revistaFuentes
ISSN: 1575-7072 | e-ISSN: 2172-7775

Insights from Spanish Language and Linguistics Students on Theory-Practice Balance in Teacher Education

Perspectivas de los estudiantes de Lengua Española y Lingüística sobre el equilibrio teoría-práctica en la formación del profesorado

Inés Lucas-Oliva[1], Universidad Pablo de Olavide (España)
Irene Moreno-Medina, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (España)

Abstract
This study aims to explore the expectations and desires of students pursuing Education Sciences degrees regarding their studies. To meet this objective, and employing a mixed-methods approach with content analysis, the study examined the perspectives of a sample of 423 students enrolled in Primary Education, Early Childhood Education, and Pedagogy programs. Findings reveal a discrepancy between students' anticipated outcomes and the reality of their university education. While students expect primarily theoretical knowledge from their studies, they express a desire for more practical and professionally oriented training. In conclusion, these insights underscore the need for enhancements in teacher training programs to bridge the gap between academic learning and professional-world pedagogical demands. Addressing these gaps holds the potential to shape a more equitable and sustainable educational landscape for the future, fostering a student body that is more motivated and equipped with the required teaching competence. Further implications of this study are also discussed.

Resumen
Este estudio pretende explorar las expectativas y deseos de los estudiantes universitarios de Ciencias de la Educación en relación con sus estudios. Para cumplir este objetivo, y empleando un enfoque de métodos mixtos con análisis de contenido, el estudio examinó las perspectivas de una muestra de 423 estudiantes matriculados en programas de Educación Primaria, Educación Infantil y Pedagogía. Los resultados revelan una discrepancia entre los resultados previstos por los estudiantes y la realidad de su formación universitaria. Mientras que los estudiantes esperan principalmente conocimientos teóricos de sus estudios, expresan su deseo de una formación más práctica y orientada a la profesión. En conclusión, se subraya la necesidad de mejorar los programas de formación del profesorado para salvar la distancia entre el aprendizaje académico y las exigencias pedagógicas del mundo profesional. Abordar estas lagunas tiene el potencial de configurar un panorama educativo más equitativo y sostenible para el futuro, fomentando un alumnado más motivado y dotado de la competencia docente necesaria. Además, se discuten otras implicaciones del estudio.

Keywords / Palabras clave
Preservice teacher education; Teaching skills; Teaching profession; Career development; Professional training; Higher education; Education and employment; Educational sciences.
Formación preparatoria de docentes; Aptitud pedagógica; Competencias del docente; Desarrollo de la carrera; Formación de profesionales; Educación superior; Educación y empleo; Ciencias de la educación.

[1] **Corresponding author:** imlucoli@upo.es

Revista Fuentes
2024, 26(2), 225-239
https://doi.org/10.12795/revistafuentes.2024.25306

Received: 2024-01-17
Revised: 2024-01-26
Accepted: 2024-03-27
First Online: 2024-04-01
Published: 2024-05-15

1. Introduction

Knowing what the teachers of the future think about their university degrees is essential for the development of educational changes and innovations that lead to higher quality teaching in our universities (Ferrão & Almeida, 2021). The relationship between expectations, motivation and academic success has been widely studied (Campos et al., 2022; Willis, 2021). When expectations are much higher than reality, or they are simply oriented in different directions, demotivation and frustration increase directly (Balloo, 2018; van der Zanden et al., 2018). This, taken to the realm of higher education, translates into student demotivation, leading eventually to academic failure (Wong & Chiu, 2021) and even dropout (Balloo, 2018; Messerer et al., 2023; Suhlmann et al., 2018; Wild & Schulze Heuling, 2020). Although the socioeconomic and cultural factor of students is one of the aspects with the greatest impact on academic success/failure (Lucas-Oliva et al., 2022), the increased motivation of students due to the fulfilment of their expectations, could reduce this impact, thus achieving a more egalitarian education (Arias Ortiz & Dehon, 2013) among students of Educational Sciences. Well-trained teachers and pedagogues are key to improving the quality of education in the future. At the same time, achieving equal quality education is one of the goals of any society in the current era, which is also reflected in the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of the UN's 2030 Agenda (United Nation, 2020).

2. State of the art

Several studies have focused on the expectations of university students regarding their studies. Alves et al. (Alves et al., 2012) identified in their qualitative study seven categories of prior expectations: training for employment, quality of training, social pressure, quality of the institution, social interaction, personal development, and political and civic involvement. Among these, one of the most recurrent expectations according to the literature is the one that directly links higher education with access to the professional world (Campos et al., 2022; de Souza Fleith et al., 2023; De-Besa-Gutiérrez & Gil-Flores, 2019). This linkage with the labour market includes different perspectives. On the one hand, a more superficial perspective focuses on the students' passage through higher education with the expectation of obtaining the formal requirements that will later allow them to access a specific profession in the field of teaching (with the profitable social and economic implications that this type of position entails in Spain). This means that students expect to obtain a higher education degree in order to achieve a future with stability and well-being as well as a high social and economic status. On the other hand, a more training-oriented perspective brings together expectations linked to the acquisition of professionalizing learning, skills, and competencies, i.e., those that will enable students to perform effectively and satisfactorily in their future job.

Regarding the latter, students expect to receive quality training, and this implies providing them with the possibility of acquiring the skills and autonomy they will be required in the future (Gleeson et al., 2021; Jääskelä et al., 2018; López-López et al., 2018; Lucas-Oliva et al., 2021). To this end, their higher education needs to be closer to practice and more oriented towards professionalization (Alzafari & Kratzer, 2019; Bendermacher et al., 2017; European Commission, 2013b; Menéndez & Naylor, 2019; Suleman, 2018; Trinidad et al., 2021).

The concept of professional competencies and, in the context of this study, teaching competencies, has been studied and defined from different perspectives. The present study draws on the concept based on Shulman (Shulman, 1987) professional knowledge, which is widely accepted both by the scientific community (Appova & Taylor, 2020; Blömeke, 2017; European Commission, 2013b; Ibañez & Villasana, 2020; Loewenberg-Ball et al., 2008; Lucas-Oliva et al., 2021; Malva et al., 2020) and by other institutions such as the OECD (Guerriero, 2017). According to the scientific literature, the professional knowledge is made up of three different types of knowledge: content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge and general pedagogical knowledge and, in order to develop all of them, especially those of a pedagogical nature, it is necessary to provide Opportunities to Learn (European Commission, 2013b).

It is common for higher education to focus its teaching on content knowledge (which is directly related to the knowledge of theoretical content), while leaving learning related to the development of skills and competencies in the background (Appova & Taylor, 2020). However, in order to develop competency-based learning, which favours the development of professionalizing skills and abilities as well as an autonomous character in the future teacher or pedagogue, it is essential that teachers have solid opportunities to learn during their training and throughout their careers (Jäger-Biela et al., 2020). This implies bringing students closer to real contexts and situations and allowing them experiential (Kolb, 2015; Morris, 2020) and action learning (Brook & Pedler, 2020; Cho & Egan, 2023; Csillag & Hidegh, 2021). That is, letting students learn by

solving authentic challenges and problems in the context of the teacher's or pedagogue's everyday work (Cruger, 2017; Figueiredo Motta & Vasconcelos Ribeiro Galina, 2023; Lucas-Oliva et al., 2021).

According to this, the European Commission issued a report on Education and training, which states that a balance between the educational programs followed by university students and the skills and knowledge demanded by the labour market would increase employment opportunities (European Commission, 2023). This is a fundamental aspect to be taken into consideration, especially in countries with high unemployment rates such as Spain (the country where this study is being carried out). The same institution, in another report on study/training dropout, states that there are three fundamental aspects related to such dropout: Lack of a comprehensive strategy, Lack of evidence-based policy-making, y insufficient prevention and early intervention (European Commission, 2013a).

In view of the above, it is considered necessary to carry out a study that will lead to knowing the expectations of students regarding their higher education. This will serve policymakers and university faculty as scientific support for making decisions regarding curricula and programs, particularly in the implementation of improvements and educational change projects that will directly benefit students as well as society as a whole. In short, bringing the curriculum and the teaching closer to students' expectations increases motivation and decreases dropout rates (Messerer et al., 2023; Suhlmann et al., 2018; Wild & Schulze Heuling, 2020). In this way, it would be possible to reduce the impact of the socioeconomic and cultural factor on academic success or failure (Arias Ortiz & Dehon, 2013). Reducing the social gap between students who access and successfully complete their higher education would mean breaking down barriers and moving closer to a fairer and more democratizing higher education. For this reason, the main objective of this paper is to know the expectations and desires of university students of Education Sciences regarding their studies.

3. Methodology

2.1. Methodological approach

The analysis of open-ended survey data is not new in educational research, despite its historical underuse due to complexity. To fulfil the research objective, we employ content analysis—a useful method for an objective, systematic, and quantitative review of text content, as per communication principles (Berelson & Lazarsfeld, 1948). It also enables comparisons during analysis and interpretation (Bécue Bertaut, 1991).

3.2. Variables – Coding

Nine categories were created for qualitative variables. Table 1 illustrates the coding process used for these variables (Bécue Bertaut, 1991), conducted post data collection. The open-ended responses were initially read and grouped based on their meaning and content, with the coding aimed at refining their meaning for objectivity.

Table 1
Coding

Nr. Code	Coding	Meaning	MF Q1[1]	MF Q2[2]
1	Tools and resources	Theoretical understanding of strategies, techniques, dynamics, tools or resources applicable to teaching and pedagogical activities. Despite their practical utility, these are predominantly taught from a theoretical standpoint in universities. It involves acquiring theoretical knowledge on the use of teaching tools and resources, with no emphasis on practical application.	27	27
2	Theoretical contents	Theoretical knowledge on any aspect related to teaching or pedagogical work. This category includes knowledge of methodological paradigms, learning procedures and processes, content on special needs or learning difficulties of both children and adults, etc. These are both general and specific theoretical foundations.	188	96
3	Motivation	Encouragement, enthusiasm, and positive emotional positioning towards teaching and/or pedagogical activity, both related to professional work and to the learning about it.	5	9

DOI: 10.12795/revistafuentes.2024.25306

4	Titling	This category includes answers related to access to the teaching and/or pedagogical profession: compulsory qualification, information on career opportunities, professional future, working conditions and job positions.	17	11
5	Practicum	Professional internships in which students carry out teaching and/or pedagogical tasks, but under the tutelage of professionals who act as mentors and guides. This is practical experience in the workplace and in direct relationship with the students.	10	48
6	Professional competencies	Development of competency learning, i.e., acquisition of skills, abilities or capacities that allow the application of contents. These are aptitudes that enable professional activity.	29	31
7	Training	Broad category covering the sum of theoretical knowledge (code 2), tools and resources (code 1) and professional competences (code 6). It implies having both the theoretical and practical preparation to enter the profession, i.e. being equipped with the theoretical and practical training, even if professional experience is lacking..	96	66
8	Soft skills	Social and interpersonal skills. These are skills that are non-technical and not specific to the profession in question, but necessary for successful performance in any work environment where other people are involved. These skills include creativity, effective and assertive communication, interpersonal relationships, team/people management and leadership, emotional management, problem solving. Also included are self-perceptive skills such as self-knowledge, self-confidence, or self-values.	32	10
9	Life experiences	A broad category that encompasses different types of non-training or non-professional life experiences. These include aspects related to friendship, fun, the future, personal growth, and happiness, among others.	14	12
	Total		418	310

Source: Own elaboration. Note[1]: MF Q1 = Marginal frequency Question 1. Note[2]: MF Q2: Marginal frequency Question 2.

3.3. Sample

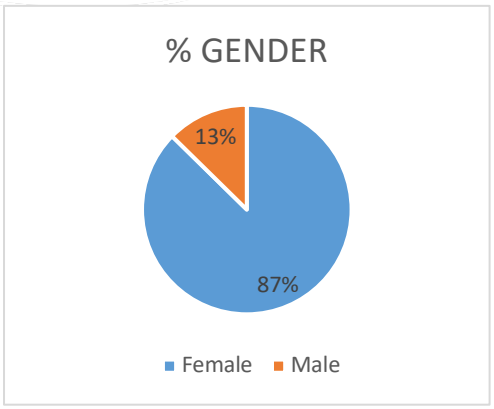
The target population of this work were students of Education Sciences of the University of Seville. Specifically, of degrees of Early Childhood Education (ECE), Primary Education (PE) and Pedagogy (P) of the academic years 2019/2020, 2021/2022, 2020/2021, and 2022/2023. Table 2 and graphs 1 and 2 show some of the characteristics of the sample participant.

Table 2
Sample characteristics

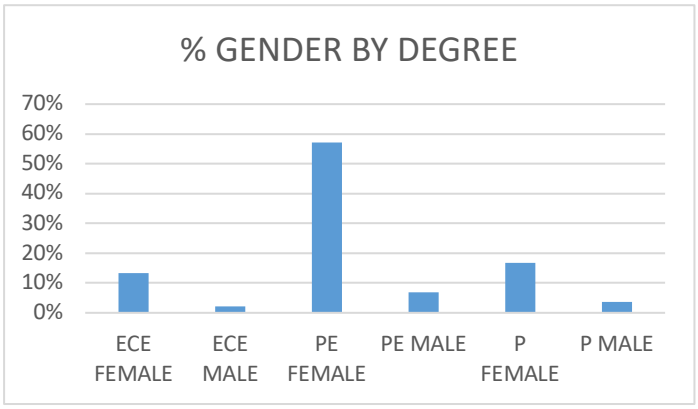
Degree	Number of Respondents	%
ECE	65	15
PE	270	65
P	88	21
Total	423	100

Source: Own elaboration. Note: Early Childhood Education (ECE), Primary Education (PE) and Pedagogy (P).

In the total sample, most students are women, representing 87%, while men make up only 13% (Graph 1). This distribution varies when considering the different degrees: in Early Childhood Education, 13% corresponds to women, in Primary Education 56%, and in Pedagogy 18%, leaving the remaining percentage for men. In detail, 3% of students in Early Childhood Education are men, 8% in Primary Education and 2% in Pedagogy (Graph 2).



(1)



(2)

Graph 1. Percentage Distribution of students by degree. Graph 2. Percentage distribution of students by gender

Convenience sampling was used, as the sample was chosen according to the teaching involvement of the researchers with the degrees of Education Sciences to be investigated. Finally, data were collected from students of 4 different subjects, in 3 courses and 3 different degrees. First, the compulsory subject Spanish language applied to child linguistics, of the 2nd year of the Degree in Early Childhood Education; second, the compulsory subject Development of linguistic skills and their Didactics in Primary Education, of the 2nd year of the Degree in Primary Education; third, the compulsory subject Spanish language and its didactics, of the 3rd year of the same degree just mentioned; and lastly, the optional subject Curriculum counselling and basic competencies in Language, Literature and Mathematics, of the 4th year of the Degree in Pedagogy. The data were collected in these subjects over four academic years: 2020/2021, 2021/2022, 2022/2023 and 2023/2024.

3.4. Instruments for gathering information

To meet the objective of the research, a questionnaire w used. The creation of this questionnaire had, as its first function, to complete the information that was collected through the institutional survey of the university degrees of the University of Seville to improve the subject. Being aware of the potential of this and the good reception of the students to give information in a more detailed way, modifications were made to answer the objective of the study. This adaptation of the instrument was done following the steps of the one used by Professor Joaquín Mora Roche in his teaching project (Mora Roche, 1994) and following the example and indications for the adaptation of the instrument of Aguilera (Aguilera Jiménez, 2007, 2017).

The instrument was configured with the following blocks of questions: a) identification questions, b) questions about professional characteristics, c) questions about the evaluation of the subject, d) open-ended questions about their expectations and desires about the career. Open-ended questions have limitations (Molero López-Barajas & Ruiz Carrascosa, 2005), but they are key to finding complementary information that cannot be extracted from closed-ended questions (Molero López-Barajas & Ruiz Carrascosa, 2005). The use of open-ended questions is the ideal way to collect information about the perception of the target population of the study without influencing their responses. It is the questions in the open-ended question block that serve to answer the objective of this work.

The validity of the instrument was carried out through a group of expert researchers who were provided with the questionnaire in Excel with a comment column so that they could make indications if necessary. These experts were selected for their academic training and professional experience in line with the objective of the instrument. Finally, professors of Research and Diagnosis Methods in Education and professors of Language Didactics participated. Likewise, a first pilot test was carried out with one of the classes of the sample. With this pilot test, some of the questions were better developed and others were eliminated since it was necessary that the questionnaire did not take more than 30 minutes since it was going to be administered in class and the intention was to alter the classroom dynamics as little as possible.

DOI: 10.12795/revistafuentes.2024.25306

3.5. Field work

The questionnaire was applied through Google form to obtain an online version that would not have problems in any type of browser or device and ensure the maximum participation of the students. For its application, a time slot of the subjects in which the researchers had a classroom was used. The participants were explained the objective of the study and given the necessary instructions to answer the questions. Once explained, their voluntary participation was requested, and it was guaranteed that the data processing would be carried out under anonymity procedures.

This study complies with all the requirements established by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Seville. All subjects have signed an informed consent form after receiving information about the project. In the case of underage subjects, consent was signed by their legal guardians.

3.6. Data analysis

The coding process of the open questions allowed a greater exploitation of statistical data to check the relationship between variables. To check if there is an association between the degree of belonging and the answers (coded nominal variables), the χ^2 Test is used, which is formulated as follows:

$$\chi^2 = \sum_{i=1}^{k} \frac{(0_i - E_i)^2}{E_i}$$

To check the intensity of the relationship, Cramér's V is used, which is formulated as follows:

$$V = \sqrt{\frac{X^2}{n * \min(r-1, c-1)}}$$

For the analysis of open-ended questions, a coding was carried out following the steps of Ghiglione (1989): coding with a reduced number of categories. It is at this point that a qualitative methodology based on content analysis is used, as it is done in a similar instrument already applied previously by Aguilera (2007, 2017), who indicates that, despite the richness of the analysis, one of the main drawbacks of this type of instruments is that their analysis is more laborious than other types of statistical analysis.

4. Results

4.1. General overview

As noted above, the objective of the research is to learn about the expectations and desires of the students of the undergraduate degrees of the Faculty of Educational Sciences of the University of Seville. A first approximation is made with the word counting (Table 3). It stands out that the word knowledge is the word that appears most frequently both in the question on expectations and in the question on desires. In general, the content of this counting is similar in both dimensions, with words from the semantic field of training, knowledge and skills being the most frequent. However, there are also notable differences. While in the expectations dimension, the terms teacher, career, teaching, and methodologies appear exclusively; the concepts life experiences, ways and resources appear only in the desires dimension.

Table 4

χ^2 test, critical value, and Cramer's V of students' Expectations.

Expectations		**Desires Frequency**	
Frequency	**Word**	**Frequency**	**Word**
223	Knowledge	93	Knowledge
97	Faculty	39	Future
57	Academic training	38	Faculty
56	Children	37	Children
51	Education	32	Academic Training
45	Teacher	30	Tools

44	Future	27	Practicum
38	Skills	25	Students
32	Degree	39	Practice
31	Job	22	Education
31	Tools	19	Learning
66	Teaching	19	Skills
30	Students	18	Work
28	work	18	job
40	Classes	17	Classes
22	Practicum	16	Life experiences
38	Learning	15	Ways
16	Methodologies	15	Resources

Source: Own elaboration. Note: Nouns were chosen (verbs have been nounized), eliminating other types of words with less semantic load such as articles, prepositions, etc.

To confirm whether there was a relationship between the type of responses and the degrees, the χ^2 test was performed for each of them. For both questions, on expectations (Table 4) as well as on desires (Table 5), H_0 was rejected. This indicates that there is an association between the students' answers and their degree. This means that the responses are not random. To test the degree of association, Cramer's C coefficient test was performed for both. V for expectations is 0.21 and for desires is 0.322. These results, since they are between 0.2 and 0.6, are considered moderate, which shows that the variables are moderately related.

Table 5
Word counting of open-ended responses.

Degree / **Answer**	**ECE** 1	**PE** 2	**P** 3
1	5,66	2,07	0,01
2	12,51	0,90	3,14
3	0,01	0,07	0,08
4	0,74	5,57	15,15
5	0,42	0,56	0,19
6	3,12	5,51	2,62
7	1,06	0,35	2,82
8	0,00	0,22	0,48
9	0,88	0,19	0,05
1	5,66	2,07	0,01
2	12,51	0,90	3,14
3	0,01	0,07	0,08
4	0,74	5,57	15,15
5	0,42	0,56	0,19
6	3,12	5,51	2,62
7	1,06	0,35	2,82
8	0,00	0,22	0,48
9	0,88	0,19	0,05
χ^2		64,39	
Critical value of χ^2		26,30	
V		0,322	

Source: Own elaboration. Note: Early Childhood Education (ECE), Primary Education (PE) and Pedagogy (P).

Once it is confirmed that the students and their responses are related, the results of the content analysis are shown divided between expectations and desires.

4.2. Expectations of students about their university education

The students' response probabilities are presented in Table 6. Clearly, expectations fall especially on theoretical content (45%), but general training (theory, practice, tools, and training:) represents 74% of the total.

DOI: 10.12795/revistafuentes.2024.25306

Table 6
Probabilities of responses on expectations.

Degree / Answer	ECE 1	PE 2	P 3	TOTAL
1. Tools and resources	3%	7%	7%	6%
2. Theoretical contents	65%	41%	43%	45%
3. Motivation	5%	1%	0%	1%
4. Titling	2%	5%	5%	4%
5. Practicum	6%	2%	1%	2%
6. Professional competencies	6%	8%	3%	7%
7. Training	11%	25%	27%	23%
8. Soft skills	2%	9%	7%	8%
9. Life experiences	2%	3%	7%	3%
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Own elaboration.

4.2.1. Acquisition of theory, resources, and training

Students expect their university studies to prepare them for the successful performance of their work as professionals in the field of education. This implies receiving training of a holistic nature, unifying theory, and practice. In this sense, they consider that the university should provide them with opportunities to learn (OTL) or acquire theoretical knowledge about learning methodologies and processes, but also about resources and tools for practical application. They expect with this type of training to know how to respond to everyday situations that occur in the performance of teaching work. This is what the students say:

> In addition to theoretical knowledge, I hope that the degree will provide me with methodologies that are flexible and that allow me and my students to develop creativity and innovation. In addition, I hope that it will provide me with real cases and situations to which I can propose feasible and effective solutions. In this way, I will be better prepared to face them when they come up in the future (Student 116: 7).

> Effective teaching methods and confidence to develop my work with autonomy (Student 145: 1).

As a complement to the above and as an inherent part of the training, many students expect the university to provide them with competency-based learning. This means that, beyond mere knowledge, they expect to be able to develop competencies, skills and abilities that will enable them to face their future work in a more professional manner. Moreover, in line with this competency-based learning, some students also refer to the critical capacity and sensitivity acquired thanks to their university education. They express themselves about it in the following terms:

> I hope that my career will train me as a teacher by providing me with all the knowledge, skills and abilities necessary to do so, as well as teaching me to have a more sensitized and detailed vision of the world around me (Student 222: 7).

> Sufficient knowledge to be able to train tomorrow good persons (Student 205: 2).

Similarly, there is a recurring reference to innovation among the students' expectations. Students expect to receive not only training in teaching methodologies, but also training in teaching innovation. In this sense, some of the informants indicate that they expect the university to help them acquire a broader and more innovative vision of the world of education, providing them with a greater openness of mind. This is reflected in the following interventions:

> I hope it will give me an innovative view of education (Student 370: 2).

> I hope that thanks to the career I will be able to know better how to treat children, increase my knowledge on how to offer them the best education and I hope it will increase my creativity and provide me with many resources to be able to carry them out in the classroom and be an innovative teacher. (Student 55: 2).

Another line of thought, within the expectations related to training, raises the relevance of being trained to provide a good public service in the future, when they will be teachers and pedagogues. Under this perspective,

students show their concern for obtaining from the university the training that will allow them to be good professionals in order to offer quality work to society. This is what they say:

> At this point, the career has already given me a lot of knowledge. However, I hope that the career will provide me with training to deal with people and understand their needs in order to provide solutions (Student 398: 2).
>
> Knowledge about the development of children and their possible needs, knowing how to act in different situations, knowing possible difficulties that may arise with future students and knowing how to deal with them (Student 46: 2).

4.2.2. Career as access to the labour market

One of the most differentiated expectations of students with respect to their time at university is that it will help them access the labour market in the world of teaching and pedagogy. There are two different perspectives in this regard. The first of them conceives their university studies in a more superficial and mercantilist way, considering that it is the procedure required to obtain the degree that will open the doors to the labour market. Thus, their expectations are deposited mainly in the material attainment of the degree and not -or not so much- in the acquisition of learning, as can be seen in the following responses:

> A title. (Student 264: 4).
>
> A diploma. (Student 394:4).
>
> Unnecessary information and a degree to go out with under your arm. (Student 229: 4).

The second line of thought that alludes to the university as a way of accessing the labour market is oriented towards the attainment of a specific job. In this sense, students expect the university to be an access route to develop the job they want and to develop professionally in the field of education. This is how students put it:

> A pathway to become a teacher (Student 136: 4).
>
> My dream job in hospital pedagogy (Student 380: 4).
>
> To be able to become a teacher in primary education (Student 73: 4).

Despite these ideas about access to the professional world, according to which students assume that their university degree will provide them with the necessary qualifications for the desired position, there are students who feel that their training is not sufficiently broad to feel confident about that future. This is how they express this criticism:

> Facilities to get into a job, but not to gain a lot of experience and feel prepared to work (Student 261: 4).
>
> For the time being, I feel that it is not helping me to prepare myself to work as a teacher (Student 263: 4).

4.2.3. Soft skills acquisition

In addition to the above, students expect the university to enable them to develop soft skills. Among them, special attention is given to skills related to effective and assertive communication, which is linked to the ability to establish satisfactory interpersonal relationships, both to transmit content effectively and to manage groups of people with positive leadership. This is how the informants put it:

> The necessary skills to correctly transmit values and knowledge to primary school children (Student 206: 8).
>
> Freedom in expressing myself and a more extensive or adequate vocabulary (Student 195: 8).
>
> More vocabulary and self-confidence when speaking in public and also knowing how to explain myself (Student 106: 8).

DOI: 10.12795/revistafuentes.2024.25306

However, the expectations of acquiring soft skills also encompass the development of skills related to creativity, emotional management, self-confidence, and personal growth. This is illustrated by the following comments:

> It will give me confidence to communicate appropriately in class, pedagogical strategies to interact with students, and knowledge to teach the relevant subjects (Student 256: 8).
>
> Learning to work with people I don't like (Student 185: 8).
>
> Social and emotional skills to deal with people (Student 396: 8).

4.3. Students' desires regarding their university education

The probabilities of students' responses according to their desires are presented in Table 7. Again, expectations fall especially on theoretical content (31%), but general training (theory, practice, tools, and training) account for 71% of the total. However, the content of the answers regarding the desires varies: they want a training that differs from the one they are receiving and whose content they consider essential.

Table 7
Probabilities of responses on desires.

Degree / Answer	ECE 1	PE 2	P 3	TOTAL
1. Tools and resources	0%	12%	9%	9%
2. Theoretical contents	55%	27%	20%	31%
3. Motivation	3%	3%	3%	3%
4. Titling	2%	0%	11%	4%
5. Practicum	12%	18%	14%	15%
6. Professional competencies	3%	16%	5%	10%
7. Training	15%	19%	30%	21%
8. Soft skills	3%	3%	5%	3%
9. Life experiences	6%	3%	3%	4%
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Own elaboration.

4.3.1. Acquisition of theory, resources, and training

In contrast to the expectations, the students also expressed their desires concerning what they would like the university to provide them with. Numerous students maintain a critical position, identifying inconsistencies in university teaching and indicating aspects that should be modified. One of these aspects refers to the way in which they receive their training and how professors carry out their teaching. They criticize that, although their classes advocate training future teachers and pedagogues in innovative teaching methodologies, the methodologies followed to carry out these teachings are completely traditional, which generally translates into insufficient training. These inconsistencies are expressed in the following terms by the students:

> I would like to be taught different methodologies and feel part of it, because many teachers promote new evaluation methodologies, doing with us the same as always, therefore, we can never put ourselves in the other place in a real way, but always in an imaginary context (Student 238: 2).
>
> A more complete training not only in contents, but in innovative methodologies that are explained, but not put into practice (Student 234: 7).

4.3.2. Need for practical implementation

Another of the most recurrent criticisms expressed by the informants in their desires refers to the lack of practical content as opposed to the excess of theoretical content. Students are concerned about the scarcity of competency-based learning, which they believe can only be acquired through practice. Two perspectives can be distinguished in this regard. On the one hand, they would like to see an increase in content applied to

the reality of teaching work, i.e., learning about tools, dynamics, or strategies for practical application. This is expressed by the informants as follows:

> Learning how to implement education in a classroom (Student 274: 7).
>
> I would like it to be more focused on training and practice rather than on the acquisition of theoretical content that will be forgotten over time (Student 405: 7).
>
> In this sense, the merely rote learning is also criticized, as reflected in the following quote:
> A new path to a more learning-oriented education, rather than learning by rote. Dynamics, new learning tools (Student 295: 7).

On the other hand, they would like to have more opportunities to learn in immersion, that is, through experiential learning. Students feel that they should be able to learn from real experiences and would like more practice-based learning with direct links to authentic contexts. This is what the students say:

> Experience, knowledge and, above all, ways to apply them in a classroom (Student 96: 5).
>
> Practical experience, innovative methodologies, useful resources to put them into practice (Student 281: 5).
>
> I would like it to give me experience, the necessary resources to be a good teacher and plenty of values to then know how to apply them in our day to day life both at school and in our daily lives. (Student 273: 5).

4.3.3. Teaching practices and approach to professional reality

In relation to the above, students would like to obtain more practical work (as they do, for example, in the Practicum). In this sense, they state that they would like to learn through direct experiences with the professional world, i.e., they advocate learning in action. This is reflected in the following testimonies:

> I would like to see more time spent in practical classes, working with children (Student 108: 5).
>
> Something much closer and more realistic to what I am going to find in a classroom tomorrow. What good is a theory going to do me if I don't know how to put it into practice (Student 26: 5).

In addition, some students express particular concern about practical work with regard to one of their worries: education in the field of therapeutic pedagogy. This is what some students say:

> I would like or would have liked to learn many more practical things and, as I said, related to special education, practical techniques to help in the educational field, etc. (Student 367: 5).
>
> I would like the career to be more linked to the practices and to deal more with the subject of learning difficulties/disabilities and how to make adaptations for this target group (Student 363: 5).

5. Discussion

The research achieved its aim by shedding light on the expectations and desires of Education Sciences university students. Nine key categories were identified from students' responses: Tools and resources, Theoretical contents, Motivation, Degree, Professional practices, Professional competencies, Training, Soft skills, and Vital experiences. These findings closely parallel Alves et al.'s (2012) landmark study, which also highlighted aspects such as employment training, educational quality, institutional quality, social interaction, and personal development. However, two categories from Alves et al.'s (2012) study—pressure, and social and political involvement—were not directly evident in our sample. Though some students expressed concern for social involvement, their main focus was on preparing themselves as effective educators rather than engaging directly in political or social spheres. Additional research is required to ascertain the reasons behind the apparent lack of engagement in social and political issues among education students at the University of XXX. Furthermore, it is crucial to investigate whether this phenomenon is prevalent among students in other faculties or universities.

The findings reveal two predominant aspects: Firstly, students expect their higher education to primarily provide them with theoretical knowledge, aligning with prior insights by Appova & Taylor (2020). Secondly, they seek training that facilitates their entry into the professional sphere, which reaffirms previous findings (Alves et al., 2012; Campos et al., 2022; de Souza Fleith et al., 2023; De-Besa-Gutiérrez & Gil-Flores, 2019).

DOI: 10.12795/revistafuentes.2024.25306

Students, often with a critical tone, express their desire for a comprehensive and professionalizing education. This implies providing them, not only with theory (linked to content knowledge), but also with tools, resources, competencies, and skills that will allow them to develop professional and teaching competence, as advocated by Appova & Taylor (2020), Ibañez & Villasana (2020) or Malva et al. (2020), among others, which will preparing them to excel in the professional world. This reinforces the words of de Souza et al. (2023) in whose study they state that "students expect not only to obtain better technical qualifications for the workplace, but also to develop personal abilities that equip them to effectively and creatively deal with the challenges and complexities of modern society" (p. 8).

Part of this criticism contend that universities must offer opportunities to learn more closely tied to practical and future professional realities. Our study's findings align with the literature on experiential learning (Kolb, 2015; Morris, 2020) and action learning (Brook & Pedler, 2020; Cho & Egan, 2023; Csillag & Hidegh, 2021; Lucas-Oliva et al., 2021), advocating that direct exposure to real-life situations and authentic professional contexts is vital for students to gain professional competence. This exposure helps them acquire the necessary skills and preparation to competently tackle the challenges of their future careers. Additionally, this viewpoint is reinforced by European Commission research on academic success and professional integration (European Commission, 2013a, 2013b, 2023) and other scholarly publications (Cruger, 2017; Figueiredo Motta & Vasconcelos Ribeiro Galina, 2023).

This significantly impacts motivation, tying expectations, motivation, and academic success together. In words of Ferrão & Almeida (2021), "there is a need for universities to address older students' expectations by reworking the undergraduate curriculum to meet their developmental expectations and place their best interests at the heart of teaching" (p. 592). Hence, this study not only urges understanding students' expectations but also advocates managing them bidirectionally. Aligning the educational program with students' expectations can foster a more motivated student body, enhancing teaching success. Simultaneously, bridging students' expectations with the academic reality, guiding them towards a more realistic view of their university studies, amplifies this motivational effect, contributing to learning success (Campos et al., 2022). This approach could mitigate the impact of socioeconomic and cultural factors on academic outcomes (Arias Ortiz & Dehon, 2013), fostering greater equality of opportunities and a more democratic education system.

Some strengths of this study involve understanding the students' concerns about their university studies directly from their own voices. Acknowledging their role and engaging them in this study marks the initial stride toward effecting changes that genuinely address their interests and needs This work also presents some limitations. The sample includes only students of linguistic subjects and only from Educational Sciences and the University of Seville. Further studies could extend the sample and implement comparative analyses. Furthermore, this work could be complemented with discussion groups that would allow us to deepen some of the most relevant ideas of this first analysis and answer other questions about the expectations and desires of the students according to the year of study or the differences between sexes (although, as shown in the sample, these are feminized careers).

6. Conclusions

This study carries implications across various dimensions, directly influencing decision-makers involved in shaping university curricula. This study illuminates a prevalent issue in contemporary higher education, notably in countries like Spain. University curricula suffer from a dual misalignment: on the one hand, they don't effectively cater to the professional objectives of higher education as perceived by students; on the other, they fail to meet the societal demands for profiles capable of autonomous adaptation in today's rapidly evolving professional landscape. Given the uncertainty surrounding future professions, educators of the near future must possess a versatile skill set enabling swift adaptation to the needs of present and future societies. Therefore, providing higher education with a stronger emphasis on practical experience and direct teaching exposure, complementing the still essential theoretical knowledge, becomes imperative. In this regard, university professors must introspect on their teaching methodologies, engaging in an exercise of self-criticism and striving for greater coherence between how they teach and how they say it should be taught.

Knowing students' expectations and desires and analysing them from a scientific perspective will furnish decision-makers in academia with crucial information to drive actionable insights and define and implement enhancements in teacher training rooted in scientific research. Enhanced competence among pre-service teachers inherently leads to an improvement in tomorrow's education. In turn, quality education significantly enhances the potential to narrow social gaps, thereby fostering a fairer and more sustainable society.

CredIT authorship contribution statement

Inés Lucas-Oliva: Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal Analysis; Funding acquisition; Investigation; Resources; Supervision; Validation; Visualization; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing. **Irene Moreno-Medina**: Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal Analysis; Funding acquisition; Investigation; Methodology; Supervision; Validation; Visualization; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing.

Fundings

This work is supported by two sources of funding from the European Union "NextGenerationEU", by the Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan and by the Ministry of Universities, in the framework of the Margarita Salas grants for the Recualification of the Spanish University System 2021-2023.
Inés Lucas-Oliva: Called by the University Pablo de Olavide, Spain, in collaboration with the University of Seville under the State Project PID2019-104557GB-I00.
Irene Moreno-Medina: Called by the Autonomous University of Madrid, in collaboration with the University of Seville (Code CA4/RSUE/2022-00208).

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DOI: 10.12795/revistafuentes.2024.25306