



Research Article

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Towards Comprehensive Education: Key Strategies to Enhance the Student Experience in Colombia

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Abstract

The student experience in higher education is a crucial factor influencing learning quality and academic success. This study employs hierarchical clustering analysis to group students based on their perceptions of various aspects of their educational experience in Colombia and Latin America. Data were collected using a validated instrument that measures key dimensions such as student-centred service, inclusion and diversity, active learning participation, teacher dependence, academic accountability, and comprehensive development. With a sample of 484 students from various higher education institutions, three clusters were identified, revealing differentiated profiles in terms of perceptions and satisfaction with the educational experience. The findings help identify patterns that provide a solid basis for developing strategies to promote student retention, academic well-being, and the enhancement of educational service quality. This analysis highlights the importance of segmenting students to design policies and programmes tailored to their specific needs, thus fostering a more inclusive and practical educational experience.

Keywords: Comprehensive, Education, Key Strategies, Colombia

1. Introduction

Higher education in Latin America, particularly in Colombia, faces numerous challenges that affect the quality and equity of the educational system. According to UNESCO (2022), Latin America has made significant progress in access to higher education, with enrolment rates exceeding 70% in countries such as Chile, Argentina, and Brazil. However, substantial inequality gaps persist, limiting equitable access to quality education, especially in rural areas and among the most vulnerable sectors. In Colombia, the higher education enrolment rate remains around 52%, below the regional average (Ibero-American Observatory of Science, Technology, and Society [OCTS], 2023), reflecting structural issues and a lack of inclusive policies to promote student retention. Despite efforts to improve access, digital divides and challenges in providing student-centred educational services

remain obstacles to achieving an inclusive and high-quality educational experience (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [ECLAC], 2022; Ministry of National Education [MEN], 2022).

Furthermore, higher education in Colombia lacks a comprehensive approach to the quality of educational services, which impacts both the student experience and academic success. Many institutions fail to address adequately student needs through administrative and pedagogical services, especially in virtual environments (Izquierdo-Yusta et al., 2021). UNESCO (2022) notes that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated pre-existing inequalities, disproportionately impacting students from the most vulnerable sectors who rely heavily on these services. This issue is also evident in the insufficiently trained administrative staff who are unable to effectively guide and support students throughout their academic journey, negatively influencing perceptions of educational quality (Clewes, 2003; Rico, 2024). ECLAC (2022) adds that limited access to technological tools and the minimal adoption of innovative pedagogical models contribute to low student satisfaction and high dropout rates during the early years of study. Additionally, Pötschulat et al. (2021) argue that the absence of a coherent institutional vision regarding the student experience has hindered efforts to improve the quality of educational services.

The limited participation of students in co-creating their educational experience further impacts the quality of higher education in Colombia. According to ECLAC (2022), students are often treated as passive recipients of information rather than active participants in their own learning process, reducing motivation and engagement with their studies. This lack of involvement is exacerbated in educational environments that fail to encourage peer interaction and collaboration on meaningful projects. Dropulić et al. (2021) assert that the co-production of learning is essential for creating a more personalised and meaningful educational experience, as it engages students in actively constructing their own learning. However, this approach remains limited in many universities across the region, and students often fail to develop critical leadership and teamwork skills essential for academic and professional success (Ministry of National Education [MEN], 2022; Pinna et al., 2023). Additionally, Dollinger and Lodge (2020) highlight that experiences of student governance reveal a disconnect between students and academic staff, negatively affecting student participation in decision-making processes.

Moreover, the dependent relationship between students and their professors, combined with insufficient teacher training, hinders the development of student autonomy in Colombia. Studies show that students excessively rely on their professors' guidance to navigate their learning process, which impedes self-management and independent decision-making (Yap et al., 2022). In many cases, educators lack adequate training in new pedagogical methodologies that promote student autonomy, a critical aspect of developing skills necessary to face challenges in the workforce (Izquierdo-Yusta et al., 2021). This issue is exacerbated by the heavy workloads of faculty members, which limit their ability to provide personalised and high-quality teaching. Multiple studies have highlighted the lack of resources and institutional support for professors in the region (Rico, 2024; Saborido et al., 2022). The limited time and resources available for implementing innovative methodologies directly affect the student experience and the effectiveness of the teaching-learning process. Jandrić and Loretto (2021) further emphasise that the physical and spatial structure of institutions also contributes to this dependent relationship, as the design of educational environments influences the perception of teaching.

Another major challenge in Colombian higher education is the lack of academic accountability among students, leading to low retention and academic success rates. According to Havenga and De Beer (2016), students' ability to assume academic responsibilities and manage their learning determines their success in higher education. However, this responsibility is often undermined by internal factors, such as low motivation, and external factors, such as insufficient institutional support. Rico (2024) also notes that the absence of tutoring systems and academic follow-up programmes prevents students from developing the skills needed for self-directed learning. This problem is exacerbated when universities fail to implement academic and emotional support

programmes effectively. Dropulić et al. (2021) stress that self-management is crucial for academic success, but many students lack the necessary training to develop this competency. Similarly, Izquierdo-Yusta et al. (2021) highlight that the absence of mechanisms promoting self-management affects student retention and their overall satisfaction with the educational process. Furthermore, a study by Teeroovengadam et al. (2023) notes that self-management skills are linked to students' subjective well-being, with those lacking these skills being more likely to drop out due to academic overload and a lack of resources for independent problem-solving. This deficit in self-management skills is one of the primary factors contributing to high dropout rates among Colombian students, particularly those from more vulnerable socio-economic backgrounds (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [ECLAC], 2022; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2016).

Thus, higher education in Colombia faces the challenge of providing comprehensive development that goes beyond academics, encompassing ethical, social, and civic responsibilities. According to Jones (2018), an educational approach that includes ethical and social development is crucial for forming well-rounded citizens committed to society. However, many universities neglect these elements, as curricular programmes predominantly focus on developing technical and professional skills while overlooking education in values and social responsibility. Pinna et al. (2023) argue that the lack of initiatives promoting social responsibility among students limits their ability to effectively integrate into society and the labour market, a crucial factor for their holistic well-being. Dropulić et al. (2021) add that the educational experience should incorporate emotional and social dimensions to ensure comprehensive learning. However, this remains a challenge in many institutions across Latin America, where education tends to prioritise the transmission of technical knowledge. Likewise, Teeroovengadam et al. (2023) suggest that the lack of institutional support for students' holistic development can negatively impact their subjective well-being and exacerbate the disconnect between their academic and personal lives. Mireles and García (2022) also highlight that higher education institutions must reevaluate the inclusion of new educational realities, such as ethical training and social responsibility, post-pandemic. Moreover, Colombia's Ministry of National Education and the OECD (2016) have acknowledged that efforts to include ethical and civic education in university programmes have been insufficient, affecting students' ability to act as change agents in society. This limited focus on holistic education not only undermines the educational experience of students but also diminishes their potential to impact society positively after graduation (UNESCO, 2022).

The challenges affecting the student experience in higher education in Colombia and Latin America reveal the need for a more comprehensive approach that considers academic, social, and emotional aspects. Student education must focus on developing technical skills and provide an environment that fosters self-management, social responsibility, and ethical commitment. This study contributes to understanding student profiles based on their perceptions of the educational experience. It identifies how the lack of quality in educational services, inequality in inclusion, limited active participation in learning, teacher dependence, and insufficient holistic development impact their satisfaction and academic success. Through this analysis, the study aims to offer a critical and evidence-based perspective to design policies and institutional strategies that improve the quality of the educational experience, promote student retention, and prepare students to address academic and social challenges effectively.

To achieve the stated objective, the document is organised as follows: first, the theoretical framework is presented, examining the main theories and previous studies on the student experience in higher education, focusing on aspects such as the quality of educational services, inclusion, active participation, and holistic development. Next, the methodology outlines the approach used to conduct the study, including the research design, data collection techniques, and analysis through hierarchical clustering to identify student groupings based on their perceptions. Subsequently, the results section presents the findings, identifying and analysing key groups that reflect differentiated patterns in the student experience, followed by a critical discussion of the findings concerning

existing literature. Finally, the conclusions and recommendations section synthesises the practical implications of the results. It offers suggestions for implementing policies and strategies to enhance the quality of the student experience in the region.

2. Theoretical Framework of the Student Experience

The student experience in higher education has been conceptualised as a multifactorial construct encompassing academic, social, and emotional dimensions. It is understood as the set of perceptions and evaluations students form based on their interactions with the educational environment, including university staff, peers, and available resources (Izquierdo-Yusta et al., 2021; Pötschulat et al., 2021). Several studies have highlighted that this experience extends beyond classroom learning, including social interactions, infrastructure, and the perception of support services (Matus et al., 2021; Pop et al., 2018). In this regard, authors like Pinna et al. (2023) argue that the student experience should be approached from a comprehensive perspective, addressing both academic and non-academic aspects, as these factors significantly influence student satisfaction and loyalty towards the institution (Douglas et al., 2008; Pinna et al., 2023). Similarly, studies by Mireles and García et al. (2022) and Matus et al. (2021) suggest that the student experience is linked not only to academic performance but also to emotional well-being and adaptation to the university environment, underscoring the importance of considering multiple factors in its analysis.

Pop et al. (2018) concur that the student experience involves cognitive and emotional perceptions influenced by internal factors such as motivation and self-management and external factors like the quality of university infrastructure and available services. Similarly, Izquierdo-Yusta et al. (2021) emphasise that the perception of institutional branding and the quality of virtual classrooms are key determinants in evaluating the student experience, particularly in hybrid and online educational settings. From a sociological perspective, Pötschulat et al. (2021) argue that the student experience is a social construct shaped by daily practices and narratives within the educational system, implying that the meaning of this experience can vary significantly depending on cultural and organisational contexts (Matus et al., 2021).

Moreover, authors such as Jandrić and Loretto (2021) have highlighted the role of the hidden curriculum and spatiality in shaping the student experience, noting that not only explicit academic content but also the physical layout and social dynamics within the university influence how students engage with their educational environment. Additionally, the work of Dollinger and Lodge (2020) introduces the idea that relationships and interactions with professors and peers are crucial to the perceived value students attribute to their education. This reinforces the notion that the educational experience is a multidimensional process encompassing academic and social elements. This view is supported by Jandrić and Loretto (2021), who stress that the physical structure of institutions also impacts how students perceive their time at university, interacting with the curriculum and educational practices (Arambewela & Maringe, 2012).

In studying the student experience, various theories provide a valuable conceptual framework to understand the multiple dimensions of this phenomenon. One of the most influential is Pine and Gilmore's Theory of Experience (1998), which posits that experience is distinct from both product and service, created in the client's mind—in this case, the student's. In education, this implies that institutions must design memorable and satisfying experiences that consider not only academic but also emotional and sensory aspects that affect students. This theory has been expanded by authors such as Schmitt (2010), who introduces the concept of sensory, affective, cognitive, and relational experiences, emphasising that the student experience should be viewed holistically. Additionally, Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) (2001), which highlights that learning arises from the interaction between students and their environment, has been enriched by contributions like those of Beard and Wilson (2013), who note that experiential learning involves not only an active process but also a reflective one, enabling students to transform experiences into practical knowledge. This makes students active agents of their learning, fostering more meaningful participation in their

educational process.

Similarly, the Service-Dominant Logic (SDL) theory proposed by Vargo and Lusch (2004, 2016; 2008) emphasises the co-creation of value in the relationship between the service provider (university) and the client (student), positioning students as active co-creators in their educational process. This theory has been expanded in the educational field by authors like Pinna et al. (2023), who argue that active student participation in creating and improving educational services is key to fostering institutional loyalty and satisfaction. Furthermore, the Co-Creation Theory reinforces the idea that students are not merely consumers of educational services but agents of change who influence the design and enhancement of these services. Barnes et al. (2024) suggest that collaborative interaction between students and universities is crucial to improving perceived service quality.

In this context, Service Theory, as presented by Douglas et al. (2008), highlights how the quality of educational services directly impacts student satisfaction. This theory is supported by the work of Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985), who argue that service quality dimensions such as reliability, responsiveness, and security affect students' perceptions of their educational experience. Research by Izquierdo-Yusta et al. (2021) also suggests that academic and administrative services must be efficient and student-centred to enhance academic and personal success, strengthening the link between service quality and student satisfaction.

On the other hand, the Expectation Confirmation Theory (EDT), developed by Oliver (1980), provides a perspective on student satisfaction based on comparing prior expectations and actual experiences at university. This approach is essential for assessing how students' expectations regarding the quality of teaching and services align with or differ from their actual experiences. Moreover, Mehrabian and Russell's Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) Theory (1974) helps to understand how academic environmental stimuli, such as infrastructure and social atmosphere, affect students' emotional and behavioural responses, influencing both their satisfaction and academic performance. Additionally, the Bottom-Up Spillover Theory by Campbell et al. (1976) and Diener (1994) suggests that experiences in specific life subdomains, such as education, can directly influence individuals' overall well-being. This theory is particularly relevant for analysing how educational experiences impact students' emotional and psychological well-being.

Continuing the review of theories and models explaining the structure of students' educational experiences, the concept of the "hidden curriculum" proposed by Philip Jackson (1968) has been key to understanding implicit educational dynamics. Assor and Gordon (1987) criticise redundancy theories, which assume repetition is sufficient for learning, proposing that the impact of the hidden curriculum also depends on cognitive processes and the emotional value of the material. They suggest that students can resist and transform implicit messages, especially those in working-class contexts, differentiating between a "hot curriculum," driven by emotional relevance, and a "cold curriculum," based on repetition. This distinction allows for a more complex understanding of how these messages are internalised. Portelli (1993) highlights that the hidden curriculum includes social interactions, unwritten norms, and institutional expectations that significantly influence students' educational experiences. Additionally, Jandrić and Loretto (2021) suggest that physical spaces and institutional organisation also form part of this curriculum, affecting students' interaction and sense of belonging. Thus, the hidden curriculum becomes a key tool for analysing how institutions convey knowledge values and hierarchies that shape personal and academic development.

Finally, the Autonomous Learning Model underscores the importance of students developing self-management skills in higher education, enabling them to face the challenges of a more independent academic environment (Hattie, 2023). Meanwhile, Transition Theory (Gill, 2020) highlights the difficulties students experience adapting to new expectations and environments, affecting their learning process and academic success. These models provide a comprehensive understanding of adaptation dynamics and offer practical tools to enhance the educational experience by focusing on developing students' autonomy and capacity to manage academic transitions.

Findings on Factors Related to the Student Experience

Research on the student experience in higher education has addressed various factors influencing satisfaction and academic success, including teaching quality, social interaction, and institutional support services. One increasingly relevant approach is co-creation, in which students are not merely recipients but active participants in shaping and enhancing their educational experience. This approach fosters loyalty and commitment to the institution (Pinna et al., 2023). The collaborative model provides a comprehensive perspective highlighting the importance of emotional and social dimensions, directly impacting students' overall well-being and academic development (Matus et al., 2021). Complementarily, technological infrastructure and familiarity with digital tools are fundamental to ensuring a smooth transition to university environments and improving perceptions of educational quality (Keane et al., 2023). Thus, integrating these elements into institutional strategies is essential to creating a more effective and satisfying learning environment tailored to students' academic and emotional needs.

One of the most prominent aspects of research on the student experience in higher education is the quality of academic and administrative services as a central component. Beyond teaching, student satisfaction also depends on factors such as support services and social interaction, which are essential for fostering an inclusive educational environment (Pop et al., 2018). Izquierdo-Yusta et al. (2021) highlight that perceptions of the quality of virtual classrooms and institutional branding directly influence students' loyalty to the university. However, the focus on services should not be limited to resource provision; studies such as those by Barnes et al. (2024) emphasise that the accessibility of support services is crucial for reducing dropout rates and creating a sense of community among students. Borishade et al. (2021) complement this view, arguing that effectively managing the student experience strengthens ties with the institution, promoting long-term loyalty. Moreover, the current approach should not treat students as passive recipients. The co-creation of the educational experience has been promoted as a key element. Research such as Dropulić et al. (2021) indicates that active student participation in improving institutional processes increases satisfaction and strengthens their sense of belonging and commitment. Pinna et al. (2023) add that a trust-based dialogue between students and academic staff fosters such participation, promoting value co-creation within the university. This collaborative approach is essential for integrating academic and emotional dimensions, ensuring a holistic student experience focused on their overall well-being (Matus et al., 2021).

Additionally, social interaction and a sense of community are key determinants in shaping the student experience. Various studies agree that the dynamics of interaction between students and the institution significantly impact both satisfaction and academic success (Barnes et al., 2024; Pop et al., 2018). These social interactions facilitate the learning process and contribute to a sense of belonging, which is crucial for strengthening students' commitment to their studies and the institution (Borishade et al., 2021). In international settings, challenges stemming from cultural and academic differences present additional barriers to student integration. Bai and Wang (2022) stress the need for institutions to implement inclusive and diverse strategies that promote an environment where all students can actively participate, regardless of their backgrounds. This approach is supported by research suggesting that a sense of belonging and community among students enhances not only their academic engagement but also their emotional and social well-being, which is fundamental to their holistic development (Teeroovengadum et al., 2023; Zou et al., 2024) furthermore, the importance of addressing students' emotional needs has been highlighted, as these directly affect their overall satisfaction. Studies such as those by Dropulić et al. (2021) and Matus et al. (2021) point out that institutions should create educational environments that consider not only academic performance but also students' emotional and social well-being, as these aspects are interrelated with their perceptions of the quality of their educational experience. This holistic approach is key to improving student retention and university loyalty.

Conversely, studies like those by Rico (2024) and Manrique-Tisnés and Ramírez-Castaño (2024) highlight the challenges students face in virtual environments due to inadequate technological

infrastructure and insufficient technical support. These shortcomings generate frustration and disconnection and affect students' motivation and academic performance by hindering their active participation in the educational process. The digital divide, including inconsistent internet access and the availability of digital tools, has been identified as a factor exacerbating these difficulties (Bai & Wang, 2022; Pop et al., 2018). Additionally, Hibbs et al. (2024) emphasise that technological limitations in particular educational contexts increase students' stress and erode their confidence in adapting to virtual learning environments. Keane et al. (2023) underline that students familiar with digital tools integrate more easily into the university environment, fostering a smoother and more satisfying educational experience. Moreover, robust technological infrastructure ensuring reliable access to resources and digital platforms facilitates students' active participation and improves their perceptions of educational quality (Campbell-Meier & Velasquez, 2024; Izquierdo-Yusta et al., 2021). In this context, technological accessibility and continuous technical support are key factors in reducing the digital divide and promoting an inclusive and equitable environment in higher education.

In addition, research has identified that students' personal and professional development is a central dimension of their educational experience. It has been found that student satisfaction is a mediator between educational quality and emotional well-being and a key predictor of academic success and institutional loyalty (Dropulić et al., 2021; Teeroovengadum et al., 2023). This approach has been supported by studies emphasising the importance of holistic development encompassing both academic aspects and ethical and social values. For example, research by Mireles and García (2022) suggests that promoting students' holistic development contributes to higher retention and loyalty to the university by providing them with the tools needed to face professional and civic challenges. Furthermore, there is an emphasis on the importance of social responsibility and ethical growth as key to preparing students to be responsible and committed citizens, thereby extending the impact of higher education beyond the classroom (Jones, 2018).

Finally, the hidden curriculum concept has gained relevance in studies on the student experience. It has been noted that implicit power dynamics in the physical and organisational design of institutions influence how students perceive their role within the university (Jandrić & Loretto, 2021). This phenomenon has been examined from a perspective that considers academic interactions and how educational and social spaces shape students' perceptions of inclusion and belonging (Dropulić et al., 2021; Pinna et al., 2023). In this sense, the spatial design and its connection to institutional values can profoundly affect how students integrate and participate in the university community (Teeroovengadum et al., 2023). Studies such as those by Pop et al. (2018) have highlighted that an inclusive educational environment, both physically and socially, not only fosters collaboration but also improves emotional well-being and a sense of belonging, which are key to student satisfaction. This reinforces the idea that spatial organisation and institutional practices should align to address both the academic and social needs of students, promoting an environment that supports full integration.

3. Methodology

This study aimed to provide a critical and evidence-based perspective for designing institutional policies and strategies to improve the quality of the educational experience, promote student retention, and prepare students to address academic and social challenges effectively. To achieve this, a quantitative and cross-sectional research design was developed. The instrument, sample, and data analysis are detailed below.

3.1 Instrument

The instrument used in this study was developed by Xu et al. (2018) and validated in Spanish by Amado-Mateus et al. (2023). It evaluates the student experience across six factors and 22 observable variables. The

first factor, student-centred service, addresses both the teaching and learning processes and the support provided by administrative processes. The second, diversity and global citizenship, focuses on evaluating the inclusion of diverse cultural perspectives, promoting global citizenship, and preparing students to engage in multicultural and international contexts. The third, co-production of experience and learning, considers the active role of students in their educational process. The fourth factor, teacher dependence, explores aspects of the student-teacher relationship, including knowledge transmission and teaching methods. The fifth factor, accountability, relates to students' behaviours in taking academic responsibility for themselves and others. Finally, the sixth factor, whole-person development, considers conditions fostering the formation of more well-rounded individuals.

The observable variables are presented in Table 1. Each variable was evaluated on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, where 1 represented total disagreement and five total agreement.

Table 1. Instrument Items Based on Amado-Mateus et al. (2023)

Factors	Code	English Items	Spanish Items
1.Student-centred service	SCE1	Teaching is student-centred.	En mi universidad la enseñanza está centrada en el estudiante
	SCE2	The school/university provides good service to me.	Mi universidad me brinda un buen servicio
	SCE3	The school/university provides enough administrative support to me.	Mi universidad me brinda suficiente apoyo administrativo
	SCE4	The school/university cares about the students.	Mi universidad se preocupa por los estudiantes
Diversity and global citizenship	DYC1	I am aware of the future state of the hospitality and tourism industry.	Soy consciente del estado futuro de la industria para la cual me estoy formando
	DYC2	I can share with future students some information about the school and university education.	Puedo compartir con futuros estudiantes información sobre la educación escolar y universitaria
	DYC3	The school/university helps me develop local and global citizenship.	Mi universidad me ayuda a desarrollar la ciudadanía local y global
	DYC4	The school/university helps me recognize cultural differences.	Mi universidad me ayuda a reconocer las diferencias culturales
	DYC5	I have the opportunity to learn from other students.	Tengo la oportunidad de aprender de otros estudiantes
Co-production of experience and learning	CPEA1	I can express my rights and opinion.	Puedo expresar mis derechos y opiniones
	CPEA2	I contribute to the learning in class.	Contribuyo al aprendizaje en clase
	CPEA3	I actively participate in group projects and class discussions.	Participo activamente en proyectos grupales y debates en clase
	CPEA4	I teach my fellow students.	Enseño a mis compañeros de estudio
	CPEA5	I can play the role of leader.	Puedo desempeñar el papel de líder
Teacher dependence	DDM1	Teachers provide suggestions to my personal and life issues.	Los profesores proporcionan sugerencias para mis problemas personales y de vida
	DDM2	Teachers motivate me to learn.	Los profesores me motivan a aprender
	DDM3	The teachers provide me with everything I need to learn.	Los profesores me proporcionan todo lo que necesito aprender
	DDM4	The teachers use ways which appeal to our generation to teach us.	Los profesores usan formas que atraen a nuestra generación para enseñarnos
Accountability	RES1	I am trained to take responsibilities for other people.	Estoy capacitado para asumir responsabilidades para otras personas
	RES2	I am trained to be responsible for myself.	Estoy capacitado para ser responsable de mí mismo
	RES3	I am trained to fix problems by myself.	Estoy capacitado para solucionar problemas por mí mismo
6.Whole-person development	DIP1	The school/university is a small community where I perform civil responsibility.	Mi universidad es una pequeña comunidad donde realizo responsabilidad social
	DIP2	The school/university creates all-rounded students.	Mi universidad crea estudiantes integrales
	DIP3	The school/university creates ethical students.	Mi universidad fomenta el comportamiento ético de los estudiantes

Before applying the instrument, participants signed digital informed consent forms to confirm their voluntary involvement in the study.

3.2 Sample

The sample consisted of higher education students from both high-quality accredited institutions and non-accredited institutions. A non-probabilistic incidental sampling method was employed, and students who were available and willing to participate during data collection were selected. Based on the parameters established by Cohen et al. (2002), which suggest a minimum sample size of 10 students per item for exploratory studies, a minimum of 230 students was determined. The total sample collected consisted of 484 students. Table 2 presents the characteristics of the study participants.

Table 2. Sample Characteristics

Characteristic	Results
Status IES	Accredited: 268 (55.4%) No accredited: 216 (44.6%)
Academic Semester	1-4: 260 (53.7%) 5-10: 224 (46.3%)
age	18 y 21 years old: 328 (67.8%) between 22 and 25 years old: 88 (18.2%) older than 25 years old: 68 (14%)
Socioeconomic Stratum	1: 13 (2.7%) 2: 114 (23.6%) 3: 167 (34.5%) 4: 116 (24%) 5: 57 (11.8%) 6: 17 (3.5%)

3.3 Data Analysis

To achieve the research objective, a hierarchical clustering model was used to categorise students based on their perceptions of each variable in the instrument. Hierarchical clustering is an unsupervised method that organises data into a hierarchical system of clusters, grouping the most similar observations at successive levels until forming a dendrogram or hierarchical tree (Kaufman & Rousseeuw, 2009). The Ward clustering method was used, a technique that minimises within-group variability to ensure that the grouped elements share the highest possible similarity. This approach relies on variance analysis to evaluate distances between clusters to minimise the sum of squared intra-cluster differences at each fusion step (Everitt et al., 2011; Ward Jr., 1963). Squared Euclidean distance was employed as the similarity measure, allowing the smallest sum of squared distances within each resulting group. The number of clusters was determined by applying a cut-off point to the dendrogram, selecting a level where a significant increase in fusion distances was observed.

After determining the number of clusters, differences in the evaluated variables between clusters were assessed using the Kruskal-Wallis test. Statistically significant differences were considered for p-values less than 0.05, indicating that at least one pair of clusters showed notable differences in the analysed variable. Finally, a descriptive analysis of each cluster was performed to identify patterns and potential strategies to improve the student experience. SPSS software version 28 was used for statistical analysis, with a 95% confidence interval for all tests.

4. Results

Using the clustering algorithm, three groups were identified by applying a cut-off point at the Euclidean distance of ten. The first group comprised 191 students (39.5%), the second 238 (49.2%), and the third 55 (11.4%). The dendrogram is presented in Figure 1.

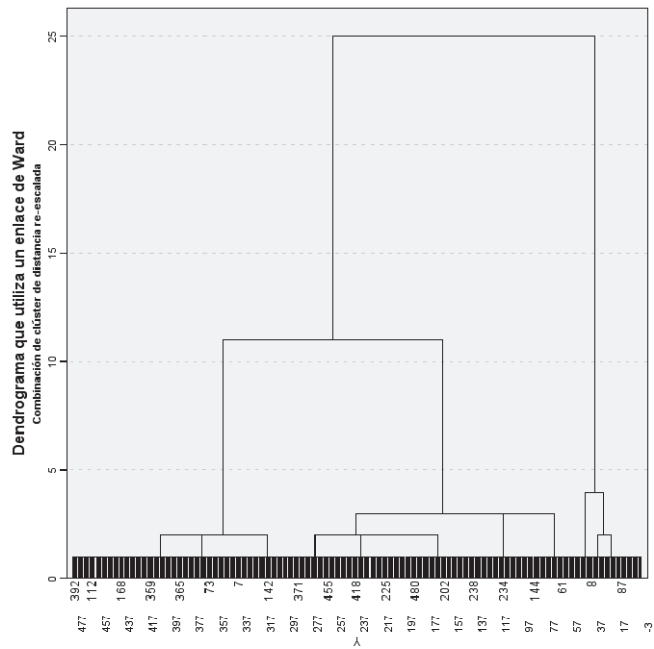


Figure 1. Dendrogram

The Kruskal-Wallis test identified significant differences ($p\text{-value} < 0.01$) among the three clusters for all evaluated variables. The H-statistics obtained revealed that the variable distributions differ significantly among the groups. Table 3 shows the results of these tests.

Table 3. Kruskal-Wallis Non-Parametric Test Results

Code	Kruskal-Wallis H	P-value
SCE ₁	216.95	<0.01
SCE ₂	253.88	<0.01
SCE ₃	215.72	<0.01
SCE ₄	231.49	<0.01
DYC ₁	157.45	<0.01
DYC ₂	202.18	<0.01
DYC ₃	232.57	<0.01
DYC ₄	203.06	<0.01
DYC ₅	198.22	<0.01
CPEA ₁	164.97	<0.01
CPEA ₂	162.23	<0.01
CPEA ₃	135.57	<0.01
CPEA ₄	130.47	<0.01
CPEA ₅	101.45	<0.01
DDM ₁	148.73	<0.01
DDM ₂	215.27	<0.01
DDM ₃	203.54	<0.01
DDM ₄	221.38	<0.01
RES ₁	122.76	<0.01
RES ₂	109.00	<0.01
RES ₃	66.56	<0.01
DIP ₁	203.71	<0.01
DIP ₂	204.03	<0.01

4.1 Cluster 1

This group stood out for obtaining the highest scores in variables associated with the university experience. In the domain of student-centred service, 79.6% (n = 152) of the participants perceived that teaching was oriented towards students. Regarding the perception of service, 83.8% (n = 160) expressed total agreement, while 15.7% (n = 30) indicated high satisfaction. Concerning administrative support, 64.9% (n = 124) reported complete satisfaction. Additionally, in terms of concern for students, 78.5% (n = 150) fully agreed, followed by 15.7% (n = 30) who expressed a high degree of approval.

For diversity and global citizenship, 67% (n = 128) indicated entire agreement with their awareness of the future state of the industry. Regarding the possibility of sharing educational information, 81.2% (n = 155) expressed total agreement, followed by 17.3% (n = 33) who showed high satisfaction. On the development of local and global citizenship, 78% (n = 149) fully agreed, while 82.7% (n = 158) expressed total agreement on recognising cultural differences.

Regarding co-production of experience and learning, 82.2% (n = 157) believed they could express their rights and opinions. Additionally, 77% (n = 147) agreed with their contribution to learning in class. Concerning participation in group projects and debates, 57.1% (n = 109) expressed total agreement, while 37.2% (n = 71) indicated a high level of satisfaction. Furthermore, 57.6% (n = 110) agreed that they taught their peers, and 70.7% (n = 135) highlighted their performance in leadership roles.

For teacher dependence, 58.6% (n = 112) stated that professors provided suggestions for personal and life problems. Regarding the motivation variable to learn, 75.4% (n = 144) expressed total agreement. Regarding the perception that professors provided adequate resources, 68.6% (n = 131) fully agreed, and 24.6% (n = 47) indicated high satisfaction. Additionally, 66% (n = 126) stated that professors used attractive methods to the current generation.

Regarding accountability, 60.7% (n = 116) reported feeling capable of taking responsibility for others. In terms of personal responsibility, 87.4% (n = 167) expressed total agreement. Regarding the ability to solve problems independently, 71.7% (n = 137) fully agreed. Finally, for whole-person development, 88% (n = 168) considered that their university created well-rounded students, and 91.6% (n = 175) emphasised the promotion of ethical behaviour.

4.2 Cluster 2.

This group stood out for obtaining intermediate positive evaluations in variables related to the university experience. For student-centred service, 51.7% (n = 123) of the students indicated that teaching was oriented towards students. Regarding the perception of service, 55.5% (n = 132) expressed total agreement, while 20.6% (n = 49) indicated a high level of satisfaction. Concerning administrative support, 42.9% (n = 102) reported being completely satisfied. Additionally, in terms of concern for students, 41.6% (n = 99) fully agreed, followed by 18.9% (n = 45) who expressed a high degree of approval.

Regarding diversity and global citizenship, 50.4% (n = 120) expressed total agreement with their awareness of the future state of the industry. Regarding the possibility of sharing educational information, 55.5% (n = 132) expressed total agreement, followed by 28.6% (n = 68) who reported a high level of satisfaction. For the development of local and global citizenship, 55% (n = 131) fully agreed. Finally, 42% (n = 100) reaffirmed their agreement on recognising cultural differences, while 33.2% (n = 79) showed a high level of satisfaction.

Regarding co-production of experience and learning, 47.9% (n = 114) indicated they could express their rights and opinions. Additionally, 49.6% (n = 118) reported full participation in classroom learning. For group projects and debates, 46.6% (n = 111) fully agreed, while 23.5% (n = 56) indicated a high level of satisfaction. Similarly, 47.9% (n = 114) expressed total agreement that they taught their peers, and 49.6% (n = 118) emphasised their performance in leadership roles—followed

by 32.8% (n = 78) who indicated high satisfaction.

Regarding teacher dependence, 36.6% (n = 87) stated that professors provided suggestions for personal and life problems. For motivation to learn, 49.2% (n = 117) expressed total agreement. Regarding the perception that professors provided the necessary resources, 55.9% (n = 133) fully agreed, while 19.3% (n = 46) indicated a high level of satisfaction. Additionally, 47.9% (n = 114) fully agreed that professors used methods attractive to the current generation, followed by 16.8% (n = 40) who indicated considerable satisfaction.

In the area of responsibility, 56.7% (n = 135) said they felt able to assume responsibility for other people. Regarding self-responsibility, 58.4% (n = 139) showed total conformity. Regarding the ability to solve problems autonomously, 50.4% (n = 120) expressed full agreement, while 42.4% (n = 101) indicated high agreement. Regarding integral development, 45.8% (n = 109) indicated that their university forms integral students, while 48.7% (n = 116) emphasized promoting ethical behaviour.

4.3 Cluster 3

This group was characterised by presenting moderate levels in the variables evaluated regarding the university experience. In the domain of student-centred service, 43.6% (n = 24) of the students considered that teaching was student-focused, while 25.5% (n = 14) agreed. Regarding the perception of service, 40% (n = 22) expressed full agreement, followed by 14.5% (n = 8) who indicated a high level of satisfaction. Concerning administrative support, 25.5% (n = 14) stated they were satisfied, while 47.3% (n = 26) reported a moderate level of agreement.

In terms of concern for students, 38.2% (n = 21) fully agreed with this statement, and 34.5% (n = 19) expressed a high level of agreement. For the variable of diversity and global citizenship, 40% (n = 22) expressed full agreement with their awareness of the future state of the industry, and 29.1% (n = 16) indicated a high level of agreement. Regarding the ability to share educational information, 27.3% (n = 15) agreed, followed by 21.8% (n = 12) who reported moderate agreement.

In the development of local and global citizenship, 43.6% (n = 24) agreed, while 27.3% (n = 15) indicated moderate agreement. Finally, for recognising cultural differences, 32.7% (n = 18) expressed full agreement, and an equal percentage (32.7%, n = 18) indicated moderate agreement. For co-production of experience and learning, 38.2% (n = 21) stated that they could exercise their rights and opinions. Regarding their contribution to classroom learning, 38.2% (n = 21) expressed full agreement, while 23.6% (n = 13) reported moderate agreement. In terms of participation in group projects and debates, 45.5% (n = 25) expressed full agreement, and 23.6% (n = 13) noted a high level of agreement. Additionally, 36.4% (n = 20) highlighted full agreement on teaching their peers, while the same percentage (36.4%, n = 20) indicated moderate agreement. Regarding leadership roles, 32.7% (n = 18) expressed full agreement, while 23.6% (n = 13) noted moderate satisfaction.

For teacher dependence, 23.6% (n = 13) reported that professors provided support for personal and life problems. Regarding motivation to learn, 41.8% (n = 23) expressed satisfaction. For the perception that professors provided the necessary resources for learning, 36.4% (n = 20) fully agreed, while 41.8% (n = 23) noted a high level of satisfaction. Additionally, 38.2% (n = 21) expressed full agreement that professors used methods attractive to the current generation, followed by 45.5% (n = 25) who indicated moderate agreement.

In the domain of accountability, 20% (n = 11) reported feeling capable of taking responsibility for others, while 30.9% (n = 17) indicated moderate agreement. Regarding personal responsibility, 23.6% (n = 13) fully agreed, followed by 21.8% (n = 12) who expressed moderate agreement. For the ability to solve problems independently, 23.6% (n = 13) expressed full agreement, while 20% (n = 11) noted a high level of agreement. Finally, regarding whole-person development, 40% (n = 22) expressed that their university fosters integral student development, followed by 29.1% (n = 16) who indicated moderate agreement. For the promotion of ethical behaviour, 49.1% (n = 27) expressed full agreement, while 23.6% (n = 13) reported a high level of satisfaction.

5. Conclusions

This study aimed to analyse students' perceptions of their educational experience in higher education, identifying patterns using hierarchical clustering techniques. The results categorised students into three distinct groups, providing a comprehensive understanding of the variations in their experiences and educational priorities.

Cluster 1, representing 39.5% of the students, exhibited high satisfaction across all evaluated dimensions of the educational experience. Key areas of strength included student-centred service, diversity and global citizenship, co-production of learning, academic accountability, and holistic development. The implementation of participatory and personalised pedagogical methodologies enhances student motivation and commitment, which are essential for academic satisfaction (Clewes, 2003; Dropulić et al., 2021). High-quality teaching combined with effective tutoring systems facilitates skill development and strengthens positive perceptions of the educational experience (Gargallo López et al., 2017; Izquierdo-Yusta et al., 2021). Institutional infrastructure and resources, such as adequate facilities and information technologies, significantly contribute to student well-being and satisfaction, eliminating structural barriers that negatively impact the perception of the educational environment (Gargallo López et al., 2017; Tereshko et al., 2024). Active participation in learning fosters self-regulation, academic responsibility, and the development of leadership and teamwork skills, which increase overall satisfaction with the educational experience (Anyichie, 2018; Dropulić et al., 2021). Additionally, the emphasis on diversity and global citizenship expands intercultural competencies and connects academic training with diverse global contexts, significantly improving the educational experience (Pinna et al., 2023; Tereshko et al., 2024).

Cluster 2, representing 49.2% of the students, reflected intermediate perceptions across all evaluated dimensions of the educational experience, indicating key areas for improvement in educational service, inclusion, and holistic development. While institutions provide adequate services, administrative management, teaching quality, and student-teacher interaction require greater personalisation and individualised attention to achieve a significant positive impact (Izquierdo-Yusta et al., 2021). Regarding diversity and global citizenship, students perceive an inclusive environment but note deficiencies in integrating multicultural perspectives and preparing for globalised settings. The insufficient incorporation of these themes limits the educational experience, as highlighted by Pinna et al. (2023), who stress the need for curricula that promote diversity. In terms of teacher dependence, prevailing pedagogical methods do not sufficiently foster active student participation, affecting their motivation and performance. Co-production of learning, as emphasised by Dropulić et al. (2021), could enhance students' active roles in their education. Finally, holistic development and academic accountability demonstrate a need for programmes that strengthen not only academic competencies but also emotional and social skills, essential for an integrated educational experience (Clewes, 2003; Izquierdo-Yusta et al., 2021). This cluster underscores the urgency of a more inclusive and holistic pedagogical approach to address these key areas and ensure a more enriching educational experience.

Cluster 3, comprising 11.4% of the students, reflected the lowest perceptions across all evaluated dimensions, indicating widespread dissatisfaction with their educational experience. This group stands out for its negative evaluations in areas such as student-centred service, diversity and global citizenship, co-production of learning, teacher dependence, academic accountability, and holistic development. Limited perceptions of student-centred service and the lack of personalised attention in administrative and pedagogical processes are key factors negatively affecting their experience (Izquierdo-Yusta et al., 2021). Similarly, diversity and global citizenship are insufficiently integrated into the curriculum, reducing opportunities to participate in multicultural environments and reinforcing perceptions of exclusion (Pinna et al., 2023). A lack of active engagement in co-production of learning and non-participatory pedagogical methods further limits students' motivation and performance (Dropulić et al., 2021). Additionally, the absence of programmes focused on holistic development hinders the formation of social and emotional competencies essential for

student well-being and academic success (Clewes, 2003).

The findings underscore the need to design targeted interventions tailored to the experiences and priorities of each student group, enabling the optimisation of educational quality in a comprehensive manner. Moreover, the results provide a foundation for innovating pedagogical methodologies, promoting equity, and strengthening holistic development, positioning institutions as inclusive spaces focused on student well-being. This analysis not only identifies challenges but also offers a clear path toward practical and measurable solutions.

6. Discussion

The three clusters identified in this study reveal variations in student satisfaction, enabling reflection on the structural and pedagogical factors that shape these experiences. They also prompt an analysis of the key dimensions needed to understand how the evaluated factors influence the student experience and their relationship with existing theories. These dimensions, far from being independent, interact to impact the identified clusters in different ways, demonstrating the complexity of the higher education experience. Below is an analysis of each cluster:

The student-centred service factor emerges in this study as a key element for satisfaction and institutional commitment, particularly evident in Cluster 1, which reflects a highly positive evaluation. This result directly supports Vargo and Lusch's (2004) Service-Dominant Logic (SDL) Theory by providing empirical evidence of how a personalised approach and the co-creation of value between the institution and the student enhance the educational experience. Furthermore, the findings from Cluster 1 reinforce the importance of aligning pedagogical and administrative practices with student expectations to foster their loyalty to the university (Izquierdo-Yusta et al., 2021; Pinna et al., 2023). Conversely, the critical perceptions identified in Clusters 2 and 3 reveal the consequences of deficiencies in this factor, highlighting how these limitations reduce perceived value and student commitment, aligning with Douglas et al.'s (2008) Service Theory. In this sense, this study expands the understanding of these theories by demonstrating the need for reliable and responsive institutional strategies that improve the educational experience and address the demands of a diverse and inclusive academic environment.

Regarding the diversity and global citizenship dimension, this study complements Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) Theory by demonstrating that the inclusion of multicultural stimuli in curricula can generate positive emotional responses that directly impact the perception of the educational environment. Cluster 1, which reflects positive evaluations of this dimension, underscores the importance of incorporating global perspectives into university training, while the criticisms in Clusters 2 and 3 highlight the need for a more inclusive curriculum design, as proposed by authors like Matus et al. (2021). This analysis also extends Kolb's (2001) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) by showing how multicultural experiences enrich learning and foster intercultural competencies essential in a globalised environment (Dropulić et al., 2021).

Co-production of learning, identified as a strength in Cluster 1, aligns with Vargo and Lusch's (2004) Co-Creation Theory, positioning the student as a key actor in constructing their educational experience. This finding also reinforces Experiential Learning Theory, which highlights that active and reflective student participation not only transforms experiences into practical knowledge but also strengthens their motivation and academic commitment (Anyichie, 2018; Pinna et al., 2023). Conversely, Clusters 2 and 3 reflect passivity in this dimension, possibly attributed to the persistence of traditional pedagogical methodologies, reinforcing the need for participatory and personalised approaches.

Holistic development, which combines academic, social, and emotional competencies, is validated in this study by demonstrating its impact on student well-being, particularly in Cluster 1. This finding complements Diener's (1994) Bottom-Up Vertical Spillover Theory, which establishes how positive experiences in specific subdomains, such as education, contribute to overall well-being. However, the results from Clusters 2 and 3 highlight deficiencies in comprehensive programmes,

emphasising the importance of designing policies that promote more holistic training (Matus et al., 2021; Pinna et al., 2023). Similarly, this study extends Jackson's (1968) Hidden Curriculum Theory by demonstrating how implicit interactions and institutional dynamics influence student perception, highlighting the need to create inclusive and supportive environments (Jandrić & Loretto, 2021).

Finally, infrastructure and technological resources emerged as determining factors in the educational experience, especially for Cluster 1, which reported high satisfaction in this dimension. This result aligns with Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) Theory, which explains how a well-designed educational environment can generate positive perceptions, and Oliver's (1980) Expectation Confirmation Theory (EDT), which demonstrates that student satisfaction increases when expectations regarding infrastructure and resources are met or exceeded. In contrast, the criticisms in Clusters 2 and 3 highlight the consequences of unmet expectations, reaffirming the urgency of investing in more equitable and accessible technologies and educational spaces (Izquierdo-Yusta et al., 2021).

The findings of this study reinforce and expand prior knowledge about the student experience in higher education. The high satisfaction in Cluster 1, linked to personalised services and adequate infrastructure, aligns with the observations of Clewes (2003) and Pinna et al. (2023), who emphasise the importance of student-centred pedagogical methodologies and well-equipped environments. Conversely, the intermediate and low perceptions in Clusters 2 and 3 underscore the persistence of structural and pedagogical barriers, supporting critiques by Matus et al. (2021) and Pop et al. (2018) on the need for a more integrated and equitable approach. This study contributes to the existing literature by identifying how student experiences vary based on institutional and personal factors, providing concrete evidence of the importance of segmenting strategies to address the specific needs of each group.

In line with recent experiences in Latin America and other regions, the findings of this study align with a global trend advocating for differentiated policy design to address diverse student trajectories. In Colombia and Spain, research has shown that access to public higher education continues to be shaped by structural inequalities that disproportionately affect vulnerable groups, underscoring the need for targeted and segmented strategies (Martínez-Garrido & Márquez-Ortiz, 2024). Complementarily, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean — or CEPAL, by its Spanish acronym — (CEPAL, 2022) warns that significant inclusion gaps persist across the region, especially in terms of gender and socioeconomic background. These concerns are echoed in the regional report Higher Education in Latin America (Aveleyra, 2023), which calls for institutional policies that recognise and accommodate student diversity. Internationally, countries such as Uzbekistan have introduced inclusive reforms to support students with special needs, while the European Commission (2024) promotes a connected and inclusive higher education framework across member states. These experiences validate the segmentation approach used in this study as a strategic tool to enhance equity and student well-being through institutional planning.

Likewise, the findings also provide concrete guidance for long-term institutional planning. The distinct student profiles identified call for differentiated strategies that respond to the specific needs and experiences of each group. For instance, Cluster 3 students may benefit from urgent interventions that address exclusion, low engagement, and weak academic support, while Cluster 2 students require medium-term improvements in co-creation and global citizenship development. By aligning these findings with policy formulation, higher education institutions can design long-term strategies that reduce dropout rates, improve equity, and build inclusive environments centred on student well-being. Evidence-based segmentation models such as the one applied in this study can become strategic tools for decision-makers aiming to implement sustainable, context-sensitive reforms.

7. Practical Implications

The results suggest several practical strategies to improve the student experience. First, institutions should implement personalised services that address the specific needs of each cluster, aligning with

the Service-Dominant Logic (SDL) Theory to promote value co-creation. This includes strengthening tutoring systems, integrating multicultural perspectives into curricula, and designing programmes that foster holistic development. Additionally, it is recommended to prioritise investment in technological and physical infrastructure to reduce gaps in access to essential resources, especially for students in Clusters 2 and 3. Institutional policies should also focus on training faculty in participatory methodologies and fostering a culture of inclusion and diversity, ensuring that all students feel represented and supported. These measures can be implemented gradually, starting with pilot projects targeting the least satisfied groups.

8. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although this study provides valuable insights into student perceptions using hierarchical clustering techniques, it has certain limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to evaluate how student perceptions evolve over time. This underscores the need for longitudinal studies to analyse how institutional interventions impact student perceptions and experiences in the medium and long term.

Another significant limitation is that, although the instrument used has been previously validated, the study focused on specific dimensions of the student experience. Future research could expand this approach to include external factors, such as family environment, work responsibilities, or socio-economic context, which may significantly influence students' perceptions and behaviours. Additionally, the scope of this study was limited to a particular geographic context. Extending the analysis to international contexts could explore how cultural, organisational, and regulatory differences affect the educational experience, providing a broader framework for understanding the diversity of student perceptions in different settings.

Finally, incorporating qualitative methodologies in future research could complement the findings, offering a deeper and more detailed understanding of individual student experiences. Qualitative studies, such as in-depth interviews or focus groups, could explore the underlying mechanisms that explain differences between clusters and how these relate to institutional policies and practices. This approach could be particularly valuable for identifying the perceptions and experiences of students in Clusters 2 and 3, whose satisfaction was lower, and for generating more specific and effective recommendations for improvement. Adopting a mixed-methods design would therefore allow researchers to capture both the statistical patterns and the subjective narratives that shape the student experience, enhancing the comprehensiveness and contextual relevance of future studies.

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