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## Diversity in university education: A study in the Latin American context

## Diversidad en la educación universitaria: un estudio en el contexto latinoamericano

Rolando Eslava-Zapata<sup>1</sup>  , Verenice Sánchez-Castillo<sup>2</sup>  , Carlos Alberto Gómez-Cano<sup>3</sup>  

<sup>1</sup>Universidad Libre Colombia, Facultad de Ciencias Económicas, Administrativas y Contables. Cúcuta, Colombia.

<sup>2</sup>Universidad de la Amazonia, Facultad de Ingeniería. Florencia, Colombia.

<sup>3</sup>Corporación Unificada Nacional de Educación Superior. Florencia, Colombia.

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**Corresponding Author:** Rolando Eslava-Zapata 

### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** in recent decades, studies on inclusive university education and diversity have increased to evaluate access to higher education and the permanence of vulnerable groups in universities. This study aims to analyze diversity in higher education in the Latin American context.

**Method:** the article is qualitative and documentary, based on the leading scientific publications on university education and diversity. The research is approached from the hermeneutic-interpretative approach and the principle of Analytical Induction. Grounded Theory is adopted as a qualitative research method to identify theoretical-conceptual elements and their interrelations.

**Results:** the results show the formation of two subcategories: The first subcategory is “Teacher profile,” which refers to specific characteristics of the teacher who recognizes diversity and works with diversity, and the second subcategory is “University context,” which refers to the educational process that universities carry out to achieve teaching-learning models that consider diversity. In this sense, “Diversity in university education” emerges, resulting from a diversification of higher education institutions and administrative and institutional differentiation.

**Conclusions:** diversity in universities is key to students’ development of learning, skills, and critical thinking, which is closely linked to social justice and the proper exercise of democracy.

**Keywords:** University Education; Diversity; Teacher Profile; University Context.

### RESUMEN

**Introducción:** en las últimas décadas los estudios sobre educación universitaria inclusiva y diversidad se ha incrementado a fin de evaluar el acceso a la educación superior y la permanencia en la universidad de los grupos vulnerables. Este estudio tiene por objetivo analizar la diversidad en la educación superior en el contexto latinoamericano.

**Método:** el artículo es de naturaleza cualitativa y documental que se apoya en las principales publicaciones científicas sobre educación universitaria y diversidad. La investigación se aborda desde la hermenéutica-interpretativa y el principio de Inducción Analítica. Como método de investigación cualitativo se adopta la Teoría Fundamentada a fin de identificar elementos teóricos-conceptuales y sus intervenciones.

**Resultados:** los resultados arrojan la formación de dos subcategorías a saber: La primera subcategoría es “Perfil del profesor”, la cual hace referencia a ciertas características del profesor que reconocen la diversidad y trabajan con la diversidad; y la segunda subcategoría es “Contexto universitario”, la cual hace referencia al proceso educativo que las universidades llevan a cabo para lograr modelos de enseñanza-aprendizaje que consideren la diversidad. En este sentido, surge la categoría “Diversidad en la educación universitaria”, la cual es el resultado de una diversificación de Instituciones de Educación Superior; además, de una diferenciación administrativa e institucional.

**Conclusiones:** la diversidad en las universidades es clave para el desarrollo de aprendizajes, habilidades y pensamiento crítico de los estudiantes, la cual está muy vinculado a la justicia social y el buen ejercicio de la democracia.

**Palabras clave:** Educación Universitaria; Diversidad; Perfil del Profesor; Contexto Universitario.

## INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, studies on inclusive university education and diversity have increased to evaluate access to higher education and the permanence of vulnerable groups in universities. An inclusive university reflects in its demographic composition groups of students made invisible because of disability, gender, socioeconomic level, origin, sexual orientation, or ethnicity. Hence, the current concern of university authorities is to seek to create a social cohesion that favors integration and, above all, to comply with the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) related to “an inclusive, equitable and quality education...”<sup>(1,2,3)</sup>

The development of inclusive policies varies among Latin American universities, and the programs are aimed at different groups, such as people with disabilities, ethnic groups, or international students. However, studies show that more institutional initiatives are still needed to guarantee the true inclusion and well-being of minority groups and align with the 2030 agenda.<sup>(4,5,6)</sup>

Diversity manifests itself in multiple dimensions, for example, cultural or gender; therefore, universities must develop strategies to respond effectively to the commitments of inclusion considering not only the students but also the faculty, the administrative and labor staff, the pedagogical model, among other elements that give life to the university space. One of the strategies related to the teaching-learning process impacts students with learning difficulties. Another strategy related to pedagogical practices is to promote learning, innovation, and the development of thought.<sup>(7,8,9)</sup>

Teachers must build knowledge in an encounter with all students to respond to each one's learning needs and identify opportunities for improvement, whether in their competencies or in pedagogical practices. The idea is to effectively address the educational needs of diverse students and foster the autonomous development of vulnerable groups.<sup>(10,11,12,13,14)</sup>

Understanding inclusive education and diversity requires an in-depth review of the university context. Recent research provides evidence of the behavior of different variables, such as tolerance, inclusion, identity construction, and inequality. This research reveals the need to design inclusive policies that promote human rights and diverse education to guarantee students ' fundamental right to receive an equitable and fair education that values multiculturalism. In this sense, this study aimed to analyze diversity in higher education in the Latin American context.<sup>(15,16,17,18,19,20)</sup>

## METHOD

The article is qualitative and documentary, based on the leading scientific publications on university education and diversity. A search was conducted in the Scopus database for articles in Spanish related to the words “Education,” “diversity,” and “university.” The search engine used was: ( TITLE-ABS-KEY ( education ) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ( diversity ) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ( university ) ) AND ( LIMIT-TO ( LANGUAGE , “Spanish” ) ) AND ( LIMIT-TO ( DOCTYPE , “ar” ) ). The results showed that only four of the five articles identified met the criteria.

The research was approached from an interpretive hermeneutics perspective, in which academic texts are primary sources of information analyzed using the principle of analytical induction. Grounded theory was adopted as a qualitative research method to identify theoretical-conceptual elements and their interconnections. Textual data was selected using the principles of theoretical sampling.

In the analytical process, the line of theoretical coding established on three levels was followed: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Qualitative analysis software ATLAS Ti was used, and a panel of experts reviewed the categorization process.

## RESULTS

The results of the qualitative study on education and diversity in the Latin American university context are presented below. The dimensions, subcategories, and categories are presented in this respect.

The results reveal the formation of the “Teacher Attitude” dimension. This dimension focuses on the teacher's ability to transmit their knowledge simply and with a positive attitude towards the teaching-learning process, considering that all students have the capacity to learn. It is made up of two codes: “Resistance to change” and “Communicative” (figure 1).

The resistance to changing the code presents arguments such as: “Going from face-to-face to virtual was an abrupt change that showed an even more worrying reality. Many teachers showed problems and resistance to the new way of teaching classes—digital education” [1: 27]. The Communicative Code is supported by arguments such as: “... this modality of education allows for diversification of communication between teachers and students” [1: 39].

The code “Resistance to change” is related to the teacher’s ability to overcome barriers and implement actions that embrace diversity. University dynamism challenges teachers to respond to social dynamics, which require training needs for diverse groups. Therefore, teachers must overcome the psychological, personal, or cultural barriers that prevent adaptation to new educational spaces.

The “Communicative” code emphasizes the teacher’s ability to engage in clear and constructive dialogue with students to reinforce the teaching-learning process and to achieve the educational objectives and good academic results for the whole group. Effective communication generates an academic environment that favors personal relationships and improves students’ abilities to participate and express their ideas. For this reason, teachers should use simple language adapted to the diversity of students so that they understand the curricular content and overcome learning barriers.

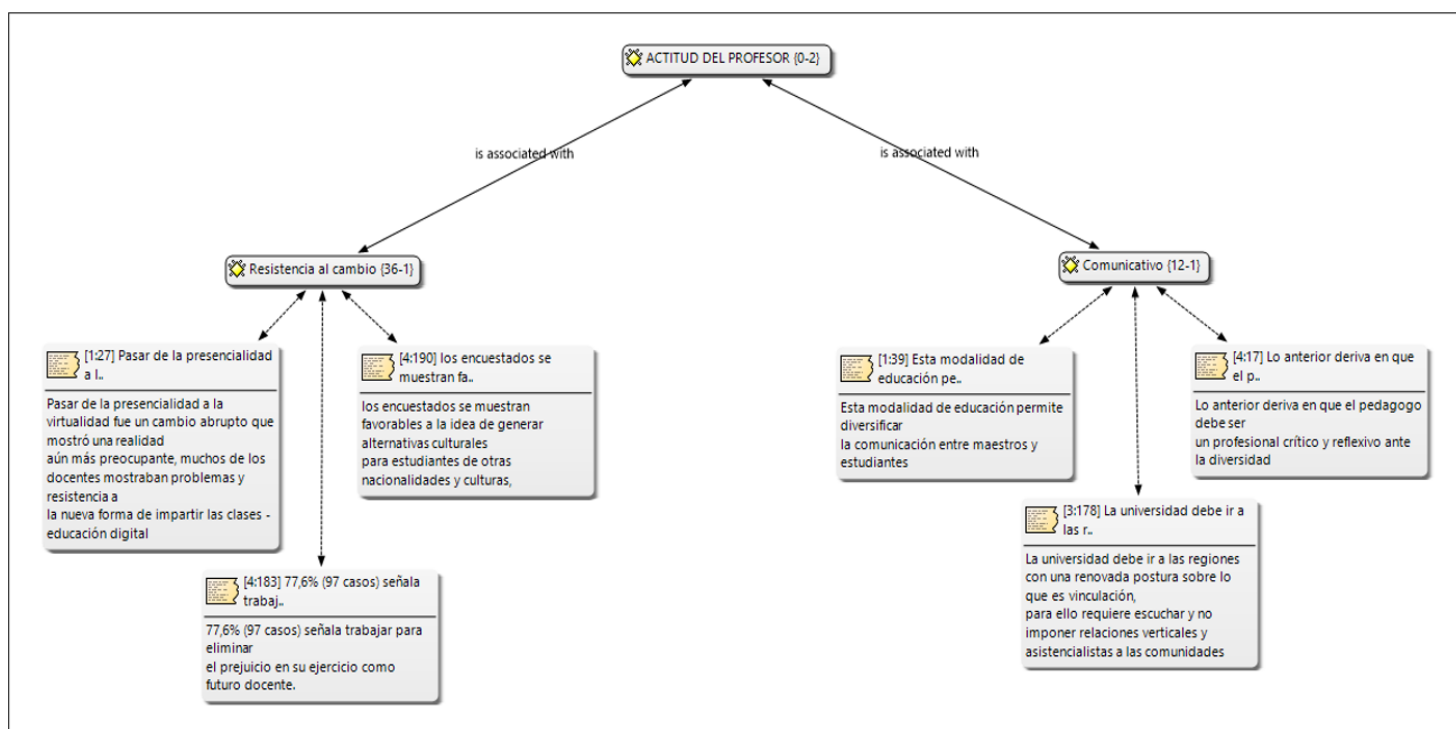


Figure 1. Teacher attitude dimension

The “Teacher training” dimension is related to the solid training of teachers to deal with the complexity and plurality that exists in university spaces, where students with disabilities, Indigenous people, people of African descent, sexual diversity, and foreigners, among others, are present. This dimension is made up of the codes of “Competencies” and “Pedagogical Practice” (figure 2).

The code “Competencies” is supported by the following comment: “...this undoubtedly enhances the intercultural competencies of the trainees, since they not only recognize the existence of the other” [4: 170]. For its part, the code “Pedagogical practice” is supported by comments such as: “...the practical knowledge that teacher training students and practicing teachers have in a diverse space is unique...” [4: 152].

The “Competencies” code refers to the teacher’s ability to respond to student diversity. These competencies may relate, for example, to didactic activities that promote the integration of all students or teamwork for problem-solving, which leads students to exchange information and experiences.

For its part, the code “Pedagogical practice” is related to the process of self-reflection of future teachers on the development of their work, didactic experimentation, and, in general, the pedagogical actions carried out in different educational settings. The success of pedagogical practice is closely linked to the teaching component developed, its relevance, and the quality of consolidating didactic knowledge that favors diversity.

The “Educational Process” Dimension is related to all the academic activities carried out to develop university students’ learning, transmit knowledge to them, and promote knowledge generation through research. This process is necessary for students of all generational and ethnic groups and other minorities to develop their

potential through the different modalities of face-to-face or virtual classes, which became popular with the COVID-19 pandemic. This dimension is made up of two codes: “Teaching-learning process” and “University student” (figure 3).

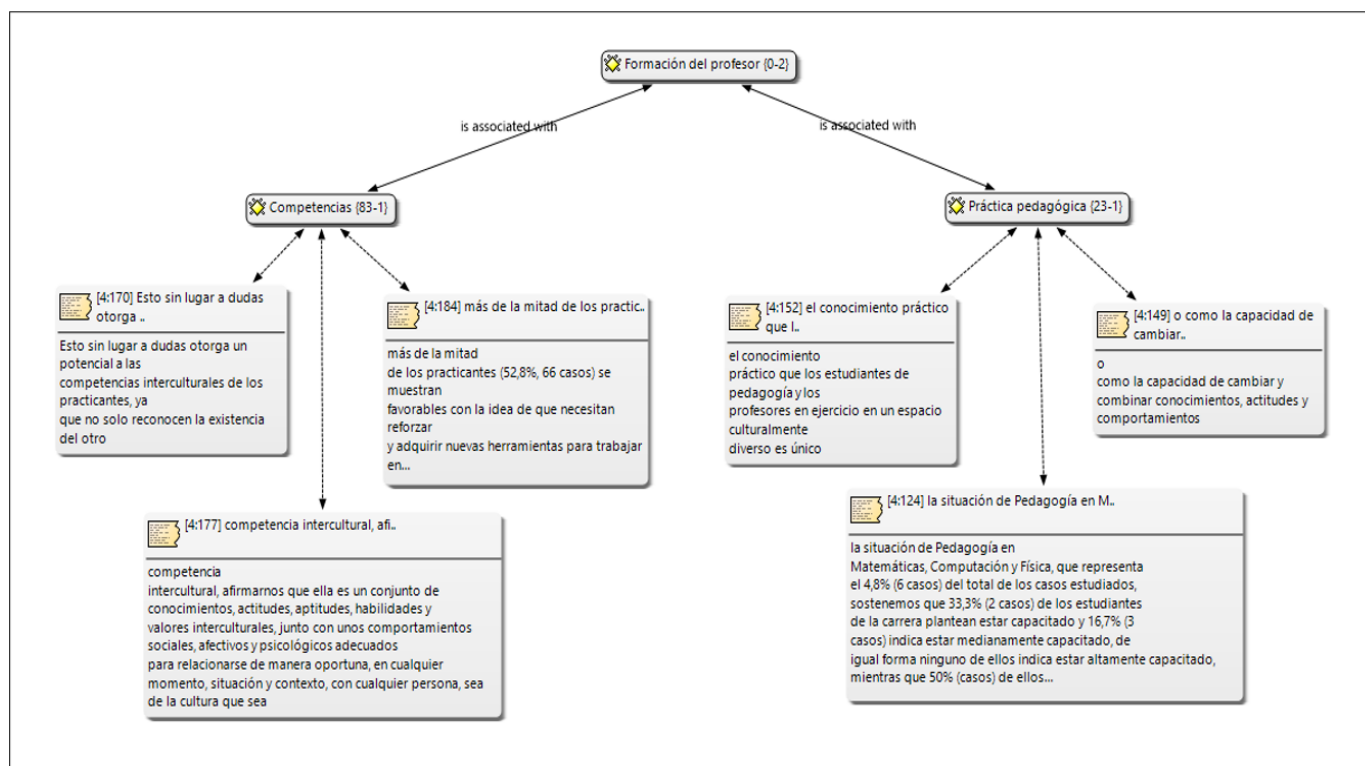


Figure 2. Teacher training dimension

The code “Teaching-learning process” is supported by comments such as: “... the use of these virtual-technological means is a common activity to which teachers must adapt to achieve the teaching-learning process...” [1: 30]; and “... all these technological tools and resources are useful for student and teacher learning”. Meanwhile, the “University student” code is supported by the following comments: “... the new Centennials or generation Z, from 1997 to 2010, who are the youngest in the labor market, they were born with technology, which is why they only consume digital formats...” [1: 6]; and “... this is manifested in the fact that half of the practitioners consulted say they have students of other nationalities” [4: 83].

The code “Teaching-learning process” refers to all the interactions between university students and professors in the classroom to develop the programmatic content of the subjects with the support of multiple pedagogical strategies. Teachers are responsible for achieving equitable teaching and equal conditions for all students, promoting a solid education that responds to society’s needs and Latin American countries’ economies. Therefore, the entire teaching-learning process must combine activities so that students achieve prominent results and changes in their intellectual and personal behavior.

The code “University student” refers to the diverse people who go to university to study. It comprises a variety of individuals with different characteristics and personal conditions. For example, there are international students from other countries who require the full attention of the universities through inclusive policies and actions that facilitate their incorporation into the education system to prevent the progress of racism and xenophobia in the classroom. Hence, universities face the critical challenge of understanding migratory processes, guiding the teaching staff in welcoming international students, and managing multicultural diversity.

Another group of university students is those of indigenous and African descent, who make up the ethnic minorities in some Latin American countries and who are in a constant struggle for their right to education, the recognition of their rights as citizens, and the construction of their identity. Although significant progress has been made regarding the recognition of indigenous groups and their languages, the reality of the university environment reveals problems of integration and respect for the roots of these groups.

Likewise, in the university environment, there are students from different generational groups, which is related to the diversity of age groups of students in universities. However, it is expected that the ages range between 16 and 24 years; in many Latin American countries, the ages can vary due to the late entry of students to universities. On the other hand, there is also the opening up of students over the age of 24, which can be over 50, due to the interest of adults in pursuing university studies to fulfill a personal or professional goal. In this



sense, universities are interested in intergenerational integration to take advantage of all students' knowledge, experiences, and learning to improve the development of skills and knowledge of future professionals.

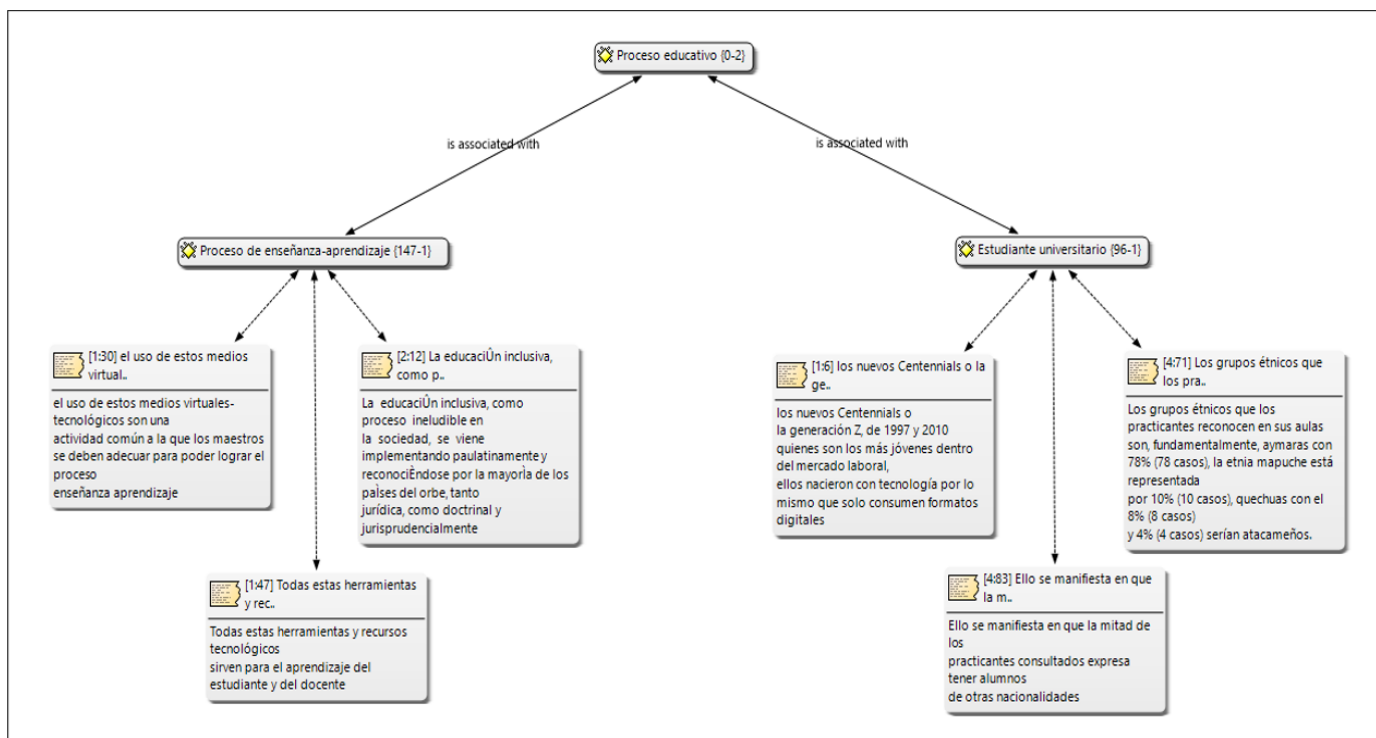


Figure 3. Educational process dimension

The “University Management” dimension is related to all the actions by university authorities for the correct development of academic activities and proper attention to the university community. Current times demand a critical vision to address political, social, economic, cultural, and technological developments, to promote academic research and the training of professionals who meet the market’s demands. This dimension is made up of the codes “Identity construction” and “University policy” (figure 4).

The code “Identity construction” is supported by arguments such as: “Although the students surveyed acknowledge the existence of others in their establishments, they are also able to demonstrate the importance of creating new educational spaces that take into account their cultural, social and linguistic characteristics...” [4: 178]; and “...but they must also develop new teaching and learning strategies that encourage students to engage in intercultural reflection and analysis...” [4: 180]. On the other hand, the code “University policy” is supported by the following comments: “Institutional policies, permeated by national and international educational policies, require a rethinking of the definition of indigenous students, challenging their premise of compensating for the almost inherent deficit of these young people...” [3: 188]; and “The rethinking of university outreach policies implies a revision of the traditional notion of the university-society relationship, of the university actors who do outreach, how they do it and for what purpose, as well as the issues that require the attention of university students...” [3: 186].

The code “Identity construction” refers to the process of defining and recognizing individuals with different elements of life experience and origin. This process is fundamentally important in the university environment to identify the multicultural and linguistic identity of national and international students from different ethnic groups in favor of plurality and effective inclusion in higher education institutions.

The life experiences of university students are very complex; they can be positive and negative, and speaking of the negative ones, they can be characterized by discrimination, exclusion, inequality, invisibility, homophobia, racism, classism, and xenophobia, which can affect their physical and mental health. For this reason, universities must promote research and identity-building programs for students to develop inclusion policies to encourage values such as respect, dignity, and tolerance towards others among teachers. Without a doubt, this is a collaborative effort within the university, which involves the participation of all academic bodies to establish a dialogue of knowledge and methodologies that generate deep reflections to improve the educational experience of minority groups.

The code “University policy” refers to the design of actions within the university to fulfill the fundamental rights of students, to be treated with dignity and to be citizens with full rights. The connotations related to inclusion, equality, and diversity are especially applied to ethnic, racial, cultural, and sexual diversity.

In this sense, Latin America still faces essential challenges in overcoming discrimination against certain groups in universities who do not have equal opportunities to study and receive dignified treatment that respects their cultural, social, and economic background. Policies should not be postponed, and if they exist, they should not be ignored in higher education to overcome discriminatory barriers in favor of more significant equity.<sup>(25)</sup>

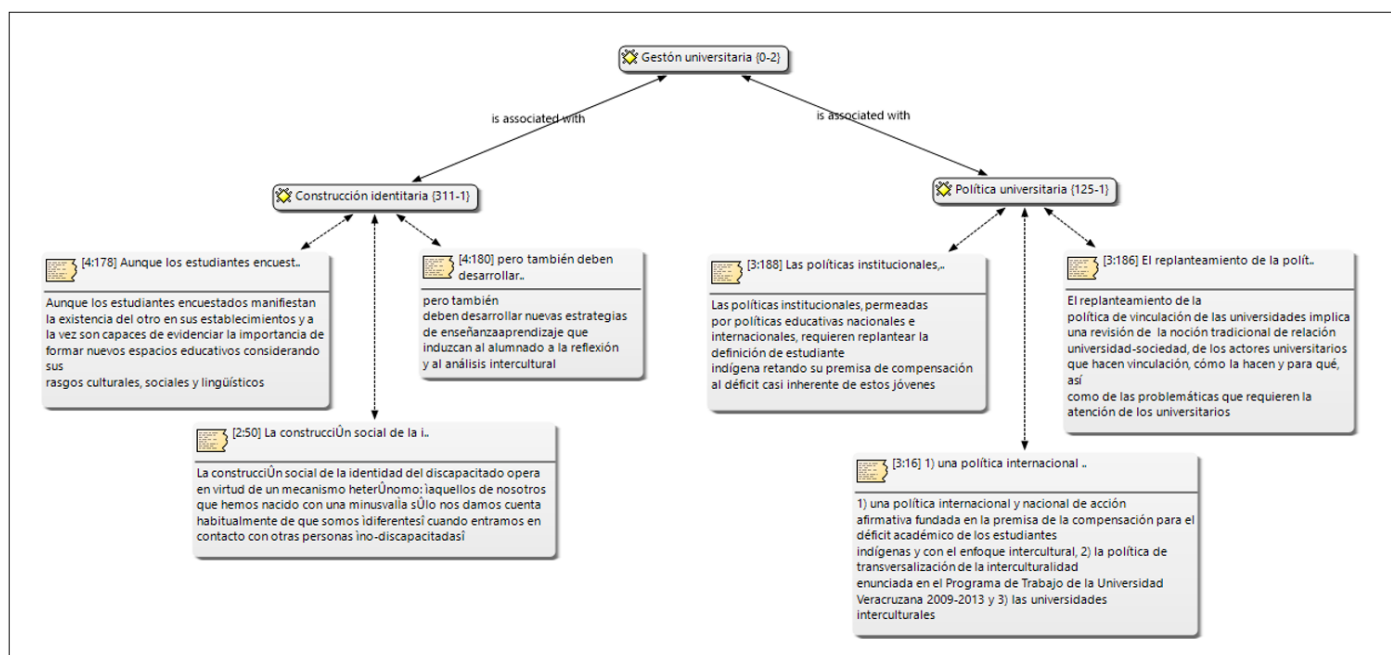


Figure 4. University management dimension

## DISCUSSION

The results reveal the formation of two subcategories and one category. The first subcategory is “Teacher Profile.” this category refers to the characteristics of the teacher who recognizes diversity and works with diversity, recognizing the rights of students to have equal participation in educational processes. Centralized by highly segmented social groups, Latin America requires additional efforts from university academics to close the inequality gap in the different student groups to promote the fourth SDG to “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (figure 5).<sup>(21,22)</sup>

University professors have a great responsibility to ensure the right of students to have a quality education, ensuring that learning is the same for everyone, regardless of stereotypes or preconceptions that hinder the total integration of students. Teachers must understand that diversity is an opportunity to enrich the teaching-learning process rather than a problem and to develop innovative educational practices that embrace the personal or professional experiences of minorities.<sup>(23,24,25)</sup>

One of the sine qua non conditions of the profile of the teacher open to diversity is to be inclusive since it is key to achieving positive changes in the integration of minority groups, leaving aside resistance to change and, instead, betting on open communication with the students throughout the educational process to give value to diversity. Therefore, teachers must strengthen their skills in inequality and education with multicultural groups to develop pedagogical strategies that involve all students in solving practical problems that support social interaction.<sup>(26,27)</sup>

The second subcategory is “University context”. This subcategory refers to universities’ educational process to achieve teaching-learning models that consider cultural diversity and build more inclusive and respectful citizenship towards minority groups.<sup>(28)</sup> To comply with human rights and the challenges imposed by globalization and technological development, universities have in their hands the power to foster an environment of respect for multiculturalism and to intervene in the processes of student coexistence to value the knowledge, languages, and experiences of vulnerable groups (figure 6).<sup>(29,30)</sup>

The process of identity construction for minority groups is a latent challenge for universities, as it helps students value their origins and recognize that their culture represents an opportunity to enrich the multiculturalism of the university. For this reason, university policies should promote integration programs and attention to students to encourage them to enter university and provide support during their academic life. This will undoubtedly facilitate the articulation of inclusive environments with university education under coexistence, acceptance, and tolerance of diversity.<sup>(31,32)</sup>

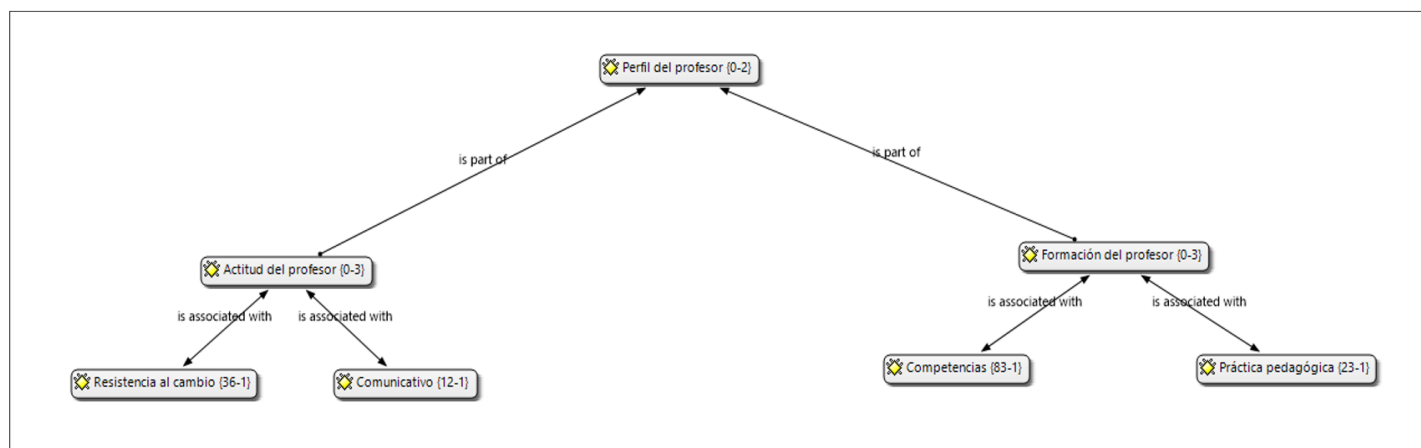


Figure 5. Subcategory Teacher profile

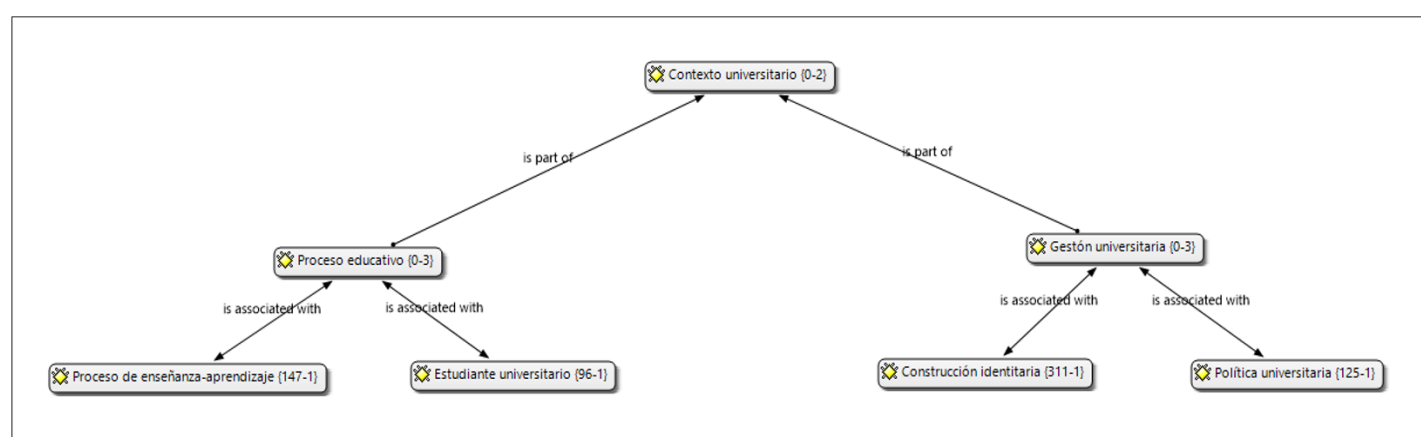


Figure 6. Sub-category University context

One category was identified, which was called “Diversity in university education.” This category refers to an issue that has been discussed over the last thirty-five years and is the result of a diversification of higher education institutions of different sizes, policies, and types, as well as administrative and institutional differentiation. This diversity makes the context of higher education complex due to the heterogeneity of students and the pedagogical strategies teachers use to achieve an effective teaching-learning process for all. <sup>(33,34)</sup>

Despite the progress made in Latin American universities in terms of diversity, there are still significant challenges to including in the study programs a diversity of students who have been discriminated against, for example, Indigenous or Afro-descendant groups. It is necessary to promote the training of future professionals who will serve an increasingly competitive labor market, which demands diverse students with skills that foster innovation and the proper development of organizational operations. <sup>(35,36)</sup>

From this perspective, universities need to organize themselves to offer academic programs that embrace diversity and student programs that foster integration. To achieve these ambitious objectives, it is necessary to invest financial and human resources to train teachers to develop pedagogical skills to work with students in multicultural environments and to open doors to diverse student groups. <sup>(37)</sup>

Access to higher education depends on many factors, for example, primary and secondary education received, the economic situation of the parents, and, in general, the preparation that students have had to access the higher education program. However, other factors can influence access to universities, such as ethnicity or nationality, which in Latin America has created a significant gap between students graduating from the best universities and those graduating from less prestigious universities. In this sense, students from the best universities are more likely to be absorbed by the labor market. <sup>(38)</sup>

Students who have the opportunity to study at different universities feel more secure and accepted. Their psychological and emotional state is balanced, which facilitates learning, problem-solving, and innovation. In general, they have the right to be intelligent and develop their thinking due to the university’s openness to multiculturalism and respect for others. Their voices, with their diverse languages and accents, are heard without discrimination and without distinction; they are seen as just another student in the classroom. <sup>(39)</sup>

The interaction of diverse groups has significant impacts on students, institutional support, positive behavior

models, and ethnic stereotypes. It also benefits the community since it improves students' perceptions of the university environment and their physical and psychological well-being. Diverse environments contribute to academic success and to the resolution of problems linked to the cognitive complexity of students exposed to multicultural environments.

For these reasons, universities must learn to manage diversity with policies that support the institutional commitment to the construction of student identity, the recognition of cultures, and the inescapable need to train teachers so that they contribute effectively to the dynamism of the university environment, to improve the educational and human quality of universities.<sup>(40)</sup>

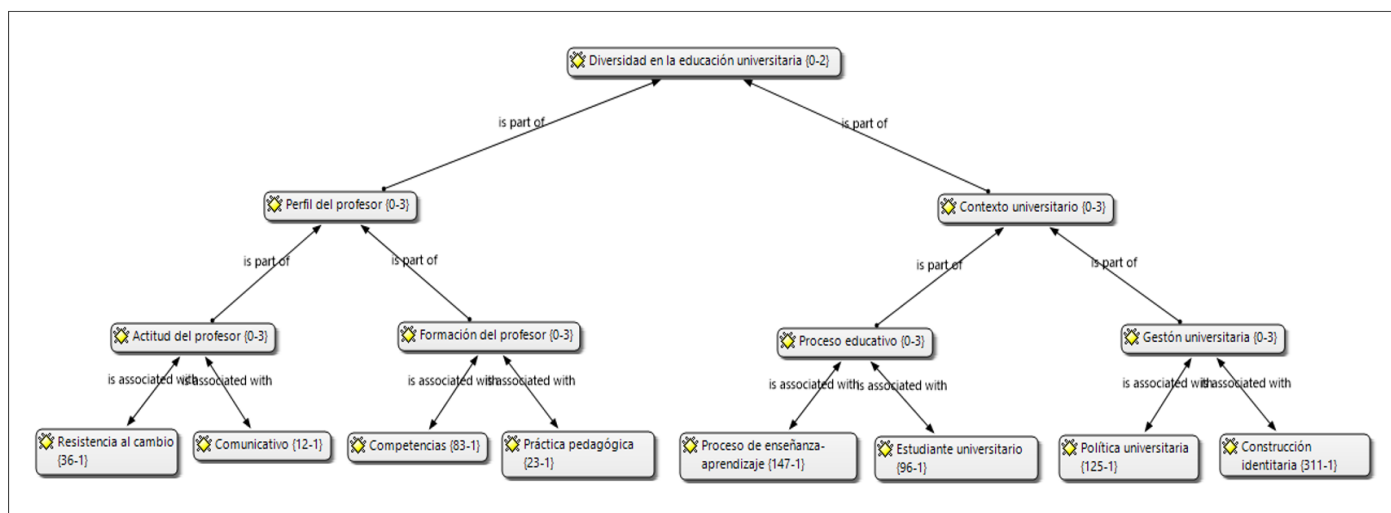


Figure 7. Category: Diversity in university education

## CONCLUSIONS

The physical and mental health of students, teachers, and the academic community generally goes beyond the apparent state of health according to fundamental indicators (demographic, socioeconomic, mortality, morbidity, risk factors, provision of health services, and social security). There is a real need to review whether the lack of teacher skills to work with the diversity and hostility suffered in many cases by minority student groups in silence is an obstacle to the training of competent professionals who help develop the country and national or foreign organizations.

Diversity in universities is key to developing students' learning, skills, and critical thinking skills, which are closely linked to social justice and the proper exercise of democracy. However, diversity is also a factor that promotes the social well-being of students from minority groups, as they can access critical educational centers and enjoy a climate of integration that favors the proper development of the educational process and institutional management.

Furthermore, student integration policies require the hiring of teachers from minority groups, teachers of African descent, Indigenous teachers, homosexual teachers, disabled teachers, and foreign teachers, among other groups, to respect the human rights and the right to work of all citizens without distinction of ethnicity, creed or condition.

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

### **AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION**

*Conceptualization:* Rolando Eslava-Zapata.

*Formal analysis:* Rolando Eslava-Zapata.

*Research:* Rolando Eslava-Zapata, Verenice Sánchez-Castillo, Carlos Alberto Gómez-Cano.

*Methodology:* Rolando Eslava-Zapata.

*Project administration:* Rolando Eslava-Zapata, Verenice Sánchez-Castillo, Carlos Alberto Gómez-Cano.

*Resources:* Rolando Eslava-Zapata, Verenice Sánchez-Castillo, Carlos Alberto Gómez-Cano.

*Software:* Rolando Eslava-Zapata.

*Supervision:* Rolando Eslava-Zapata, Verenice Sánchez-Castillo, Carlos Alberto Gómez-Cano.

*Validation:* Rolando Eslava-Zapata, Verenice Sánchez-Castillo, Carlos Alberto Gómez-Cano.

*Visualization:* Rolando Eslava-Zapata, Verenice Sánchez-Castillo and Carlos Alberto Gómez-Cano.

*Writing - original draft:* Rolando Eslava-Zapata.

*Writing - review and editing:* Rolando Eslava-Zapata, Verenice Sánchez-Castillo, Carlos Alberto Gómez-Cano.