



## Access to higher education and students' phenomenological experiences

### Ingreso a la educación superior y experiencias fenomenológicas de los estudiantes

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#### ABSTRACT

Entering higher education is often a complex experience involving academic and personal changes. The purpose of this study is to reveal the phenomenological experiences of Colombian students in their process of entering higher education. Through interviews with students from Comuna 8 in Medellín and following Van Manen's methodology, seven 'motives for living' were identified: i) desire for social mobility, ii) vocation as a driving force, iii) emotional independence, iv) fear of the unknown, v) existential economic obstacles, vi) perceived academic fragility, vii) desire for emotional support. University admission constitutes an existential transformation that transcends the academic, manifesting itself in four dimensions: i) temporality (horizon of hope and uncertainty), ii) spatiality (territory of adaptation), iii) relationality (need for emotional support), and iv) corporeality (physical manifestations of stress). The university is revealed as an existential territory where family aspirations and processes of identity reconfiguration converge.

**Descriptors:** admission requirements; educational management; educational planning. (Source: UNESCO Thesaurus).

#### RESUMEN

El ingreso a la educación superior suele ser una experiencia compleja que implica cambios académicos y personales. Este estudio tiene como propósito de investigación develar las experiencias fenomenológicas de estudiantes colombianos en su proceso de ingreso a la educación superior. Mediante entrevistas con estudiantes de la Comuna 8 de Medellín y siguiendo la metodología de Van Manen, se identificaron siete "motivos del vivir": i) anhelo de movilidad social, ii) vocación como motor vital, iii) independencia emocional, iv) miedo a lo incierto, v) obstáculo económico existencial, vi) fragilidad académica sentida, vii) deseo de acompañamiento afectivo. El ingreso universitario constituye una transformación existencial que trasciende lo académico, manifestándose en cuatro dimensiones: i) temporalidad (horizonte de esperanza e incertidumbre), ii) espacialidad (territorio de adaptación), iii) relacionalidad (necesidad de contención emocional) y iv) corporalidad (manifestaciones físicas de estrés). La universidad se devela como territorio existencial donde convergen aspiraciones familiares y procesos de reconfiguración identitaria.

**Descriptorios:** condiciones de admisión; gestión educacional; planificación de la educación. (Fuente: Tesoro UNESCO).

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## INTRODUCTION

Entering higher education can be a stressful experience for students, characterised by transformations that transcend the purely academic, as it involves a complex phenomenon where aspirations, fears, socio-economic challenges and identity-building processes converge, which need to be understood from the lived experience of those going through it. However, in Colombia, access to higher education is framed within a context of deep social and territorial inequalities that shape different experiences depending on the socioeconomic, ethnic and geographical background of students. In fact, the country has reached historic figures in university enrolment, with 2,475,833 students in higher education by 2023, representing an increase of 0.4% compared to 2022 and constituting the highest number of students ever served by the system (Ministry of National Education, Vice-Ministry of Higher Education, Sub-Directorate of Sectoral Development, 2024). Particularly significant is the fact that the higher education coverage rate stood at 55.38% in 2023, the highest level in the historical series, representing a growth of 0.45 percentage points compared to 2022 and returning to the growth path that had not been seen since 2017.

However, these advances also reveal the complexities of the Colombian education system. Thus, while the postgraduate level experienced significant growth of 7.4% (13,395 additional students), undergraduate enrolment showed a slight decrease of 0.17% (3,790 fewer students), mainly due to the reduction in the technological level. Consequently, these figures show that, despite advances in overall coverage, approximately 45% of young people of university age still do not have access to this level of education, with the greatest limitations concentrated in rural, Afro-descendant and indigenous populations (Ministry of National Education, Vice-Ministry of Higher Education, Sub-Directorate for Sectoral Development, 2024).

On the other hand, the determinants of access to higher education in Colombia have been widely documented. In this regard, Acevedo et al. (2008) identify economic, academic and family factors as central elements in educational demand, while more recent studies show how the country's structural inequalities are reproduced in the university sphere. In particular, rural education presents specific challenges for the transition to higher education (Herrera Arias & Rivera Alarcón, 2020), characterised by limitations in infrastructure, educational quality and opportunities to prepare for entrance exams.

Likewise, the experiences of specific populations reveal the complexity of the Colombian landscape. In this regard, Afro-descendant students face additional barriers related to discrimination and a lack of effective inclusion programmes (Escobar, 2021), while women, despite representing 54% of university enrolment, continue to face challenges in traditionally male-dominated areas (Garavito et al., 2018). Meanwhile, first-generation students, who are particularly numerous in vulnerable contexts, navigate unfamiliar institutional systems without family members to guide them through the process (Flanagan-Bórquez, 2017).

Equally worrying, the psychosocial context of university admission in Colombia presents alarming characteristics. In this regard, González et al. (2019) document high levels of depression, anxiety and stress among new students, phenomena that are intensified in contexts of socioeconomic vulnerability. Therefore, it is clear that the transition to university is an experience that affects students holistically, requiring comprehensive approaches that transcend the purely academic.

Public policies have attempted to democratise access through programmes such as 'Ser Pilo Paga' (Ruiz & Ramírez, 2017), but their impact on students' lived experiences requires greater phenomenological understanding. It should be noted that research has favoured quantitative approaches focused on academic results and access rates, leaving a gap in the understanding of how students existentially inhabit this transition process.

Against this backdrop, hermeneutic phenomenology emerges as a relevant theoretical and methodological perspective for addressing these experiences in the Colombian context.

Similarly, studies such as those by Castillo-Sanguino & Montes-Sosa (2018) have explored the lived experience of new students, while Vázquez-Rodríguez (2023) has examined experiences of sudden changes in the educational context. Indeed, these works demonstrate the richness of the phenomenological approach for understanding the structures of meaning that underlie educational experiences in Latin American contexts.

Consequently, the present study is situated within this framework, with the research purpose of revealing the phenomenological experiences of Colombian students in their process of entering higher education.

### **Theoretical reference**

To begin with, the Colombian higher education system is characterised by institutional heterogeneity and profound inequalities in access that reflect the country's social structures. In this context, García-García (2013) points out that 'equity and inclusiveness in higher education in Andean countries, including Colombia, face structural challenges related to poverty, social exclusion and territorial gaps' (p. 140). This situation creates a context in which university admission experiences are mediated by socioeconomic, ethnic, and geographical factors that determine not only access but also students' subjective experiences.

On the other hand, the processes of admission to higher education in Colombia have undergone significant changes with the implementation of computerised systems and standardised tests. In this regard, García-Ojalvo et al. (2020) document how these systems, while modernising processes, have also generated new forms of exclusion for students from vulnerable backgrounds who are unfamiliar with digital technologies. Complementarily, the analysis by Pérez-Pulido et al. (2016) on the results of state tests shows how previous educational inequalities are reproduced in university selection mechanisms.

### **Hermeneutic phenomenology and educational experience in Latin American contexts**

From a theoretical perspective, hermeneutic phenomenology, as conceptualised by Van Manen (2003, 2016), offers a fundamental framework for understanding educational experiences in Latin American contexts characterised by cultural diversity and social inequalities. In the author's words, Van Manen (2003) argues that 'hermeneutic phenomenology is not a simple research technique; it is a way of living reflectively in the world and relating to it in an ethical and comprehensive manner' (p. 45). This approach is therefore particularly appropriate for exploring experiences of entry into higher education in Colombia, as it allows us to capture the structures of meaning that underlie student experiences in vulnerable contexts.

Additionally, the application of phenomenology in Latin American educational research has demonstrated its potential to reveal hidden dimensions of human experience. In this sense, Castillo-López et al. (2022) highlight in their systematic review that the phenomenological method allows 'access to the understanding of educational phenomena from the perspective of those who experience them, revealing structures of meaning that remain hidden in more traditional approaches' (p. 252). Consequently, this perspective is fundamental to understanding how Colombian students existentially inhabit their transition to higher education.

Elaborating on this line of thought, Jiménez & Valle Vázquez (2017) conceptualise education as a phenomenological experience in the Latin American context, arguing that 'education is not simply a process of knowledge transmission, but a lived experience that transforms the very existence of the subject, particularly in contexts where it represents an opportunity for social mobility' (p. 260).

Therefore, this understanding is fundamental to addressing university admission in Colombia as a phenomenon that transcends the academic realm to become an existential transformation with family and community implications.

### **Experiences of admission in contexts of socioeconomic vulnerability**

With regard to the particularities of the context, the specialised literature has documented the characteristics that define admission to higher education in contexts of socioeconomic



vulnerability in Colombia. Specifically, first-generation students, who are particularly numerous in the country, face specific challenges related to 'the lack of family cultural capital, the absence of close role models, and the need to navigate unfamiliar institutional systems' (Flanagan-Bórquez, 2017, p. 95). Certainly, in the Colombian context, these challenges are intensified by persistent structural inequalities that limit educational opportunities from basic education onwards.

Particularly relevant, Herrera Arias & Rivera Alarcón (2020) identify that rural education in Colombia presents specific obstacles to the transition to higher education, including 'limitations in academic preparation, geographical access difficulties, limited connectivity, and economic barriers that condition the possibilities of educational continuity' (p. 92). Consequently, these conditions shape differentiated experiences where university admission represents not only an educational transition but also a geographical and cultural migration that involves complex adaptation processes. From a psychological perspective, the emotional aspects of this transition have been specifically documented in the Colombian context by González et al. (2019), who identify high levels of depression, anxiety and stress among new students. These findings therefore show that university admission is an experience that affects Colombian students in a comprehensive manner, requiring comprehensive approaches that recognise the particularities of the national context.

### **Vocational guidance and academic performance in the transition to university**

Within the context of the transition to higher education, vocational guidance is a fundamental element that mediates students' experiences during their admission to university. In this regard, Camacho & Rubio (2007) point out that 'the professional guidance of students entering higher education is a comprehensive process that transcends the mere selection of a career to become an existential accompaniment that facilitates adaptation to the new academic context' (p. 18). Therefore, this guiding dimension becomes particularly relevant in vulnerable contexts where students lack family members with university experience.

Complementarily, academic performance during the first years of university reflects the complexity of factors that influence the student experience. In this regard, Ramírez (2014) identifies that 'the factors associated with academic performance according to the level of undergraduate education and gender of higher education students in Colombia show significant differences that need to be understood from a comprehensive perspective' (p. 210). Specifically, this author documents how socioeconomic, gender and prior academic preparation variables interact to shape different trajectories of university success or failure.

From a broader perspective, the experiences of first-generation students and their assessment of institutional support programmes reveal additional dimensions of this transition. In this context, Guerrero-Valenzuela et al. (2022) document that 'the experiences of first-generation university students and their assessment of affirmative action programmes highlight the need for comprehensive support that addresses both the academic and existential dimensions of the university transition' (p. 145). Consequently, these contributions suggest that the most effective support programmes are those that recognise the phenomenological complexity of the student experience.

In summary, the convergence between vocational guidance, academic performance and support programmes constitutes a fundamental field of understanding for addressing the experiences of entry into higher education from a phenomenological perspective. In this way, these elements not only influence academic outcomes but also mediate students' existential experiences during their adaptation to the university context, particularly in populations facing multiple social and economic vulnerabilities.

### **Ethnic diversity and differentiated experiences**

In terms of ethnic diversity, Colombia is characterised by its cultural plurality, which shapes differentiated experiences of access to higher education. In this regard, Escobar (2021) documents the experiences of Afro-descendant students, identifying that 'the social inclusion of this population requires not only access policies, but also institutional transformations that



recognise and value cultural diversity' (p. 235). These experiences reveal how ethnic identities mediate university experiences, generating both additional challenges and specific cultural strengths.

At the same time, the experiences of women in Colombian higher education have particular characteristics. In this context, Garavito et al. (2018) point out that, despite representing the majority of university enrolment, women continue to face 'cultural and structural barriers that limit their participation in certain areas of knowledge and condition their professional trajectories' (p. 250). Consequently, these gender dynamics shape specific experiences that need to be understood from a phenomenological perspective.

### **Inclusion policies and student experiences in Colombia**

In terms of educational policies, affirmative action initiatives in higher education in Colombia have sought to democratise access. However, their impact on students' lived experiences requires greater phenomenological understanding. Specifically, the 'Ser Pilo Paga' programme, analysed by Ruiz & Ramírez (2017), represented a significant effort to expand access, but also generated debates about its effectiveness and sustainability. According to these authors, 'beyond quantitative results, it is necessary to understand how beneficiary students subjectively experience these programmes' (p. 12). Complementing this view, Jiménez-Quiñones (2024) advocates integrating phenomenology and intersectionality into the study of university affirmative action policies, emphasising the importance of 'understanding how students subjectively experience inclusion programmes, considering the intersections between class, race, gender and territory that characterise the Colombian context' (p. 15). In this way, the author recognises that student experiences cannot be understood in isolation, but must be analysed considering how multiple forms of inequality intertwine to shape specific experiences of access to and permanence in university. Student movement and meaning-making.

Additionally, the Colombian context is characterised by a tradition of student mobilisation that shapes specific experiences of meaning-making about higher education. In this regard, Serrano-Rojas (2019) documents how 'the political participation of the student movement in Medellín reveals imaginaries about higher education that transcend the individual to become collective projects of social transformation' (p. 78). Therefore, this political dimension of the university experience adds complexity to student experiences, particularly in urban contexts such as Medellín.

### **Leveling and preparation programmes**

In this regard, the need for leveling programmes for students entering higher education has been recognised in the Colombian context. In this regard, Alvarado-Bejarano & Quirós-Vargas (2021) document experiences of levelling courses that seek to 'academically and emotionally prepare students for their transition to university, recognising previous educational gaps' (p. 92). Indeed, these programmes demonstrate institutional recognition that university admission requires comprehensive support.

### **METHOD**

The methodological approach was based on Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology (2016), as this approach allowed us to explore human experiences in their deepest essence. As Van Manen (2003) pointed out, 'hermeneutic phenomenology is not a simple research technique; it is a way of living reflectively in the world and relating to it in an ethical and comprehensive manner.' This method proved particularly appropriate for capturing the 'motives for living' that we identified in the results, allowing us to understand how students existentially inhabited their transition to higher education.

We adopted a non-experimental, descriptive and cross-sectional design, consistent with the four existential dimensions that emerged in our results (temporality, spatiality, relationality and corporeality). This approach allowed us to explore the phenomena as they presented themselves in their natural context, respecting the uniqueness of our participants' human experiences.

In terms of information collection techniques, in-depth interviews were our main technique, selected for their ability to capture the subjective experiences that emerged as 'reasons for living' in the results. Following Van Manen (2014), these interviews did not seek to explain or predict, but rather to 'clarify and understand the meaning of human experiences as they are lived.' Therefore, we designed open-ended questions to explore the three dimensions that we subsequently analysed in the results:

- a) Imaginaries and desires regarding the university experience
- b) Perceived challenges upon admission
- c) Support needed for successful admission

We selected our participants through intentional sampling of secondary school and university students from Comuna 8 in Medellín (Caicedo, La Sierra and Villatina neighbourhoods), following the principle of theoretical saturation. This selection allowed us to capture the diversity of experiences that were later reflected in the seven 'reasons for living' identified in the results.

Our analysis of the information followed Van Manen's method, which integrates description and hermeneutics to capture both explicit and implicit meanings. This process allowed us to identify emerging thematic structures (the 'reasons for living') and develop the semantic networks and maps of meaning that we present in the results.

We used ATLAS.ti software to facilitate the organisation of the narratives and the construction of the interpretative networks that revealed the connections between motives such as 'desire for social mobility', 'vocation as a driving force' and 'fear of the unknown', allowing us to understand the experience from the four existential dimensions identified in our results. Therefore, this phenomenological-hermeneutic methodology allowed us to reveal the complexity of the students' experiences, transcending mere thematic coding to achieve an understanding of how they existentially inhabited their transition process to higher education.

## RESULTS

Van Manen's approach allows us to interpret the profound experiences of students during their transition to higher education, revealing how they existentially inhabit this critical process. It is presented as follows:

Identified reasons for living

The testimonies revealed seven fundamental thematic structures:

1. Desire for social mobility: 'I hope it will allow me to help my family get ahead.'
2. Vocation as a driving force: 'I want to study something I'm passionate about, like engineering.'
3. Emotional independence: 'I'm excited about making my own decisions.'
4. Fear of the unknown: 'I'm excited about studying, but I'm afraid I'm not prepared.'
5. Existential economic obstacle: 'I'm worried about not being able to pay for transportation or materials.'
6. Perceived academic fragility: 'I feel that school did not prepare me well enough.'
7. Desire for emotional support: 'It would be helpful to receive psychological help for stress.'

### Triangulation and analysis

Triangulation between the narratives of secondary school and university students revealed convergences in the desire for social mobility and anxiety about the future. Analysis by question revealed:

- a) Imaginaries: University as a space for personal transformation and a territory of challenges.

- b) Perceived challenges: Anxiety, economic pressure, and lack of academic preparation.
- c) Necessary support: Emotional support, vocational guidance, and academic preparation.

### **Existential interpretation**

University admission represents a transformation that affects four existential dimensions:

1. Temporality: The future as a horizon of hope and uncertainty.
2. Spatiality: University as a challenging place that requires adaptation.
3. Relationality: Need for emotional support networks.
4. Corporeality: Physical manifestations of stress and anxiety.

This transition is a human experience that transcends the academic realm, requiring comprehensive support that recognises both the vulnerability and the hope of students.

### **PHENOMENOLOGICAL THEORETICAL ANALYSIS**

Phenomenological experiences reveal that entering higher education in contexts of socioeconomic vulnerability is a complex existential phenomenon that transcends purely academic or economic dimensions. In this sense, the seven 'reasons for living' identified form a structure of meaning that shows how students existentially inhabit their university transition, revealing the deep interconnection between life aspirations, existential fears, and identity-building processes.

This demonstrates the relevance of Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology for understanding educational experiences in Latin American contexts. In this order, the identification of the four existential dimensions (temporality, spatiality, relationality and corporeality) validates the theoretical proposal that education constitutes a lived experience that transforms the very existence of the subject (Jiménez & Valle Vázquez, 2017).

It is particularly significant that the 'desire for social mobility' emerges as a central motive, confirming the observations of García-García (2013) on how structural inequalities mediate university experiences in Andean countries. Therefore, it is evident that, for students in Comuna 8, the university is not only an educational institution but also an existential territory of transformation where family hopes and life projects converge.

### **Existential dimensions and social vulnerability**

The manifestation of physicality through stress and anxiety confirms the contributions of González et al. (2019) on the psychosocial aspects of university admission in Colombia. However, our results deepen this understanding by revealing how these physical manifestations are expressions of an existential vulnerability that transcends the individual to reflect structural conditions of inequality. Therefore, temporality as a 'horizon of hope and uncertainty' highlights the complexity of living in a present marked by economic limitations while projecting a future of social transformation. This temporal tension reflects what Flanagan-Bórquez (2017) identifies as the specific experience of first-generation students navigating unfamiliar systems.

### **Implications for understanding the Colombian context**

Phenomenological experiences reveal that inclusion policies, such as those analysed by Ruiz & Ramírez (2017), require a more comprehensive phenomenological understanding of student experiences. In this context, the identified 'desire for emotional support' suggests that the most effective support programmes are those that recognise the integral nature of the human experience, confirming the observations of Guerrero-Valenzuela et al. (2022).

On the other hand, the emergence of the 'existential economic obstacle' as a fundamental motive shows that economic barriers are not simply material limitations, but existential threats that condition the very possibility of projecting a different future. This understanding deepens



quantitative analyses of university access by revealing the structures of meaning that underlie coverage statistics.

### **Emerging theoretical contributions**

Phenomenological experiences reveal the need to conceptualise university admission in contexts of vulnerability as a process of existential habitation that involves:

1. Identity reconfiguration: Students not only access knowledge, but also reconstruct their understanding of themselves and their life possibilities.
2. Territorial mediation: The university as a physical and symbolic space that requires complex processes of cultural and geographical adaptation.
3. Construction of futurity: The ability to project temporal horizons different from those determined by conditions of origin.

### **Limitations and projections**

Although phenomenological experiences reveal the experiences in Comuna 8 in Medellín, the transferability of these contributions to other Colombian contexts requires additional research that considers the regional and ethnic particularities documented by Escobar (2021) and Herrera Arias & Rivera Alarcón (2020). In this sense, the phenomenological methodology, although revealing experiential structures of meaning, could be complemented by approaches that integrate the intersectional perspective proposed by Jiménez-Quifones (2024) to capture the multiple forms of inequality that are intertwined in student experiences. This phenomenological understanding contributes to the field of higher education studies in Colombia by offering an interpretative framework that can guide both future research and the design of more effective and humanising institutional interventions.

### **CONCLUSION**

Phenomenological experiences reveal that entering higher education in contexts of socioeconomic vulnerability is a complex existential phenomenon that goes beyond purely academic dimensions to become a process of integral transformation of the self. Using Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenological methodology, seven 'motives for living' were identified that show how students from Comuna 8 in Medellín existentially inhabit their university transition, revealing that this experience simultaneously involves aspirations for social mobility, vocation as a driving force, the search for emotional independence, but also fears of the unknown, existential economic obstacles, perceived academic fragility, and deep needs for emotional support.

From the above, it is revealed that the university represents for these young people not only an educational institution, but also an existential territory of transformation where family hopes, life projects and processes of identity reconfiguration converge, expressed through four fundamental existential dimensions: temporality as a horizon of hope and uncertainty, spatiality as a challenging place of adaptation, relationality as a need for emotional support networks, and corporeality expressed in physical manifestations of stress and anxiety. Consequently, these results show the urgent need for educational inclusion policies and institutional support programmes to adopt a comprehensive phenomenological perspective that recognises the human complexity of this transition, going beyond purely quantitative approaches to honour the dignity, vulnerability and existential aspirations of students seeking to transform their realities through higher education.

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