

# **Analysis of the University Institution Through the Leadership Exercised by University Students: An Approximate Study at the University of Granada.**

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## **SUMMARY**

In this article, we present a descriptive research, carried out at the University of Granada. With the objective of analyzing university students' self-perception about their role as university leaders, a mixed methodological design was developed in which a questionnaire was passed, semi-structured interviews were conducted and discussion groups were given to a total sample of 80 students University professors who held positions of representation and actively participated in the various governing bodies of the University. This research is justified on the need to encourage the participation of the majority population, the student, in the curricular, organizational and political decisions of the university. At the same time, the fact that students are the main affected in these, further support the realization of this study. The results show a gradual increase in the level of involvement of university students to access the University management and participation bodies. However, at the same time and, we want to highlight the lack of diffusion and promotion of this figure of leadership, by the different positions of university government.

**Keywords:** leadership, student leadership, higher education.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Leadership can be defined as the influence that one or more people have on a particular group to perform a particular action (RAE, 2014). Leaders are usually characterized by good social and communicative skills, often charismatic, assertive, and resolute people (Leithwood, 2009, Harris, 2014). These abilities that often they have are the responsible that the rest follow their actions. The study of leadership began to develop in the business world. However, thanks to other research currents such as that of Learning Organizations, it was transferred to other areas such as education.

### **Leadership and University Micro-Politics**

Influence as an inherent aspect of leadership may be due to the position (strategic or not) that occupies the leader or leaders within the organization or by the power that has within it. Power and influence are the two main factors that will characterize the relationships between the different members of an organization. At the same time, the network of relationships that emerge in any organization, a consequence of the confluence of particular interests, ideological and institutional between the different levels and even among the workers of the same rank in the institution, outline the micro politics underlying any company (ElHomrani, 2014).

The educational field, like any organization formed by a group of people with individual needs, characteristics and interests, who in turn work based on common objectives, is not an exception. The educational micro politics is a reality that must be studied in depth if the intention is knowing and analyzing the organization as an integral way. In fact, the interests and the conflicts that arise by the power and the negotiations where is the true functioning and the real identity of any institution. To detach all the

peculiarities that make it up is the best way to implement changes and to influence in the correct development of the same one.

On the other hand, human interactions and relationships between staff influence the achievement or not of the objectives or purposes pursued by the institution as a whole. Around the conjugation between the individual and group interests, certain practices or others will be developed. An analysis based on the rules established within the institution, that is, the micro-politics will identify different human groups with contradictory interests that will struggle to put their objectives before the rest. Far from a pejorative conception of conflict, they will help the organization evolve in order to achieve the best for all (Ball, 1990; Lindle, 1999, cited by El Homrani, 2014). Related to this, access to this characteristic political framework in every democratic institution is usually subject to certain options.

In the Spanish university context, for example, to give voice to the entire university community, especially those people whose opinion is usually restricted or silenced, that is, students, we find the participation bodies, which are composed of all Representatives of the University community.

Both for access and for achieving adequate performance, leadership skills gain significant added value. Good communicative skills, assertiveness, empathy, resilience, or ability to lead groups of indeterminate extent are just a few examples of skills and abilities assigned to effective leaders (Pont, Nusche and Noorman, 2009, Leithwood, 2009). Therefore, an analysis of the university and its internal functioning is unthinkable without assuming the importance of leadership on the performance of the working groups and the micro-politics that accompany it.

At the same time, within the great variability in the types of existing leadership transferred to the educational environment, the work we present we will focus on the political leadership (El Homrani, 2014; El Homrani, Conde-Lacárcel y Ávalos, 2016). Focusing on existing participation bodies within the university, in this case, the University of Granada, we will analyze the degree of leadership that student representatives exercise through their rank and the position they occupy at some point in their passage through Higher education.

### **University Students, Potential Leaders**

Although our educational system has certain limitations, such as the rigidity of organizational structures or the lack of continuity of curricula, there have been notable improvements in recent years. The promotion of participation to the entire university community has contributed favourably to the implementation of certain improvement actions on university organizational functioning and that consequently affect the teaching and learning processes themselves.

Thanks to this, the largest sector of the university, students, has a large cast of representatives distributed among the different governing bodies and University participation.

This sector, through its representatives, exerts their influence on questions related to the teaching and learning processes, the faculty, elections to Rectorate, Dean or Department, as well as more specific ones that concern the Faculty to which they belong. Although the number of student representatives is not very high (around 24%), their vote is often decisive in making important decisions, so they are participants in the micro political dynamics that take place at the university. Through their positioning on the issues raised above, students become an equal player, on equal terms with other levels (department directors, deans, faculty, management and services personnel ...), political leaders, with the ability to exercise their power (and influence) and to satisfy the interests of the population they represent within the organization.

This student leadership is a type of institutional leadership, whose arises within the University and it must be interpreted as a technical, interpretative and transformative process (Lorenzo, Hinojo, Aznar, Cáceres & ElHomrani, 2008), articulated around the characteristics and conditions that surround the context where it takes place.

The University is a micro society, where live and interacts socially different people, with different needs, interests and motivations. In turn, the university institution can also be conceived as an entity that pursues a clearly established purpose: to offer a quality education and training, to enable its graduates to insert themselves in the social and labour world satisfactorily. As for the functioning, as it happens in lower educational levels, it presents a deep hierarchical organizational structure, analogous to the private enterprise (Firestone & Riehl, 2005). The vertical arrangement of the governing bodies makes the possibility of participation in them is desirable. At the same time, it responds to the imperatives of social

justice, which highlights the need that all the groups that make up the university community have voice and vote in decisions that affect the future of their institution.

As far as the student sector is concerned, in the literature we find numerous investigations carried out in the international field, which have been endorsed by the importance of student participation (or student leadership) in the governing bodies, on the proper functioning of the institution (Pareja, López, ElHomrani & Lorenzo, 2012, Inman, 2014, Bennetts, 2009, Lorenzo, Cáceres, Hinojo & Aznar, 2013). In the same, the focus has been on different factors, such as gender (Cáceres, Lorenzo & Sola, 2009; Sola, Cáceres & Trujillo, 2010; Cáceres, Trujillo, Hinojo, Aznar & García-Carmona, 2012); The development of managerial skills in university students (Laborda, 2006); The micro politics generated in the different organs of the universities (Murphy and Curtis, 2013); The management of teachers in relation to leadership (TLópez-Yañez, 2009); The development of ethical, social and transformational values of university politics (Alvarado, Prieto & Betancourt, 2009; Terzioglu, 2011; El Homrani, 2016) or the promotion of quality (Lorenzo, Hinojo, Aznar, Cáceres & El Homrani 2008)

In this sense, it seems convenient to point out some defining characteristics of the University of Granada, in order to give more representation both to the object of study that we present and to the data and results that we have found during the study.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodological approach of this research has been designed according to the parameters offered by the object of study. With a view to providing a complete overview of the participation of university students in the various bodies of the University of Granada, we have taken as a reference the three sites subscribed to it: Granada, Ceuta and Melilla.

Specifically, this research tried to analyze the degree of participation of the university students in the different organs of government, emphasizing especially in the type of leadership that they exerted in the same ones. To unravel this crossroads, we raised a series of questions that guided the design and development of the instruments used to obtain our answers (see Table 1)

Investigation questions	Purpose
Who are the university student leaders? As they are? What are their traits and attributes?	Identification of leaders
Why have they been chosen?	Attributions of the leader
What have they been chosen for? It's duties?	Leadership Expectations
How do they perform their functions? What difficulties do they encounter? What are your responsibilities?	Leadership practice
What is your experience? How do they look? What do you think is expected of them?	Satisfaction and shortcomings

**Table 1:** Research Questions. Own elaboration

In order to respond to the questions raised, a non-experimental descriptive and interpretive design was followed, on a final sample of 80 student representatives in the University of Granada (Department Council, Center Board and Faculty Cloister), selected from the different degrees, courses and areas of knowledge applying stratified random sampling without agreeing any way to distribute the surveys for each stratum. This is due to the complex task of accessing the sample; It was more convenient to avoid a fixed number for each stratum in order to achieve greater representativeness.

The total population is 719 students. But it must be clarified that this is a very fluctuating population, which is not very helpful to the representative bodies in which they should perform their functions. There are some and some students who can hold up to 6 positions in the different representation bodies. That is why it was decided to locate and pass the questionnaire mainly to those students attending the faculty of the university (maximum governing body), whose composition is 71 members representing this sector and in which all members of the university are represented. The university community. Finally, we only obtained the participation in this research of 62 of the 71 members of the university faculty, in addition to 18 significant students in the University of Granada based on the position they occupy. Thus, we get representatives or leaders from all the Faculties of the University of Granada (El Homrani, 2016).

The collection of information was carried out through 3 instruments: the first one is the questionnaire 'Student Leadership at the University of Granada.' developed by Lorenzo, Torres-Martín, Pareja, Hinojo, López-Núñez, Cáceres, El Homrani, Moreno & Lorenzo (2007), with a reliability of 0.877 Alpha of Cronbach for 67 elements, and a Lickert scale of response of 1 to 4 where one corresponds with 'totally disagree' and four with 'total agreement'. This instrument follows a mixed structure, with a first part composed of 30 closed questions; And the second part with five open questions. For the treatment of the obtained data, we use the statistical program SPSS.

The technique of the two halves of Guttman was equally applied to him; The Spearman-Brown Coefficient test and the correlation between forms, as well as an expert judgment with the following results, as we can see in Table 2:

<b>RELIABILITY-METHOD OF THE TWO HALF-</b>			
<b>Cronbach alpha</b>	Part 1	Value	0.814
		Number of elements	34 (a)
	Part 2	Value	0.831
		Number of elements	33 (b)
		Total number of items	67
<b>Correlation between forms</b>			0.593
<b>Spearman-Brown Coefficient</b>	Length equal		0.744
	Uneven length		0.744
<b>Two halves of Guttman</b>			0.743

**Table 2:** Reliability of the questionnaire. Source: Lorenzo et al. (2007)

The second of the instruments used was a semi-structured interview, based on the different dimensions of the questionnaire, made to the most significant student regarding the position of student representation that occupies, which allowed us to follow an analytical script of the same based on our Research needs while offering the respondent sufficient freedom of response.

For the analysis of the information obtained with this instrument, we have performed biographical-narrative discourse analysis techniques (Fernández Cruz, 2008; Gijón 2010). Content analysis was crucial for the interpretation of collected data: coding, categorizing, indexing tables (categories, definition, traits, etc.).

Finally, we held a discussion group for Centers, the student representatives in the Department Council, Center Board and Faculty Cloister, since its open and flexible nature allowed us to centralize research in the most significant aspects. At the same time, it facilitated the participation and motivated collaboration, and the expression of their thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, etc. Which together with the quantitative data have allowed us to have a global and complete vision of the reality to be investigated. The script used in both semi-structured interviews and focus group, answers the following questions:

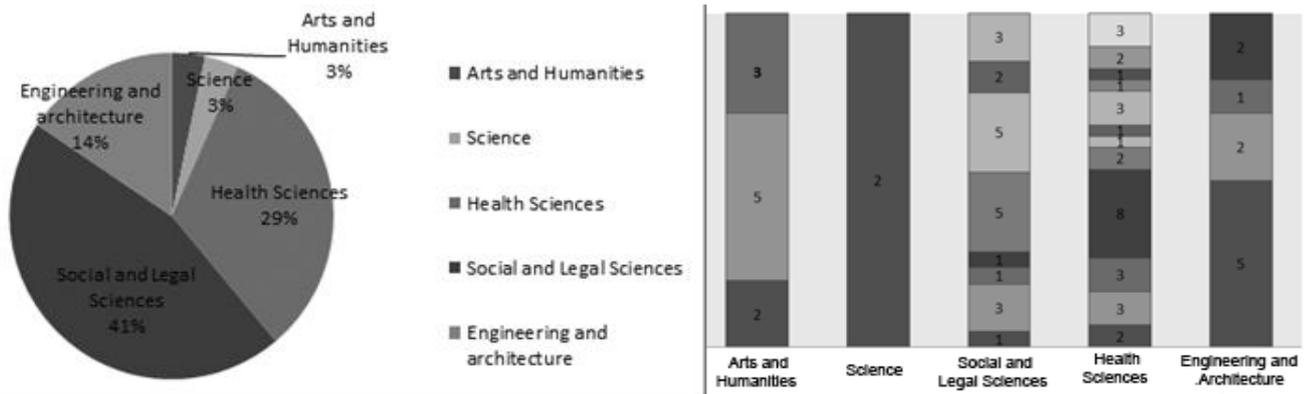
- What are the causes (personality, your way of being, the absence of candidates, etc.) for which you consider that your partners have chosen to you as their representatives?
- Do you think that the gender condition can be a conditioning factor to be elected or not? Who occupies, in currently, the higher charges that a student can reach as representative of the student body (the Governing Council)?

- What dimensions or qualities (being, knowing, doing) can be more decisive when voting for a representative?
- What is it that gets students involved in the "university micro politics", that is, in the representation functions?
- With what difficulties (confrontation with teachers, students, PAS) have you faced to develop these functions? How have you solved it?
- What does success in student representation depend on?
- What mechanisms do you use to "mobilize" your partners and the rest of students? ¿Do you think there are differences between mechanisms used by men and women?
- What learning gaps do you think should be improved to perform the task of excellence with excellence student?
- What have been your greatest satisfactions or disappointments as student representatives?
- How do you think that student participation in university life could be improved (economic remuneration, academic benefits, etc.)?
- 

In the next section, we present a summary of the most significant data found in the instruments. The results obtained from the three sources are presented to account for the similarities found and to reinforce, in the last resort, the starting hypotheses that we handled at the beginning of this study.

## **Results**

The results presented below have been analyzed according to the degree of participation of the student representatives. To facilitate their understanding, the sample has been divided by areas in areas of knowledge, as reflected in Figure 1:



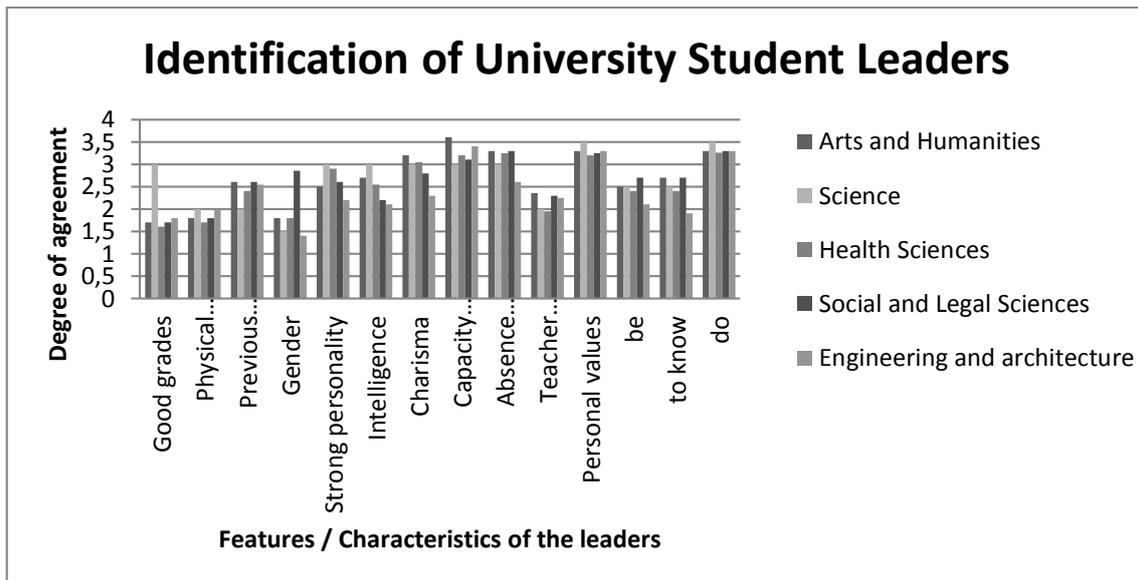
**Figure 1:** Student participation by knowledge and Centers of the University of Granada. Source: El Homrani (2014)

Once the sample obtained is delimited, by areas of knowledge, we will present the most significant findings. To do this, a Quartimax Analysis was performed, which resulted in five major conceptual components of university student leadership (see Table 1). Obtaining similar results, these same components have also been identified when we set out to analyze the discussion groups. Hence we decided to present the results together.

<b>Defining Components of Student Leadership</b>
Identification of leaders
Attributions of the leader
Leadership Expectations
Leadership Practices
Satisfaction and shortcomings

Table 1: Defining components of student leadership based on a Quartimax analysis. Source: ElHomrani (2014)

On these components will rotate the presentation of the results obtained both in the questionnaire and in the discussion groups. Thus we find that the first component of the analysis corresponds to the **"Identifying the leaders."** It contains the desirable features that a student leader must meet. According to his opinion, 'Personal values' and 'know-how' are priority characteristics that a leader must possess for all branches of knowledge, followed by the 'lack of candidates' and 'persuasiveness' of these (with scores of agreement between 3 and 3.5 on 4), as we can see in Figure 2. In turn, similar features emerge in some comments produced in the discussion groups. Some samples of this are inserted after the following graph.



**Figure 2:** Identification of University Student Leaders. Source: ElHomrani (2014)

In contrast to these results, we find a subject that underlines the importance of doing in a leader, along with consideration of the majority opinion in decision-making and its consequent, co-responsibility. Thus we extract the following passage: *"For my part, I think it was due to have prior involvement being representative of the class. My colleagues have seen that I have "worked", I asked their opinions and they have seen results. All this makes you earn the respect of others and popularity"* (Subject 6, E, lines 9-11).

In the case of students in the branch of science, we find that aspects such as 'intelligence', 'charisma', 'good grades', a 'strong personality' (with a 3 agreement on 4) or 'previous experience'. However, students in the rest of the branches of knowledge obtain inferior results in these traits.

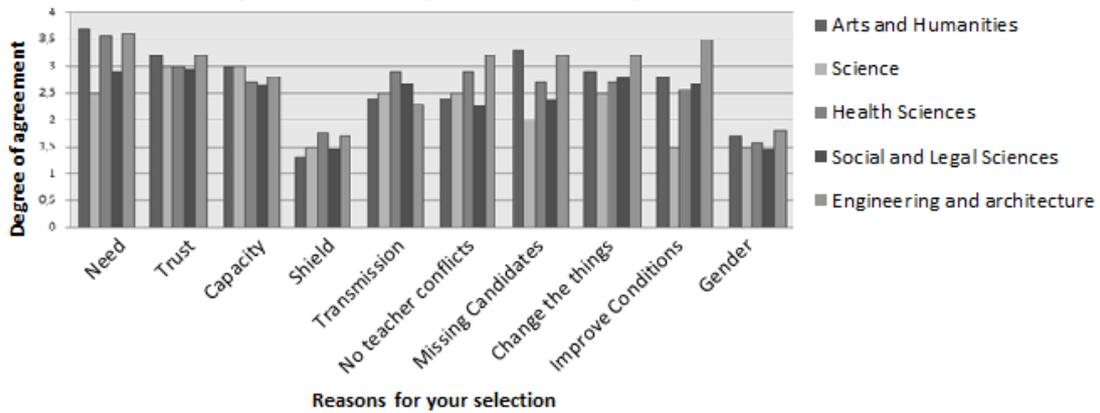
On the other hand, it is observed how the lowest scores are obtained in reference to 'gender' and 'physical aspect'. However, by analyzing the discussion groups, we see how some discourses do not quite match, with the scores of the questionnaire. Thus, for example, some participants suggest that *"there are internal and external factors influencing the gender factor. There are stereotypes that condition this situation. In the government team who is in charge is a man and has been like this all his life and the second in command is a woman and probably, who is doing the work is the woman, but never valued. It is external things that influence, but we have it so assumed that we see it normal. However, in representation, the number of women is greater than that of men, but men are still more representative than women."* (Subject 3, lines 35-37 J).

Regarding the factors that motivate the choice of some leaders or other, ie, the **"powers of the leader"**, shows that the 'need', 'trust' and 'ability' are the main reasons for choosing their Representatives/university leaders for all branches of knowledge, with very similar percentages of agreement in the answer, as we can see in Figure 3. In contrast, some of the answers obtained in the discussion groups are exposed, since according to the students :

Subject 1; A; Line 1: *There was no one who wanted to be the delegate. In my school, there is no one to get wet."*

Subject 6; E; Lines 65-68.: *I also think it's because of the popularity, though I differentiate various types. The first, the initial, is when no one knows you. It is based on the grace that you have, the physical attractiveness, the one that you go to class, ... but that does not reflect in fact if you are apt or not for the position. The other is acquired popularity, which occurs when you have already been involved, you do things, you convey your concerns to the other government bodies ... Now people know you for "this is the one who made such."*

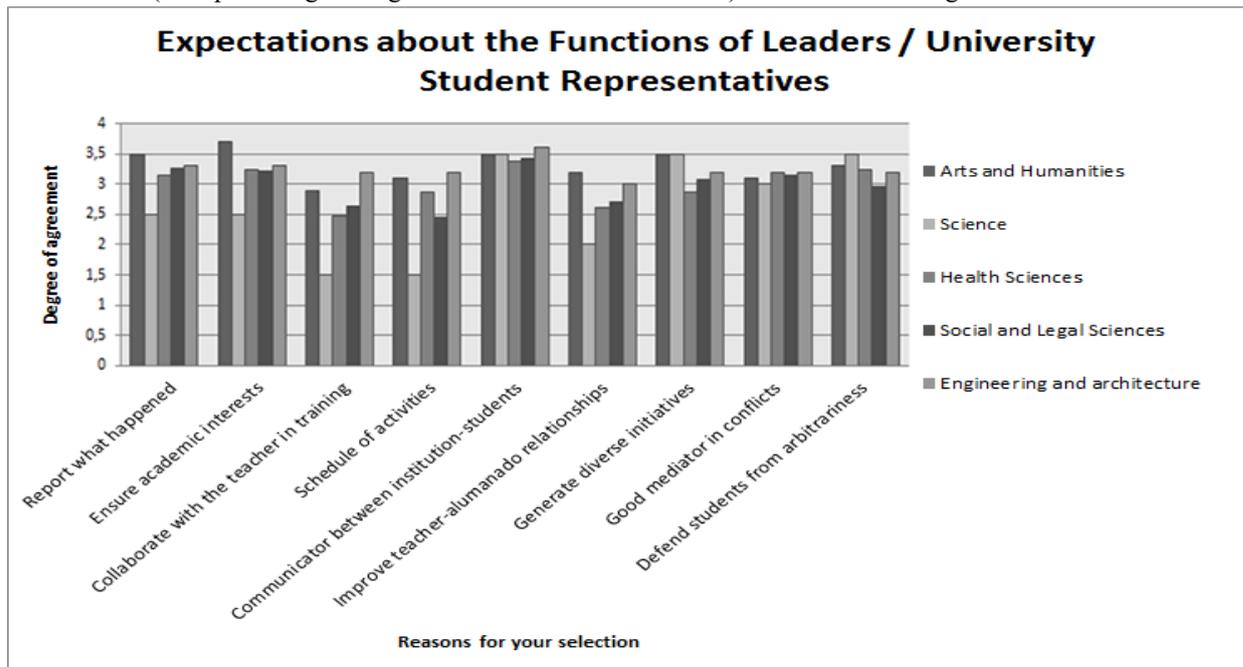
### Attributions and Beliefs about the Election of Leaders / University Student Representatives



**Figure 3:** Attributions and Beliefs about Election Leaders / University Student Representatives. Source: ElHomrani (2014)

The lowest scores in agreement on the response are obtained in 'escudo' (leaders/representatives act as 'protectors' in situations of conflict within the institution, department or with teachers mainly) and 'gender' again (with 1, 5 according to the answer on 4). The branch of Arts and Humanities also emphasizes the desire to 'improve the conditions' of students (with a 3.5 in agreement on the statement on 4); The desire to 'change things' and 'avoid conflicts with teachers', repeating the 'lack of candidates'.

Regarding the **"Expectations about leadership"** and the reasons behind the choices of students, we find unanimity in all areas of knowledge. They all advocate the importance of being 'Communicator between the institution and the students'; To be a 'good mediator in conflicts' and 'to defend the students of arbitrariness' (with percentages of agreement in the answer above 3) as we can see in Figure 4.



**Figure 4:** Expectations About the Functions of Leaders / University Student Representatives. Source: El Homrani (2014)

Significant is the branch of science, which scores with 1.5 in agreement on the answer on 4 to 'collaborate with the teacher in the preparation of the training' and that the representatives fulfill a function of 'agenda of activities'; Also aspects such as 'informing what happened' or 'ensuring academic interests' do not seem

to be a priority for this student among the functions that must be fulfilled by their representatives as opposed to the data obtained in the other branches of knowledge. For the area of Engineering and Architecture, the aspect punctuated with a lesser degree of agreement is what to make reference to 'improving the relationship between teachers and students' with a 3 out of 4. In this respect we find different answers:

Subject 2, JM; Lines 124-129): *"Since I finished high school and while in college I spent four years doing nothing of this. What prompted me to re-enter was that there was a lack of information, to see how the Bologna Plan was applied and that I did not agree at all. I was talking to all the teachers and we had many discussions in which nothing was solved. I did not even know that there was student participation and saw that nobody did anything"*.

Compared with the fourth component, **"Leadership Practice"**, we see that their Higher scores, respond to 'ethical coherence, honesty, and values' on the part of university student leaders/representatives and the 'learning of representation functions through practice'. Specifically, the highest valuation is found in the branch of Arts and Humanities (with 3.7 in agreement on 4), followed by the branch of Sciences, Engineering and Architecture, Social and Legal Sciences and, lastly, the students of Health Sciences. Other aspects that score significantly high are 'the exhaustive knowledge of the university institution' and the idea that 'is not born university leader but learned to be' (with response rates around 3 out of 4).

However, more controversial aspects such as the 'partisan use of office'; 'Difficulties or facilities in subjects' or 'personal injuries' score with a scant 2 out of 4. On the basis of the results, it seems that the representatives themselves do not reach a consensus on these consequences of exercising their different positions. Proof of this is the opinion of this man, who says: *"It is true that being a student representative opens doors, teaches you to move, to better understand the institution."* (Subject 5, D Line 130). However, no evidence has been found to indicate that these advantages are reflected at the academic level.

In terms of the lowest scores, as it is observed in the graph 5, the item of 'advantages in grades' stands out (with a mean of over 4 disagreements). By branches of knowledge, Sciences does not believe that the charge involves a possible scholarship (with a 1.5 disagreement with this statement); Health Sciences emphasizes in this sense the one that supposes 'advantages in the qualifications' (with 1.62 of disagreement on 4); And Social and Legal Sciences does not believe that a 'use of the position for the interests of other groups' is made (with a disagreement of 1.7 on 4).

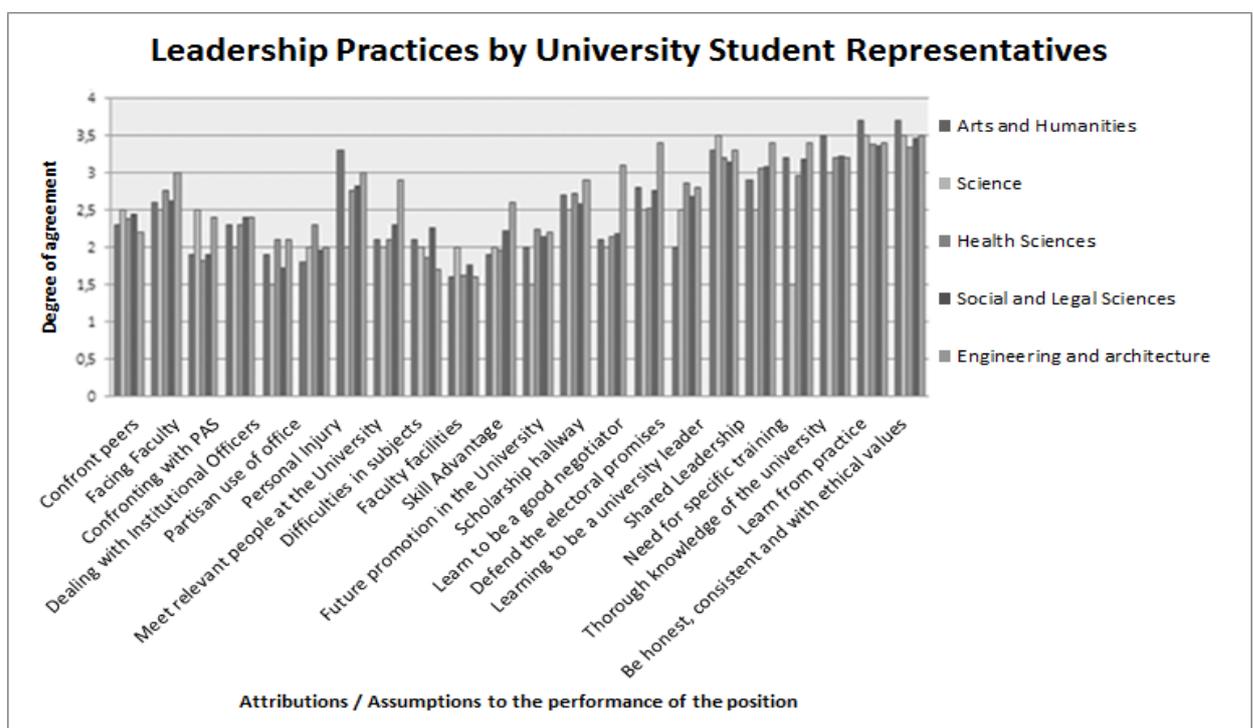


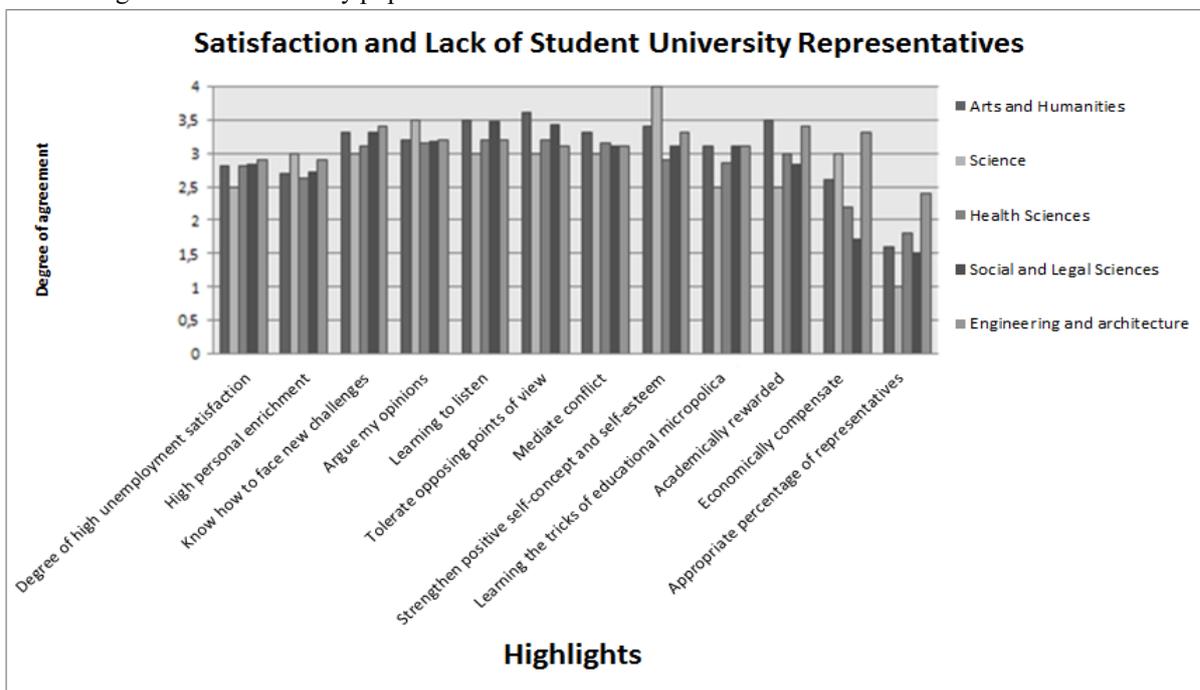
Figure 5: Leadership Practice by University Student Representatives. Source: ElHomrani (2014)

Finally, the last component analysis, "**Satisfaction and shortcomings**", we highlight some consensus on the claim that the performance of leading students has positive effects on students. In this sense, items such as 'reinforcing self-concept and self-esteem' by student leaders or students representatives of the branch of science receive a score of 4 (out of 4); Followed by 'tolerating opposing points of view' and 'learning to listen' by the Arts and Humanities branch (3.6 and 3.5 out of 4 respectively). In the same trend, although with slightly lower scores, are student representatives from the branch of Social and Legal Sciences, followed by Health Sciences, on these issues.

A controversial finding is played by the items of 'facing new challenges' and the need to 'reward academically'. While the students of the Engineering and Architecture branch score it positively (with a 3.4 out of 4 response), the rest of the branches of knowledge show great disagreement (with response rates between 1 and 2.5 according to 4).

However, all of them consider that representation should be exercised in a coherent and ethical way in which work done well on an external reward that could lead students to present themselves to these positions for academic or economic interests, not service and commitment.

The lowest scores obtained in this component correspond to the 'percentage of representatives', with scores between 1 and 2 over 4 (see graph 6). This unanimity is based on the belief that student representation is insufficient, demanding a greater number of representatives, in order to reach a certain balance between the different agents of the university population.



**Figure 6:** Satisfaction and Lack of Student University Representatives. Source: El Homrani (2014)

## CONCLUSIONS

This research has tried to answer many of the questions that accompany the figure of the student representatives as university leaders. In the same, it has been tried to establish differences between the opinions of the university representatives, subscribed to different faculties and areas of knowledge. However, based on the results, we found a convergence in most of the responses. Except for exceptions such as the "advantages of being a leader", most respondents have a similar idea about the implications, functions, duties, and compensation of being a student representative.

A collation of the results obtained in our context (University of Granada, Spain), university student leadership is outlined around a two-fold. On the one hand, the practicality of representatives who know how to carry out their tasks and possess qualities such as intelligence, charisma, persuasiveness or a strong personality; And on the other hand, with ethical and personal values, so that they can be trusted. In short, an ethical leadership.

The desire to change things is present in the election of these people as leaders within the various positions of representation of governing bodies of higher education by the students themselves. However, with reference to data analysis, we believe that collaboration between teachers and students should be strengthened, as well as the relationships between students for a better functioning and organizational climate in the different representation and government bodies.

On the other hand, participation and satisfaction respect the position they have is not very high. In this regard, we believe it is necessary to promote opportunities for training on the various aspects that make up the micro and organization at universities; and continue to set different types of recognition.

Similar investigations had contributed to making visible good practices and possibilities of action of the student's as great protagonists of the university institutions. Promoting and building participatory channels and platforms, with spaces where they are given voice, is the best way to improve the quality of universities, from the institutions that become the protagonists of their own development.

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