

A Multiinstitutional Spanish Master's Program in Ecosystem Restoration: Vision and Four-Year Experience

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ABSTRACT

Since 2006, an innovative, multiinstitutional Spanish Master in Ecosystem Restoration (MER) is jointly offered by four major public universities in Madrid. In view of the high student demand—about 900 applications this academic year for only 30 places, a remarkable 75% rate of professional poststudy employment in a period of economic crisis, and the high number (> 40) of prestigious organizations involved in the program, we consider the MER program, although still young, to be very promising for the long term. We explain the process to create the MER and achieve the results obtained thus far. We describe its organization, report its vital statistics in terms of students, and identify some strengths and weaknesses observed to date. The MER program has evolved as a network of knowledge and experience that links universities, lecturers, researchers, students, private and public companies, NGOs, and administration centers. Our aim is to help other groups that may want to launch similar graduate-level ecological restoration degree programs.

Keywords: active teaching and learning, European higher education, networking, professional training, Spain

The Spanish Master in Ecosystem Restoration, offered by four major public universities in the Madrid metropolitan area, was initiated in September 2003 by five senior lecturers with active research programs in restoration ecology. We were motivated by the obvious “boom” in scientific, legislative, media, and technical aspects of this field, as well as the growing social demand, the foreseeable employment demand, and the possibility of filling a noticeable gap in advanced teaching on this subject in Spanish, at both the national and international levels. It took three years to get started, and six years later, as the fourth cohort of students gets started, we consider the Spanish Master in Ecosystem Restoration (MER, www2.uah.es/master_rest_eco/) to be a success. Here, we explain the process that

led to creating the MER, some keys to the results obtained, and the way the studies are organized. We also report on some vital statistics and identify some strengths and weaknesses. Our goal is to help other groups that may want to launch similar postgraduate study programs.

Building the MER program

The five founding lecturers, from four different universities, met together a number of times with the aim of creating a network that would follow the keys to successful team performance (Guimerà et al. 2005). These are 1) an adequate number of team members to launch an initiative; 2) previous collaborative experience (four of these five lecturers were members of the existing Madrid-based research network on ecological restoration named Remedial; www.remedial.org); and 3) collaborators with complementary expertise in order to enjoy synergistic effects. After brainstorming for

two years, with additional consultations with university administrators and other researchers, we identified what we thought was an appropriate organization for this master of science (MS) program, defined a core curriculum, located outstanding researchers in ecological restoration and related disciplines, and identified key institutions and organizations to approach as potential allies.

Our next step was to invite major lecturers to join the program. Fourteen people were identified and invited. Altogether, the team leaders and the invited lecturers represented six disciplines, namely, ecology, forest science, geology, soil science, geography, and economics. In the second year, one university declined to participate and we lost one faculty member. This lecturer was soon replaced by another with similar expertise, and since then the faculty has changed little. Five new lecturers have recently been incorporated to teach a subject introduced in the fourth year (more details below).