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*Artículos científicos*

## **Experiencias de los estudiantes exitosos de primera generación en la educación superior mexicana: un estudio narrativo**

*Experiences of Successful First-Generation Students in Mexican Higher Education: A narrative study*

*Experiências de estudantes de primeira geração bem-sucedidos no ensino superior mexicano: um estudo narrativo*

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### **Resumen**

La diversidad de la población estudiantil dificulta a la universidad poder satisfacer la demanda educativa. Los estudiantes de primera generación (EPG) pertenecen a una población vulnerable por sus características y retos de mantenerse en su trayectoria escolar. Los EPG son los primeros en sus familias en asistir a una universidad; por lo tanto, enfrentan retos complejos como no conocer la cultura escolar, tener bajo rendimiento académico, dificultades económicas y típicamente no tienen un proyecto académico. El propósito de este estudio, por tanto, fue conocer a través de sus historias las experiencias de EPG exitosos en la educación mexicana. Se utilizó un método cualitativo con enfoque narrativo. Se colectaron datos de cuatro participantes a través de entrevistas narrativas de profundidad para encontrar cuáles fueron sus retos, sus sistemas de apoyo



y sobre todo su motivación hasta alcanzar el éxito. Las historias narradas demuestran que la visión clara sobre lo que quieren profesionalmente y habilidades emocionales como la motivación y la resiliencia les permitieron conseguir sus metas académicas. Sin embargo, cabe resaltar que no todo debe depender de los EPG, pues la universidad tiene la obligación de proveer el apoyo que los estudiantes necesitan de acuerdo a sus necesidades.

**Palabras clave:** enseñanza superior, estudiante universitario, sociología del estudiante.

## Abstract

The diversity of the student population makes it difficult for the university to meet the educational demand. First-generation students (EPG) belong to a vulnerable population due to their characteristics and challenges of staying in their school careers. EPGs are the first in their families to attend college; therefore, they face complex challenges such as not knowing the school culture, having poor academic performance, financial difficulties, and typically do not have an educational project. This study aimed to understand the experiences of successful EPGs in Mexican education through their stories. A qualitative method with a narrative approach was used. Data were collected from four participants through in-depth narrative interviews to find out their challenges, support systems, and motivation that allowed them to continue until they reach success. The narrated stories demonstrate that a clear vision of what they want professionally and emotional skills such as motivation and resilience enable them to achieve their academic goals. However, it depends not only on the EPGs; the university must provide the students' support according to their needs.

**Keywords:** higher education, student sociology, university student.

## Resumo

A diversidade da população estudantil dificulta o atendimento da demanda educacional da universidade. Os alunos da primeira geração (EPG) pertencem a uma população vulnerável devido às suas características e desafios de permanência na carreira escolar. EPGs são os primeiros em suas famílias a frequentar a faculdade; portanto, enfrentam desafios complexos como não conhecer a cultura escolar, ter baixo desempenho acadêmico, dificuldades financeiras e, normalmente, não ter um projeto acadêmico. O objetivo deste estudo, portanto, foi conhecer por meio de suas histórias as experiências de EPG de sucesso na educação mexicana. Foi utilizado um método qualitativo com abordagem narrativa. Os dados foram coletados de quatro participantes por meio de entrevistas narrativas em profundidade para descobrir quais eram seus desafios, seus sistemas



de apoio e, acima de tudo, sua motivação para alcançar o sucesso. As histórias contadas mostram que a visão clara do que desejam profissionalmente e as competências emocionais, como motivação e resiliência, permitiram que atingissem seus objetivos acadêmicos. No entanto, deve-se destacar que nem tudo deve depender dos EPGs, pois a universidade tem a obrigação de fornecer o suporte de que os alunos precisam de acordo com suas necessidades.

**Palavras-chave:** ensino superior, estudante universitário, sociologia estudantil.

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## Introduction

The challenges of both public and private higher education globally are diverse, although some relate to funding, governance, accountability, transparency, high tuition costs, and student retention. The pending task of the university, therefore, is to offer flexible higher education programs adapted to the needs and characteristics of 21st century students, who demand creative and innovative training to access better jobs (Dennis, 2012) .

In this context, technology plays a preponderant role because it allows a more flexible education to be provided. However, it must be taken into account that the use of these tools by themselves would be insufficient if there are not also support systems that guide and motivate the entry and permanence of students. As a result, questions such as the following arise: what strategies does higher education employ to ensure student success? And what support programs benefit the permanence of the students?

The success of students depends on multiple factors, including the creation of educational environments that benefit their academic experiences, which can impact their perceptions and, consequently, their success or failure in school.

For this reason, the purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the experiences of successful first-generation students in higher education through the narration of their life stories. In this way, you will understand how college support systems impact and how your life stories contribute to academic success in higher education.

## Literature review

First generation students (EPGs) belong to a group of the higher education student population that have unique characteristics and needs. In the United States, for example, more than 20% of the student population is made up of EPG and only 11% manage to obtain a university degree, compared to 55% of traditional students (Katreovich and Aruguete, 2017).

Typically, EPGs are unaware of university culture because they are the first members of their families to enroll in an institution of higher education, that is, their parents do not have a university degree. The EPGs are students without a defined school project (Soto Hernández, 2016). Among other characteristics, the EPGs are non-traditional students, since they are older compared to the traditional ones, with non-linear school trajectories, and they have children and work (Ishitani, 2016; Linne, 2018). In fact, in many cases EPGs are women economically responsible for their families (Linne, 2018), hence they face very diverse and particular difficulties.

### Emotional and academic deficiencies

First, EPGs are students with emotional needs that affect their performance and permanence in higher education. In studies on the emotional burdens of Latino students in the US, Tello and Lonn (2017) suggested that these students require strategies to cope with the stress generated by a university environment. Therefore, they must develop emotional and cultural intelligence, resilience and intrinsic motivation, as well as leadership skills that allow them to visualize and plan their future (Jacobson-Lundeborg, 2016; Shumaker and Wood, 2016; Soria, Roberts and Reinhard, 2015; Tello and Lonn, 2017).

Likewise, in an investigation on the social capital of undocumented students in the US, Montiel (2016) explains that EPGs are students who need resilience skills to enter and stay enrolled in university. On the other hand, in studies in Chile, Soto Hernández (2016) comments that these students feel excluded because they are unaware of the university environment.

For EPGs, emotional intelligence is a key factor for academic performance and for social integration at university. In addition to emotional factors, EPGs in many cases are students with limited academic abilities that put their permanence in higher education at risk. Low grades and poor math and critical thinking skills are one more challenge for EPGs (Katreovich and Aruguete, 2017). In addition, EPGs have a low self-perception of their skills and school performance (Barraza-López y González, 2016; Flanagan, 2016).

## **Low economic resources**

EPGs share another characteristic that limits their academic performance. Different studies describe EPGs as low-income students (Hirudayaraj and Maclean, 2018; Ishitani, 2016; Linne, 2018; Montiel, 2017). Lacking income not only affects the emotional state of students, but mainly leaves them less time to study, since they have to work to meet their family, personal and academic needs.

## **Family and college education**

Feeling supported by family is a critical factor for school success at all levels. In an article on EPG career aspirations, Raque-Bogdan and Lucas (2016) mention that EPGs have many difficulties, especially related to family and financial matters. EPGs regularly live with their parents, who do not have academic experience, hence they cannot effectively help their children. In this sense, the study by Castillo and Cabezas (2010) indicates that there are more PGAs enrolled in higher education when both parents are present at home, perhaps due to the motivation they can exert on their children. In fact, the influence is greater when one or both parents have higher education, as there is greater orientation and motivation towards the university culture (Linne, 2018).

The fact that PGA parents do not have an academic degree impacts on their social and cultural capital, since they are the ones who transfer these knowledge and skills (Tello and Lonn, 2017). Regularly, EPGs tend to have difficulties interacting socially and culturally at university, and they do not normally converse with their parents about academic matters (Flanagan, 2017). According to Donoso, Donoso and Arias (2010), the commitment of parents with the education of their children is essential so that they, from an early age, can imagine a school and professional project. However, in the case of EPGs the reality is different, since they lack the orientation, motivation and support to face the challenges of the university. In other words, EPGs do not have a reference to support their entry and journey into higher education. (Soto Hernández, 2016).

## **University culture, social integration and sense of community**

For traditional students, the college environment can be a challenging setting. However, for non-traditional students — such as EPGs — college is more than that. Tello and Lonn (2017) describe that EPGs face prejudice, stereotypes and marginalization because they are an underrepresented group of the student population.

According to Soto Hernández (2016), the idea of the university is very far from the minds of the EPGs, since they do not know the university culture or understand the norms and codes of communication (Hicks and Wood, 2016). Shumaker and Wood (2016) point out that students with less cultural capital face more difficulties to interact, which constitutes an essential element for social and academic success.

In a study on recognizing the challenges and predicting the success of EPGs, Katrevich and Aruguete (2017) show that academic preparation and faculty interaction predict student success in college. EPGs require social integration to create the necessary links and feel part of the university community. In this regard, Ishitani (2016) comments that the EPGs that achieve greater social integration are more persistent. In the words of Means and Pyne (2017), the sense of belonging helps to create learning communities (Means and Pyne, 2017).

However, it should be noted that although some PGAs manage to integrate with peers, they have limitations in interacting with teachers and support staff (Mwaikinda and Aruguete, 2017). Therefore, it is the responsibility of educational institutions to provide all students with a suitable environment in which a social integration is promoted that supports them to study satisfactorily. (Hicks y Wood, 2016; Ishitani, 2016; Katrevich y Auruguete, 2017; Means y Pyne, 2017; Tello y Lonn, 2017).

### **School dropout**

The characteristics of the PGAs and their condition as a vulnerable group within the student population generate consequences for both them and for educational institutions. Their emotional, financial, and academic needs are factors that impact attrition. In addition, not knowing the university culture and having social integration limitations are elements that increase the possibility of staying in the university (Barraza-López and González, 2016; Mwaikinda and Aruguete, 2016; Le, Mariano and Faxon-Mills, 2016). In an article on underrepresented college students, Means et al. (2016) explain that students are not well prepared because universities design poor programs or because their approach does not specifically address the EPG. Therefore, it is imperative that universities know the profile of the students, mainly the EPGs.

Hicks and Wood (2016) mention that it is necessary to investigate the knowledge that teachers have about PPE to better understand and guide them during their educational process, while Flanagan (2017) considers that it is necessary to investigate PEG in Latin America. Specifically, investigations on PGE are required in the Mexican context, as they are non-existent. Most of the studies on PGE are carried out in the United States (Clemens, 2016; Hicks and Wood, 2016;



Ishitani, 2016; Katrevich and Aruguete, 2017; Le et al., 2016; Means and Pyne, 2017; Mwaikinda and Aruguete, 2016). In fact, only in Argentina and Chile has this matter been investigated (Castillo and Cabezas, 2010; Flanagan, 2017; Linne, 2018; Soto Hernández, 2016).

For this reason, this study aims to offer a literary input on the EPG in the context of Mexican universities, especially on their life stories to understand their school career. It is hoped that with the results of this work, academic authorities, educational psychologists and teacher-tutors will be able to better understand the characteristics, experiences and motivations of PGA. In fact, by assessing the life stories of successful students, characteristics and skills can be identified that serve as the basis for the design of strategies aimed at PGA at risk of dropping out.

Specifically, the research questions asked were the following:

- a. What have been the life stories of successful first-generation students in higher education?
- b. How do successful first generation students define themselves?
- c. What have been the barriers that successful first-generation students have faced in higher education?
- d. What have been the support systems for EPGs?

## **Methodology**

A qualitative method with a narrative approach was used. According to Patton (2015), the narrative approach focuses on the stories told by people to capture people's lived experience in relation to its own meaning. Creswell (2014), on the other hand, mentions that this approach analyzes the lives of individuals to later be recounted by the researcher. In other words, it examines human life through narrative (Arias-Cardona and Alvarado-Salgado, 2015), which allows access to knowledge (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). The narrative research approaches seek to provide a notion of individual reality, and not a collective one, through the experiences of the participants that are represented in their narratives. (Bold, 2012).

## **Participants and sample**

The participants for this narrative study were Mexican higher education EPGs who successfully obtained a university degree. The sample that was used was non-probabilistic of the intentional type (Check and Schutt, 2012). Specifically, a typical case sampling strategy was used, since the participants are cases with common criteria (Patton, 2015). There were four participants (one woman and three men) who managed to integrate socially and culturally in the university

environment and who demonstrated various skills and attitudes that allowed them to complete their university career. Table 1 shows a more detailed description of the participants.

**Tabla 1.** Características demográficas de los participantes

Seudónimo	Género	Edad	Programa educativo	Nivel educativo (padres)
Oscar	Hombre	21-31	Licenciatura en Psicología	Secundaria (ambos)
Karen	Mujer	32-42	Ingeniería en Telemática	Primaria (madre)
Javier	Hombre	22-32	Licenciatura en Tecnología Educativa	Bachillerato (ambos)
Raúl	Hombre	21-31	Licenciatura en Mercadotecnia Digital	Primaria (ambos)

Fuente: Elaboración propia

The participant Oscar studied outside his hometown: he lived with his friends with whom he rented a house. Oscar's parents covered his expenses since he did not work (he only studied). As for the participant Karen, she also studied in a city where she was not a native, so she lived in a care home where she was provided with food and a room. She had to work as a salesperson to pay the rent, and she supported herself financially from her mother. Javier, for his part, lived with his father and mother in the city where he studied; Although he had a scholarship for his high average, he worked and supported himself financially from his parents to cover expenses. Like the participant Javier, Raúl lived with his parents in the same city where he studied and worked in a bank to pay for his studies.

### Data collection

With the narrative approach of qualitative research, data is not collected, but rather is constructed through conversation with the investigated participants and is created through various techniques such as interviews, journal notes, narrative letters, photographs, videos, and informal conversations. . Thus, the researcher and the participants can understand the meaning and meanings of their stories (Arias-Cardona and Alvarado-Salgado, 2015). Therefore, in-depth narrative interviews were conducted in order to understand the meaning of their stories.



## Analysis of data

Once the interviews were carried out, the narratives were analyzed, for which a coding record was made. The resulting information was transcribed and identification codes were assigned. This is useful to detect the importance of the events, that is, to know what, how and why the events occurred, as well as the temporalities (when) and the spatialities (where) (Arias-Cardona and Alvarado-Salgado, 2015).

The analysis of qualitative data involves reducing the volume of information generated in the interviews through the coding and categorization of the data and identifying patterns of meaning to create meaning, which facilitates communicating the essence of the stories (Patton, 2015). Codes are words and phrases that denote meanings once they are organized into conceptual categories (Patton, 2015; Saldaña, 2016). The conceptual categories were intrinsic motivation and vision, family support, institutional support, friends, and challenges.

## Results

The codes and categories that resulted from the data analysis were fundamental in the structure and writing of the results, which are presented as stories told by the participants through their narratives. These are the stories of Oscar, Karen, Javier and Raúl.

### Oscar History

Oscar's college story began with the hope of earning a degree. This happened when he was studying in a high school at the same university from which he graduated. There he learned about the study plans, which was an advantage for him, since he had "the direct passage ... because ... [he came] from the same university." Thus he became interested in the public university. Oscar commented:

I started to see what the academic plan was and I saw ... a private school, and I saw that ... [in my university] they were already having what internationalization is, which the private one did not find any of that, so it was which also caught my attention.

Oscar wasn't sure which major to study, but he knew it had to be related to medicine. He explained that his motivation was "to have ... a university degree and because ... he said I am going to be the first to have a degree, I always [thought] I want to finish a degree", although at times he doubted which area to focus on. . Oscar mentioned that "being in college, ... [the] career was very

broad ... [and] had many areas of study." So "we were advancing by races and there was something new." In other words, Oscar doubted what to specialize in because "he advanced a little more and saw that there were other topics."

In college his experience was pleasant; He was a student who did not miss school and spent happy moments: "With my friends it was fostered as a brotherhood, you could say, because we were always together." His intention was to have fun and meet people. Although he said that "he was not considered nerdy, he was calm and took advantage of the time." Academically he did not feel pressure and did not stress, less for financial reasons. Oscar said that "when he was a group representative at the university he did not pay registration." Being elected to that position helped him financially. Oscar mentioned:

I [when] I entered they elected me as a representative, they told me well, you have a right or a prize, I don't know, one could say, an encouragement to continue being a group representative. Thank God, my parents supported me financially, I did not lack anything.

Although as a university student I did not experience stress due to academic or financial issues, Oscar commented that "there were times when I did not want to continue studying because I was lazy." However, what motivated him to continue - despite setbacks - were his friends and teachers. Oscar recalled an experience with a teacher:

A teacher was very special, very difficult to deal with; If you didn't do what she said to the letter, I wouldn't check on you ... Until she arrived, sat down and took out her coffee, she said now yes, I can check you now, I wouldn't check on you until she arrived.

Despite the aforementioned situation, Oscar remembers her as an important person in his university experience, since "he liked learning from her". In relation to her friends, he commented that "her moments of coexistence with her companions" were joyous moments. In her college days, she focused on fostering friendship ties with her classmates with whom she lived. But "I detached myself from the family because I came [to my parents' house] once a month."

At present, she continues to consider her colleagues as friends, as she is aware of her personal and professional lives. Although Oscar's college experience was positive, there were also times when she experienced sadness, anger, and rage. However, her characteristics and emotions allowed her to persist and never give up. The inner drive of wanting a college degree and the responsibility for it kept him motivated to get ahead. Oscar mentioned: "I say that my personality is changing." That

personality and his characteristics such as being "outgoing, creative, and serious when necessary" contributed to his being a successful student.

The university itself also influenced Oscar's motivation, as his professors and the way of teaching through cases helped him arouse interest in him: "The teachers presented strong cases that helped us develop the clinical eye". As a successful first-generation student, he has been a great influence on his family: "My sister and cousins have also graduated from college since I left."

### **Karen History**

Karen's college experience was "rewarding ... a great experience." She remembers her with great joy because she had the opportunity to study, practice and apply what she learned in the university labs. Ella karen ella said that she "spent it at university, in the laboratory fixing equipment, installing networks and going to classes in the morning and afternoon." Having attended a college preparatory school helped her make the decision to stay, as some of her classmates also attended the same college and university. Karen mentioned that "they were good, friendly and there was availability to team up, they shared and they were warm". As for the teachers, she remembers her relationship with them "very formal, serious ... [in] the role of each person".

Karen usually ate at school, in university cafeterias, and at night she ate dinner at the house where she lived with her classmates. At some time she shared a room and pleasant moments in which they talked about her daily situations and gave each other support. They lived in an environment of great trust. She remembers them as "different experiences", as there was "closeness between the partners and a lot of trust".

As for her classmates, the majority were men, who were kind and available to support. Karen commented "that there was always availability to team up, they were shared and warm". Currently, Karen and her former teammates still interact through social media.

Karen always felt the support and motivation of her boyfriend and her family. She, although she mentioned that "there was a limited economy, but not enough to not finish the race." Specifically, she had the support of her mother and her professional uncles. Karen shared that "her family is very motivating." In her college experience, Karen also received support from her teachers, whom she remembers as "good and welcoming."

Although the university where he studied was not his first choice, it provided enriching experiences that helped him meet his goals. From the beginning, she Karen she was clear about what she wanted professionally: "My thought at that time was to study, to continue preparing,

because I always had that image of being able to achieve my goals." Her vision was always present and she was also "very observant" and "dedicated, motivated" and "in control of things". Her ability to create a vision for herself and stay motivated inherently made Karen a successful student. Just as she was influenced by her professional uncles and the support of her mother, she also influenced her sister to obtain a college degree.

### **Javier History**

Javier recently graduated with the highest GPA of his generation. When he entered university he was not sure what career he would choose, as he really wanted to study film. He commented:

I wanted to study cinema ... it was my dream, my plan was to finish my degree and study something that I liked. The educational technology career did not attract my attention, it made me very x, I wanted to study something else.

Studying educational technology for him, back then, was an opportunity to get a degree and then study what he really wanted. He mentioned: "I always saw education or going to study as something I had to do, so doing homework was not difficult for me." Despite his doubts at the beginning of him as a university student, his experience was one of "stress, joy and satisfaction. I have discovered that the first two or three years I am always very calm and in the last one I let go a lot", so he remembers that his experience was "enriching".

Once at the university, he did not find his academic load difficult at all, since his abilities and personal characteristics made it easier for him to travel. His confidence in himself and being a calm and accommodating person with others were of great help in his academic development. Javier said that he "liked to help his classmates and to live together, although at first it [was] difficult for him." "I didn't like going to the first party so much, because he [would] say to me: 'Why am I going?'".

Although his academic load was not heavy, Javier commented that he "always had the support of mom and dad". He mentioned that he "lived with [his] parents of his [and] they asked him how [he] was doing in school." Living with his parents was a great help, even though they had no college experience. Some of the obstacles that he experienced were related to social insecurity and the family economy, although he always had a financial scholarship for his academic excellence. Javier commented that "he wanted to study outside the city, but due to insecurity and the [family] economy, he couldn't."

Javier's college transition was smooth. In his classroom there were few students and there was good interaction between them. At first he did not like to attend the gatherings organized by the university; However, over time he integrated with his classmates and developed a taste for coexistence between classmates and teachers. Javier remembers his experience full of "joy, satisfaction and emotion; although there were also moments of stress "related to" some teachers and learning activities ". According to his experience, Javier experienced changes and mentioned a sense of achievement: "I learned a lot, I had a great time."

### **Raúl History**

Raúl's experience was a pleasant one. Studying college was helpful. He commented that "his experience ... was a superior personal achievement." Raúl was convinced that "studying or preparing could improve his quality of life (...). Continuous training helped me to acquire knowledge, I have had better job opportunities now, better salary, better opportunities, it opens doors to study and that was my main objective ”.

On the other hand, his abilities like "willpower, persistence, motivation" and his sense of personal accomplishment kept him in school. Raúl expressed that he liked "to keep learning more". Despite the fact that he had stressful and negative moments, he also experienced happy situations, as he had a good relationship with his friends. He noted that he was helped "mainly by dedication, persistence and motivation to finish something you are starting." In addition, his relationship with his colleagues and friends was "quite good", because in them he found support. Raúl recalled that "they supported each other a lot, [they gave each other] all kinds of support and we continue to share today."

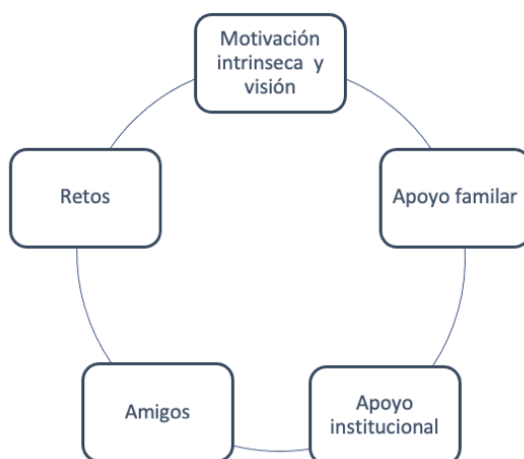
The limitations that Raúl had in his career at the university are related to economic issues and social insecurity, since "most of the support came from the school, since he had a monthly scholarship." Although "the support of my father and mother also helped me a lot", as well as the information that the university offered. Raúl was a positive influence on his brothers, who also studied a university degree.

### **Discussion**

The stories of Oscar, Karen, Javier and Raúl have aspects in common that go beyond their characteristics of successful EPGs. Figure 1 shows these similarities in conceptual categories, which were derived from data analysis.



**Figura 1.** Características de los EPG exitosos



Fuente: Elaboración propia

For Oscar, Karen, Javier and Raúl, being a university student was a challenge that involved passing many tests. Specifically, the economic shortages that everyone faced during their school career. In this regard, Linne (2018) mentions that for students having low resources is decisive in their success or failure because it affects emotions and motivation. However, it should be noted that intrinsic motivation and vision kept these students ready to overcome all challenges. Wanting to pursue a college degree was the priority regardless of or wondering how they would achieve what they had in mind.

Jacobson-Lundeber (2016), Tello and Lonn (2017), Shumaker and Wood (2016) and Soria et al. (2015) agree that emotional intelligence is required to have the ability to visualize the future. Oscar, Karen, Javier and Raúl knew how to manage their emotions, because despite facing stressful situations, they knew how to handle difficult situations, which shows Montiel's (2017) assertion about the resilience capacity of successful EPGs to overcome stresses. challenges despite adversity.

In relation to family and friend support, the students' stories show that both factors are key to success. Although Raque-Bogdan and Lucas (2016) argue that EPG families do not have academic experience to support them, in many cases (as in those reviewed) moral support is more significant. For example, in Raúl's story, his greatest motivation was to improve the quality of life of his parents.

On the other hand, regarding friends, Means and Pyne (2017) comment that interactions between classmates create a feeling of connection and belonging, which helps students feel part of the group.



It is worth noting, however, that the interactions of students with teachers do not occur in the same way (Mwaikinda and Aruguete, 2017), although in the case of successful EPGs, a close relationship with their teachers was perceived. In this sense, it should be noted that the support of educational institutions is important for the EPGs, since the stories of Oscar, Javier, Karen and Raúl revealed that the university was a facilitator in the academic trajectory due to the support provided.

The successful EPGs who were interviewed are defined as intrinsically motivated students with a clear vision of what they want for themselves and their families. Successful EPGs have their emotional strengths and weaknesses well defined, which allows them to overcome the challenges that arise.

The barriers of the EPG are related to economic issues and academic support from the family. In some situations emotions could be a barrier; however, the motivation demonstrated in their narratives proved to be decisive in achieving their goals. Therefore, the enablers of successful EPGs are persistence, motivation, the ability to integrate with your friends, and your ability to envision a better life. The moral support systems of successful EPGs are their families and friends, although the university also played an important part in the process (specifically in Javier's story, as he was the one who received scholarships). However, in the stories of Oscar, Karen and Raúl, clear and concise support was not perceived from the university system, but only from teachers and classmates.

The limitations of the study were possibly deformed events and forgetfulness perhaps caused by age or some trauma; however, through the questions during the interview an attempt was made to provoke the memories lived.

## Conclusions

Higher education worldwide faces multiple challenges in different dimensions. One of them is to offer the student population an education appropriate to their needs and characteristics. The EPGs have different characteristics that make it difficult for universities to provide a quality education relevant to student demand. There is extensive research on PGA and the factors that influence school failure; however, from the perspective of successful students, inquiries are limited in Mexico and Latin America.

The purpose of this qualitative study, therefore, was to learn about the experiences of successful first-generation students in higher education through the narration of their life stories. Although it is not an exhaustive study, the subject is explored in the Mexican context in order to understand it

and compare it with other contexts to find possible solutions. The academic trajectory of the EPG in the university supposes barriers and facilitators. Barriers for students are related to their inexperience in the university culture and lack of academic support from their family, as well as uncertainty and emotions such as stress, anger or despair. Despite this, the narrated stories of the participants demonstrate that their motivation and resilience made it easier for them to achieve their academic goals.

The ability of the EPGs to envision their future encouraged them to integrate with colleagues and teachers to study and work as a team. However, although there is some institutional support, specific university programs are still required to facilitate the academic life of EPGs, because despite their ability to overcome challenges, there is a high number that do not complete their objective, so it is appropriate wondering what is the role of higher education institutions in this scenario.

### Future lines of research

Future studies could explore university programs that have a direct impact on the development or promotion of resilience, motivation and visualization capacities, as well as the experiences of students at risk of dropping out. It would also be convenient to study the performance and impact of existing university programs in charge of generating an inclusive university culture.

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