of English to join an ARA group?
  4. Do you consider you have the same level of education than ARA groups?
  5. Please mention the main reasons why you decided not to join the ARA group
  6. Do you have an English language accreditation? Which one?
  7. Please rate the importance you think English has in your degree. (1 to 10)
  8. Would you say that there are teachers capable of teaching in English?
  9. Would you study in an ARA group without all the advantages?
  10. Do you think it would be easier for you to find a proper job after being part of an ARA group than if you were part of a Spanish speaking group?
  11. Do you think that more students will attend the ARA group if it would be named in another way?
  12. If your answer is yes, which of the following names would you choose?
    - i. The name should indicate that is a reduced group.
    - ii. The name should indicate that classes are in English.
    - iii. The name should indicate that classes are in English and in a reduced group.
  13. Did you answer this survey last year?

14. Do you have any suggestions or proposals to make regarding ARA groups?

- Students undertaking a degree with an ARA group, attending this group:
    1. Do you know the advantages of studying in an ARA group?
    2. Would you say that there are teachers capable of teaching in English?
    3. Do you think that the level of demand of the degree in relation to English is correct?
    4. Do you think you have improved your level of English with bilingual education?
    5. Which level of English language accreditation do you have?
    6. Please rate the importance you think English has in your degree. (1 to 10)
    7. Do you think you have a higher level of preparation than the non-ARA groups?
    8. Would you say in general that the required level of ARA groups is higher than the non-ARA groups?
    9. Have you ever had native professors? If yes, would you like to give more classes with them?
    10. Do you consider you have the same level of education than ARA groups?
    11. How did you know about the existence of the ARA groups?
    12. Has the ARA group fulfilled your expectations?
    13. Rate 1 to 10 according to your level of satisfaction with the ARA group.
    14. Do you think it would be easier for you to find a proper job after being part of an ARA group than if you were part of a Spanish speaking group?
    15. Do you think that more students will attend the ARA group if it would be named in another way?
    16. If your answer is yes, which of the following names would you choose?
      - i. The name should indicate that is a reduced group.
      - ii. The name should indicate that classes are in english.
      - iii. The name should indicate that classes are in english and in a reduced group.
    17. Did you answer this survey last year?
    16. Do you have any suggestions or proposals to make regarding ARA groups?
- 
- Professors teaching an ARA group: Biology .
    1. Do you believe that the level of English of the students is in line with what high academic performance demands?
    2. Would you say that at some point teaching in English doesn't confer any benefit to teaching?
    3. Do you think students in the ARA groups show a greater predisposition to learning than other groups?
    4. Would you say that class attendance in ARA groups is higher than the other groups?
    5. Do you consider that, apart from the language, the ARA groups have a higher level of teaching?
    6. Would you consider that one of the biggest advantages of the ARA groups is the small number of students per class?
    7. Which level of English language accreditation do you have?
    8. How many years ago did you obtain your English language accreditation?
    9. Do you feel as comfortable giving classes in English as in Spanish?
    10. Do you think giving classes in English leads to a delay at some point?
    11. Please rate 1 to 10 according to your level of satisfaction with teaching in an ARA group.
    12. If you had to choose between teaching an ARA group or a non-ARA group, which one would you choose?

13. Do you think it would be easier for you to find a proper job after being part of an ARA group than if you were part of a Spanish speaking group?
  14. Did you answer this survey last year?
  15. Do you have any suggestions or proposals to make regarding ARA groups?
- Professors not teaching an ARA group:
1. Do you know what the ARA group consists of?
  2. Do you know the advantages and benefits of teaching in an ARA group?
  3. Would you consider that one of the biggest advantages of ARA groups is the small number of students per class?
  4. Which level of English language accreditation do you have?
  5. How many years ago did you obtain your English language accreditation?
  6. Would you rather teach in ARA or non-ARA groups? Why?
  7. Do you think giving classes in English leads to some slow-down at some point?
  8. Do you believe it would be appropriate for all degrees to have an ARA group?
  9. Do you think it would be easier for you to find a proper job after being part of an ARA group than if you were part of a Spanish speaking group?
  10. Did you answer this survey last year?