

Organic Farming Master at Barcelona University. Fourteen years training specialists in Mediterranean Organic Farming.

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Authors Background:

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Summary:

Since 1999, The University of Barcelona imparts the first Master in Organic Farming in Spain, with the aim of responding to the growing demand for professionals specialized in organic farming. This university has trained more than four hundred organic specialists. The diversity of the teaching staff, coming from numerous universities, research centers, Government Administration and private enterprises, offers the student a global vision of all the bio agri-food sectors (Figure 1). The course has a well-built relationship with the public and private sectors in order to facilitate the entry into the labour market for new graduates. Students conduct practical or scientific projects in organic enterprises to learn about the reality of the organic sector up close.

After fourteen years of the Master, the organization has conducted a survey among its alumni. Most of the respondents state that studying the Master has offered them new career possibilities or a job better in line with their expectations.

Background:

The development of organic agriculture and livestock farming is a reality that emerges as a response to the need to find more environmentally-friendly farming techniques, as well as to obtain healthier food. Organic farming exists in Spain for more than 30 years and it is official since 1991. The agricultural land devoted to this kind of farming has been continuously increasing and offers a very good alternative for environmental and social recovery of rural areas. This significant development of Spanish organic agriculture requires specialized technicians who can do research and advisory work on farms and organic enterprises, perform inspection in public and private organizations and, ultimately, push and support the development of the organic world. The Master in Organic Farming at the University of Barcelona (<http://www.ub.edu/agroecologia/masterae>) was launched to train these specialists and during fourteen years it has been building bridges between science and producers, helping to set up organic institutions and improving the reputation of Organic farming.

Main chapter:

The Master, which is based on the European standard ETCS credits includes classroom activities (theoretical and practical classes, seminars and assessments), non-contact activities scheduled and tutored by electronic means (forums, debates, visits and readings) and student's autonomous personal dedication, with the aim of progressively incorporate new learning methods in line with the organization of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) (<http://www.ub.edu/agroecologia/masterae>). The course has a strong relationship with the public and private sectors in order to facilitate the entry into the labour market for new graduates. Therefore, the master encourages the organic stakeholders to participate in training the students through university-enterprise agreements. That allows students to conduct practical or scientific projects and learn about the reality of the organic sector up close.

The main competences achieved through the program are:

- Learning the ecological and agronomic basis of agroecosystems functioning.
- Understanding the concepts and principles of agroecology.
- Becoming skilled at the basic techniques of organic agriculture and animal husbandry.
- Gaining knowledge of management systems in organic agri-food industry.
- Understanding the role of organic production on quality and food safety.
- Knowing the rules and the control and verification processes of organic production.
- Understanding the current situation of organic farming and the prospects for its production, marketing and consumption in Europe.
- Designing and developing transition strategies towards organic farming at different spatial scales.
- Gaining knowledge of how to analyze the sustainability of organic production farms.
- Being trained for the recognition and characterization of agricultural soils.

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Core messages and conclusions:

After fourteen years of the Master at Barcelona University, the Master's organization has made a survey among its alumni to know the sectors in which they carry out their professional activities and assess whether their current work is related to organic agriculture. The survey also has allowed knowing students' satisfaction degree with the training received in the master's program and the new opportunities offered to them after studying it.

The survey was completed by 103 people which corresponds to 26% of the alumni. The information comes from students of all courses, although most of the surveys have been answered by students belonging to the last three academic years (59.2%). More than a third of respondents (35.9%) are currently working in private enterprise, while teaching, advising and Government Administration account for almost 31% of the professional activities. Twelve percent of the alumni are unemployed. The results reveal the increase in the percentage of alumni who work in fields related to organic farming. While only 27.2% of the alumni worked in activities related to organic farming before attending the master course, at present 49.5% of the students are employed in the organic sector. Most of the respondents (72%) state that studying the Master has offered them new career possibilities or a job better in line with their expectations. The number of alumni that are satisfied with the Master's program and would recommend it to others reaches 94.2%.

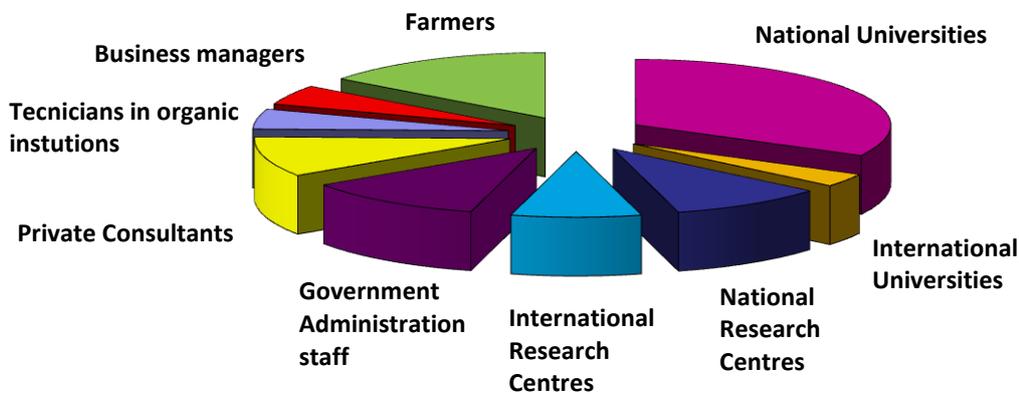


Figure 1: Teaching staff profile. Source: Sans/Lanzón 2013