Enablers and barriers to the construction of motives for learning at the university: The student's perspective

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Article Info

ABSTRACT

The massification of higher education and the migration to online formats imply changes that affect the ways that people learn and their motivation for learning. In this sense, the motivational orientation of the student can make a difference in learning. This article aims to describe the enablers and barriers to students' motivation for learning from the perspective of Chilean University students in the areas of health and education. The study was conducted through virtual group interviews. The analysis was carried out on the participants' accounts from a constructivist approach to grounded theory. The results showed a valuation of the practical and altruistic motives as a structuring motivational axis. In line with the self-determination theory, the existence of a protected space in the classroom appears as an essential motivational enabler of learning, and virtuality is a critical motivational barrier.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The literature identifies two main orientations for academic motivation: mastery and achievement [1]. During their university education, students orient their activity according to specific goals, which can be performance-oriented, i.e., oriented towards obtaining a grade that allows them to pass the subject, or learning-oriented, which involves activating the cognitive resources necessary to appropriate the content and skills in a profound way [2]. While there is abundant literature on the factors that influence the motivation to learn, as well as the practices in which these are performed, the changes that the current generations have faced with the COVID-19 pandemic suggest that these elements that favor or hinder the desire to learn at university may have undergone mutations. As the UNESCO report [3] indicates, online mode classes do not seem to have been well received by students. However, it is not yet possible to know what impacts this change in teaching modality might have on students in the medium or long term.

In the last two years, university teaching has had to resort to non-traditional learning modalities. This change of scenario forces us to investigate what factors students perceive as favoring or hindering their desire to learn at university in the new contexts. From this perspective, knowing what situations, practices, and actors facilitate, promote, or stimulate the desire to learn at university is essential. Likewise, it is crucial

to identify those barriers that discourage this motivation to learn, taking into account the new scenarios which go beyond the virtual or face-to-face in which university education is currently taking place.

For conceptual clarity, we will distinguish between motives and motivation in this article. To the American Psychological Association [4], motivation is "the impetus that gives purpose or direction to behavior and operates in humans at a conscious or unconscious level (see unconscious motivation)". Meanwhile, the definition of motive has two meanings: one that relates it to motivation in terms of "a specific physiological or psychological state of arousal that directs an organism's energies toward a goal". And another meaning, which is the one we adopt in this study, is associated with the reasons offered to explain an individual's behavior.

The literature, for its part, identifies different elements that can affect motivation to learn. In this study, we have focused on those elements directly linked to the motivation to learn, leaving aside, for the moment, those elements that may favor behaviors related to motivations other than learning. Thus, it is possible to conceptualize the motivational factors of learning from different theories. This distinction allows us to analyze those elements identified by students as barriers and facilitators of learning motivation.

The first theoretical approach corresponds to the self-efficacy theory [5], [6]. This theory proposes that motivational dynamics will be determined by the competence perceived by the student to perform a task successfully. In other words, the lower the self-efficacy, the lower the effort to successfully perform the task [7]. This is because a low perception of competence to perform a determinate task would be an obstacle, as it would inhibit the activation of volitional resources to engage in it.

A second possible theoretical approach is Self-Determination Theory (SDT). This theory conceives motivation on a continuum ranging from extrinsic to intrinsic motives [8], the latter being the type of motives that have the greatest positive effect on the activation and maintenance of activity, in our case, and learning. From this perspective, internal motives would be powerful enablers of learning, while extrinsic motives would have less motivational power, and externally regulated motives would be limited to the existence of such regulation [9]. Within this perspective, it is essential not to forget the role of emotion in motivation. Emotion has been indissolubly linked to the motivational process [10]. By facilitating enjoyment [11], emotional aspects emerge as enablers, while, in the opposite sense, disruptive or negative affections function as barriers to learning motivation.

A third approach is the expectancy/value theory [12]. This theory shows that motivation is determined by expectancy (a construct equivalent to self-efficacy) and by the value assigned to the task. From this perspective, wanting to learn depends both on the expectation of success in the task and the value that the task implies. In this theory, value is a construct that is structured based on interest, perceived utility, importance, and task cost. Recent advances have made it possible to distinguish different types of costs [13], which constitutes a relevant advance in understanding the barriers that affect learning.

Finally, an important distinction is provided by goal theory [14], [15]. This theory posits a model representing two goal orientations, thus distinguishing the orientation of motivation. Therefore, we can observe that students can orient their motivation toward performance or mastery in both an approach and an avoidance dynamic [16]. Thus, when students pursue performance goals, their primary purpose in engaging in academic activities is to develop their competencies. Learning-oriented students welcome challenges and see occasional failures as a natural part of learning.

Conversely, performance-oriented learners focus primarily on how they are evaluated against their peers, on trying to outperform others, demonstrating their competency, and gaining recognition for their performance. On the other hand, performance-avoidance-oriented students try, at all costs, to avoid making mistakes so as not to appear incompetent. These distinctions will allow a more precise analysis of the identified barriers or enablers.

Given our interest in understanding those elements that favor or hinder motivation to learn at university, researchers chosen not to limit ourselves to using a single motivational theory. Looking through more than one motivational theory allows us to understand, in a more profound way, those elements that favor or hinder motivation to learn at university. This methodological choice is anchored in the current theoretical discussion on the use of theories in the field of motivation [17] and is functional to the practical objectives. Finally, the study focus on those elements directly linked to the motivation to learn, leaving aside, for the moment, those elements that may favor behaviors related to motivations other than learning.

2.   RESEARCH METHOD

This article is part of more extensive research that seeks to understand the development of motivational orientation towards learning in university students, delving into contextual elements and the role of teachers in health and education careers. These have been selected as careers with a high social impact. While all professions are important and make a specific contribution to society, there are some whose

practice has a greater social impact. The results of this first stage, qualitative in nature, are reported, in which the motives that students of Health and Education careers have for learning at the university. As well as the enablers and barriers that they identify in the process of learning at the university were investigated.

2.1. Participants
There were 31 students of both gender, all of them of legal age, who were studying health (n=11) or education (n=20), both male (n=21) and female (n=10) participated in this study, selected by convenience sampling. They were contacted via their university e-mail addresses. These students came from different national universities (8), years (1st n=7; 3rd n=11; and 5th n=9), from six different Chilean regions. In this way, the greatest possible heterogeneity was intended.

2.2. Instruments and procedures
Group interviews were conducted within each area (education and health) and class (1st; 3rd; and 5th). Within these groups, we aimed at diversifying these groups in terms of gender, geography, and universities. The participants were invited to participate in group interviews (n=8) that sought to elaborate a collective narrative, favoring a positioning as university students. This strategy meant considering the interviewees as competent actors in the area [18]. Therefore, capable of carrying out a conversation around the topic, seeking the enunciation of a "we" in which intensive processes of reflexivity about learning at the university were developed with autonomy [19]. Heterogeneity among participants within each group enriches each discussion by strengthening the collective viewpoint as university students, which allows a better understanding of the phenomenon.

The data collection was stopped when discursive saturation was reached [20]. The interviews lasted 60 to 90 minutes, were conducted virtually through the Zoom platform and digitally recorded. Subsequently, a verbatim transcription was made, and proper names were modified to safeguard the confidentiality of the participants and their institutions. For reporting purposes, each participant was assigned a letter and a number. The interviews focused on the reasons for wanting to learn at university, the obstacles and enablers for this, and the criteria for evaluating a subject. A semi-structured script was prepared with questions that could facilitate the discussion.

2.3. Analytical procedures
The data analysis process used a pragmatic approach to grounded theory analysis [21]. This process involved analysis in three concurrent stages: i) A process of iterative condensation, through constant comparison, initially very close to the data, raising categories that could explain the phenomenon studied; ii) The process of data visualization, which allowed the establishment of relationships [21], for which the software Nvivo 12 plus and Cmaptool were used; and iii) the establishment of conclusions through the development of an intersubjective consensus within the research team in search of plausibility and robustness of the conclusions. The criteria of rigor that guided the entire process were those of credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness [22].

The analysis process responds to the methodological decisions made by the authors. In this sense, grounded theory, as a method, allows us to approach the understanding through the narratives constructed by the participants. This comparative method, consistently structured based on previous and emerging motivational categories, allows us to visualize the interrelationships of the phenomenon studied through the networks. In this sense, incorporating Cmaptool networks seeks to visually represent these interactions in network displays [21].

3. RESULTS
In the first reading of the results, it is possible to recognize contextual and personal factors that influence the definition of motives for learning from the participants' discourse. However, despite the effort to separate these motives for their analysis, it was observed that their delimitation was diffuse as a consequence of the close link between them. Therefore, the results are presented organized around three questions: i) What motives do students have for learning at the university?; ii) What enablers and barriers do students identify concerning learning motivation at the university?; and iii) What criteria do students used to evaluate the subjects?

In analyzing the results, the researchers did not seek to establish a comparison between training areas or levels. Notwithstanding the above, the differences are explicit in some specific cases as a form of contrast and deepening. The analysis proposal sought to identify the motives that the participants define for learning, the enablers they find associated with this process, the obstacles to this motivation, and the evaluation criteria of the subjects.

The results are presented using the main categories and associated codes, making the necessary distinctions when these vary according to the area (education and health) or level of training. Likewise, in analytical terms, the motives indicated by the students have been organized following a temporality criterion: before starting the career, motives that develop during the formative process, and those associated with a professional future. Some of these motives persist along this timeline, and others appear relevant at one moment and not at another in the formative trajectory.

3.1. What are students' motives for learning in college?

One aspect that stands out from the results obtained in this study is the statement, on the part of the students, of feeling motivated to learn at the university. In other words, students find reasons to acquire new knowledge in the context of their careers. In this respect, the reasons for learning are mainly framed on an altruistic horizon. Despite this, the orientation of these motives is varied and may lean towards taste and enjoyment, achievement, or the sense of usefulness or importance of what is learned. These orientations of the motives for learning in their careers are not exclusive but complementary, as shown in Figure 1.

The motives for learning are organized around practical experience, understood as the possibility of glimpsing the usefulness of a given knowledge in the context of professional practice. The desire to learn is linked to the possibility of taking conceptual or theoretical knowledge to a real scenario, of contextualization or simulation, which allows them to see its usefulness for their future professional performance. It should be noted that this category does not appear among first-year students but is clearly present among participants in the third and fifth years of training. This phenomenon is similar in both groups (health and education), although the sense of practicality is found in students of health careers associated with practice and the link with what they call the "user" of their work.
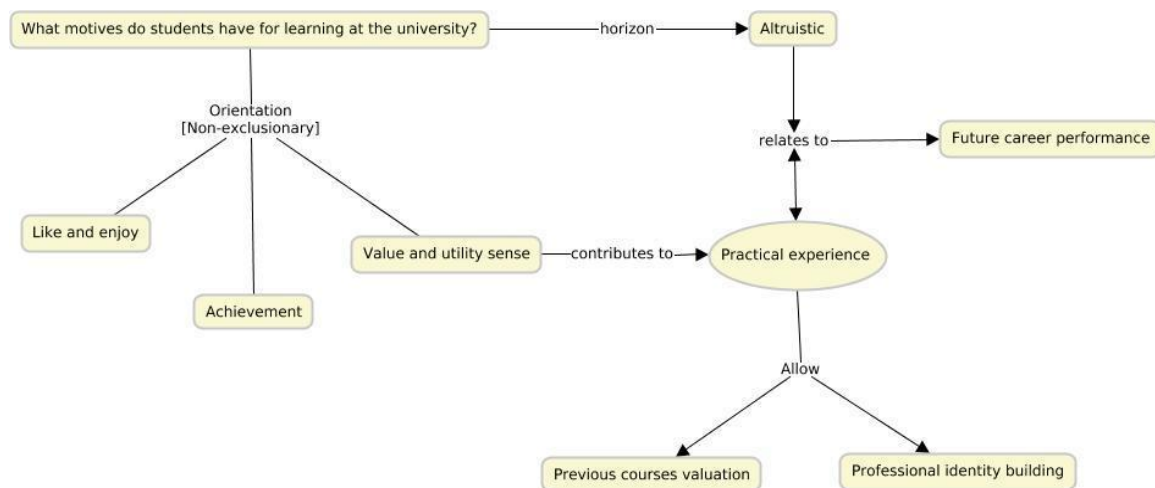

Figure 1. Motives for learning at the university

The value and utility reported by the students correspond to the construction of meaning within the framework of the learning constructed during the training, in line with the expected professional performance. It should be noted that this emphasis on practical experience is not reduced to the pragmatic order, nor does it necessarily point to a "reification of knowledge". On the contrary, this motive, together with others of an altruistic nature, is linked to and coherent with the expected professional learning of service to others or, also, to the concern for the expectation of self-efficacy in the face of professional performance. In the case of students in the health area, this altruistic dimension is represented in the attention to the "service user" and is associated with the need to be efficient in attending to them.

> "*Now that I am in practicum, I have taken it this way; I have been able to treat my users, I have been able to focus, as M5 says, on the communitarian, the social, the familial, and in this way, one at least reaches the user faster, because as M2 also said, sometimes the person does not arrive simply because of a pain, perhaps sometimes it is not a pain that really affects them; then one, with these tools that are delivered at the university, one can go looking into other aspects as well, not only physical but emotional too.*" (M1-Health-5A)

In the case of student teachers, altruistic motives appear in the form of reasons for learning at university. These reasons are projected towards the impact on their future performance. In this way, professional training is seen as a means to provide a good education to others and thus impact the lives of their future students.

> "*I think this motivation is how we can influence in life, in the development of, uh, children and adolescents who will pass through the classrooms where we are, uh, developing our professional activity, right?*" (H3-Education-3B)

Likewise, the sense of usefulness and value attributed to learning during the undergraduate professional training process. This sense seeks to deploy learnings and knowledge of a different order in professional practice. In this sense, the "practical "dimension organizes the motives for learning, projecting the different knowledge that will be put at the service of others.

> "*I like theory very much. Very, very much. But I also know that I can't stay in theory because I have to bring it down, and it is my task, and it is our task as teachers to do it properly for (silence)... There is even an ethical responsibility, I think.*" (M1-Education-5A)

An interesting aspect is that the construction of motives for learning is not linear and can occur retrospectively concerning what has already been learned. The participants report having studied subjects for which they found few motives when they coursed some subjects. However, they state that in subsequent practical experience, they could assess the relevance and usefulness of these for their professional practice.

> "*I think when other courses are integrated, for example, Biomechanics, there you start to see Anatomy, but as the function, the function of I don't know, of 'such and such bone moves concerning such and such other bone.' And then it starts to change a little bit, and then in practice, it changes, and then you start to see, to say, 'wow, I should have learned this' (laughs), I should have paid attention in class and not just learn it by heart but integrate it later.*" (M1-Health-5A).

Among the student's motives for learning at university are also those oriented to achievement. Here the motive is not centered on learning itself, but on obtaining results by specific demands that arise within the career. These motives appear, preferably, in the area of health:

> "*Some people want to be good; they want to prove that they can handle the program, so they study a lot to prove, I don't know, ... that they are worthy of being in the program, or to prove to others that they are good for the race.*" (M1-Health-1A)
> "*I am motivated by... to continue improving my English and... and well, at the end of the day, I think that what motivates all of us is to get our degree or to finish this phase and... to start a professional one.*" (H1-Education-1A)

The last motive of the participants for learning is linked to the enjoyment that the specific content arouses. This motive is expressed both in the form of interest in learning certain areas of knowledge, value attribution based on the interest in learning certain subjects. Finally, the potential enjoyment capacity generated by the content.

> "*No, I don't think there is a big difference, just that all of a sudden, for example, if I like the area of motor skills more compared to something more of anatomy, for example, uh, I'm going to focus more on that area.*" (M1-Education-3B)

As noted, the students who participated in this study have motives for learning in college that can complement each other. For example, liking and enjoyment are related to achievement-oriented motives. Those are framed in a future professional performance horizon.

> "*For example, in high school, I didn't like chemistry, I didn't like biology, but... I began to understand it little by little and... I really liked the subjects, so I felt it was the perfect career in every way. So, that's (what) motivated me to study, that I really like the career, I want to get good grades, I want to pass the semesters well, and I want to practice this profession.*" (M2-Health-1A)

3.2. What enablers and barriers do students identify in the process of learning at the university?

When consulted, the subjects investigated elaborate discourses that highlight two factors in the learning process at the university: vicarious experiences and teachers. These, in turn, can be observed from a temporal perspective associated with the training path as shown in Figure 2. Before entering the career, the desire to learn in the form of enjoyment and interest in disciplinary or professional content appears as a relevant element that will later allow the decision to enter a specific career, and that helps to justify the motives for learning in the present.
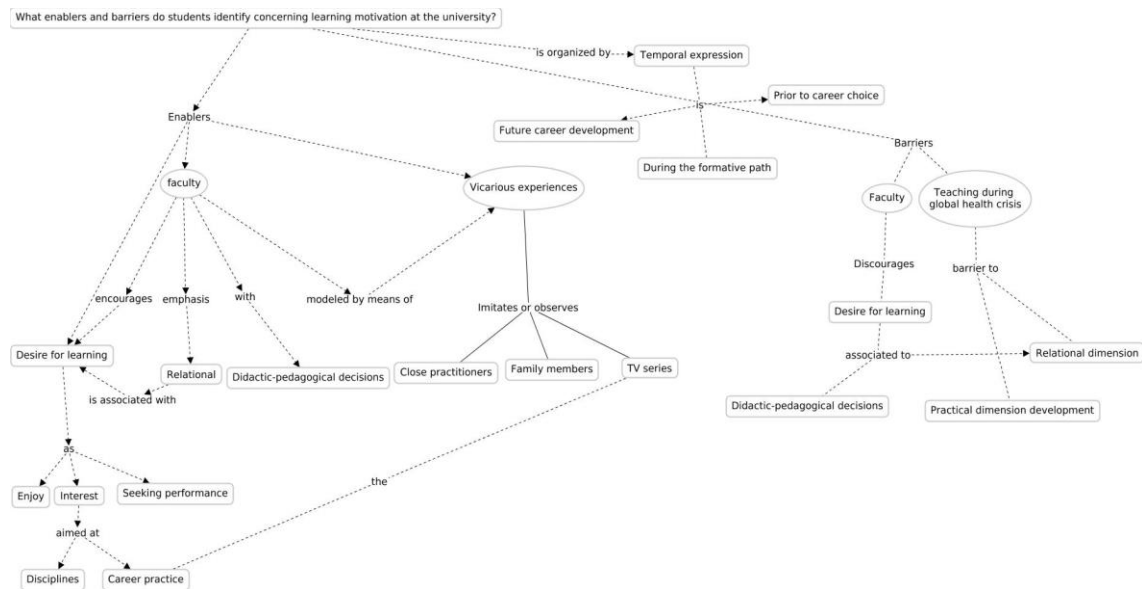
Figure 2. Elements that facilitate or hinder the motivation to learn

Another relevant element is vicarious experiences. These are associated with learning that arises from imitation or observation of others, be they close professionals, family members, or even television series. It should be noted that some vicarious elements such as television series maintain their importance during the course of the degree, allowing the development of motives for learning throughout their training and is projected to subsequent professional development; where again, the practical theme emerges in the discourse of the participants.

> "*I know that maybe it's a little silly, but these series like Grey's Anatomy or House, I think that... yes, they are like an excellent point for people who don't know what's going on with health, and they also see these great doctors, 'whizz' (Excellent), who also have their own lives, their things. I think it's the same because, at least in my class chat group, it's like, "oh, it's just like an episode of Grey's Anatomy when this and that happens.*" (M1-Health-1A)

The enablers linked to the desire to learn in the present manifest as an interest in disciplinary knowledge. In the case of the future, they are expressed as motives that mobilize them to achieve results. An example of this is to obtain a place in a specialty, in the case of medical students.

3.3. The teachers' influence

Both health and education students state that they are influenced by their teachers, who can facilitate or hinder this process. This importance of the teacher is maintained throughout the entire process, from the instances before entering the university, the course of studies within them, and the future projection. The influence of teachers on the motives for learning is associated with how they relate to students, how they teach, and their contribution to the construction of meaning in the profession through practical experience. Thus, teachers are considered facilitators of the motives to learn when they promote a safe space where their students can feel welcomed, valued, and respected, with conditions to be able to ask questions and make mistakes. This relational dimension appears universally -in all areas and years of training- as relevant to build or maintaining students' motives to learn.

"That professor is very... he is quite friendly, he asks you... he asks you how are you doing, he asks how your family is doing regarding COVID-19, if anything happens, that if anything happens, he will talk to the university, and that there is no problem. To have a... a sort of student-teacher bond, that you feel that you can trust the lecturer, that you can ask him, that he will take the time to explain, that he is not going to ridicule you. All those little details are motivating, and in the end, they make you ask questions, talk to him, send emails, hand in your homework." (H1-Education-1)

The participants in this study indicated that if the teacher conducts "entertaining" classes, these are more motivating for learning. However, upon analyzing the results, it is possible to observe that the facilitating role of a teacher is not limited to an entertaining class. A teacher who facilitates the construction of motives for learning allows them to develop a sense of the practical utility of what they have learned and to project it to future professional practice.

"So, the teacher has to have her stamp. It's the same thing I was saying: teacher x, who has been an example for me because I could see her passion, this dedication not only for her work but also for the profession she was practicing." (M1-Health-5A)
"There was a teacher who relied a lot on research and made us read a lot and do research; I felt that this was very important because it was to understand how the diversity of learners was global and how we can contribute to that." (M1-Education-3A)

In contrast, teachers also appear as a barrier to developing motives for learning. The participants express that the different experiences lived during the training. Teachers can become obstacles when the students do not feel that they are pleasant, capable of generating a safe and welcoming space or does not establish a contextualized and practical experience associated with future professional practice.

"Some teachers don't really care, as if the student is interested in perhaps going deeper into something else, would like to approach it differently, they don't listen to them either; so, this deafness that teachers suddenly have of: 'I do my class, and this is how I do it, this way, and there is no other way', I think it is not correct." (Health-1A)

When asked again about the barriers, the health emergency scenario and the need to have virtual classes arise. In this sense, students report that virtuality became an objective barrier in constructing motives for learning. Indeed, some students state that virtual types affect not only the practical training experience but also the learning climate, socialization processes, and learning scope (depth).

"Well, I think that... one of the one of the great demotivation that education has had in gene..., in general, is virtuality since the online study is also difficult with all the distractions that one has at home or with one's responsibilities as well. So, I think it is demotivating for the majority of people having to study at home rather than at school, at university; at least for me, I was very motivated to go to university and do my classes at university, and the fact that I can't do them that way is a factor that demotivates me as well." (H1-Educ-5B)

3.4. What criteria do students use to evaluate a subject?

One of the aspects that we seek to investigate, associated with the motives for learning, is how they define what it is necessary to learn to be professionally trained. The criteria through which they value a given subject are of three types: i) assigned credit, ii) usefulness of the course, and iii) teachers, it should be noted that, for the participants, the three criteria are equally important.

First of all, students point out that the first criterion for weighing a subject's importance is the number of credits assigned to the activity. The higher the number of credits, the more complexity, and depth the students expect; and the opposite happens with subjects with a lower number of credits. When this does not occur, they make pragmatic decisions regarding the level of effort they must expend to pass a course.

"The most difficult subjects have, let's say, 8 hours of study per week or even more; yes, much more in fact! On the other hand, these have 2 hours. Right there in the same curriculum, it is said that this course needs so much difficulty, so much study, then one associates it, as well as 'Ah, right! This one need fewer hours, maybe it is because it is less... it even has a lower difficulty." (H1-Health-3rd)

The next criterion is the sense of the utility of the subject related to the experience and practical use of knowledge in the context of professional performance, either deepening disciplinary content or enhancing the development of specific skills. This utility responds to a critical question of the student: "What will be the use of what I am learning?". The criterion of disciplinary interest also complements the utility.

They were consulted about what recommendations they would give to their peers who have recently entered the university. The students of higher courses point out the importance of valuing some subjects that at the time were not considered useful, but that during the practical experience, they discover the reasons why they were necessary. This sense of utility makes it possible to retrospectively evaluate the weight of the number of credits associated with the course as a criterion of importance or value of the subjects concerning the practical experience.

> "Now that I got to fifth grade, I thought that the subject family community health wasn't going to serve me at all, but I swallowed all my words (laughs), because I ended up putting it into practice a lot, even..." (M1-Health-5A)

A third criterion for evaluating the subject is associated with the teachers. In this dimension, the attitudinal and relational issues of the teacher concerning their students reappear, as well as the teaching methodologies used for the development of the class and the achievement of learning. Students value more the subjects in which they feel respected and, at the same time, entertained. When asked about the teacher's expertise, they assume that all their teachers know what they teach; therefore, this point does not appear as a relevant criterion.

4. DISCUSSION

In the university formative process, it is inevitable to focus the discussion on learning, particularly on the aspects that influence or determine the type and quality of motivation. The present study sought to understand from the perspective of university students. This research looked for elements that enable or hinder motivation to learn and the criteria they use to evaluate the different subjects in Health and Education programs.

Regardless of the area and discipline, the participants in this study want to learn at the university and have reasons to do so. This "wanting to learn" is oriented towards mobilizing what they have learned in a concrete professional performance context. In this sense, the reasons given by the study participants for wanting to learn are associated with the possibility of relating the contents of various orders with a practical, simulated, or real space, where they can observe the usefulness of such knowledge and the meaning it has for their future professional performance; which is consistent with a learning orientation [14], [15]. The above is crystallized in the idea of needing to be trained to deliver the best in their future work performance, offering a quality service and thus benefiting other people. In both groups of students, altruistic motives for learning at university are notorious, a factor especially relevant in the literature concerning Education and Health careers [23], [24]. These altruistic motives also influence the feeling of enjoyment they experience when they are learning some specific knowledge related to their profession. In this sense, we could think that to the extent that this type of reason for learning is present, the regulation of learning would become more internal, and, therefore, a higher level of autonomous motivation would appear [25].

Notwithstanding the above, the pragmatic focus of this learning orientation or mastery [1], needs to be studied in greater depth since all participants belong to institutions that intend competency-based vocational training. This type of training involves the mobilization of different kinds of resources for the resolution of professional situations. It could be influencing the utility value of learning. Even so, this must be qualified by results that show some expressions of interest in certain disciplinary knowledge associated with experiences of enjoyment strongly influenced by the teachers' actions. This highlights the importance of the teacher's action for students to broaden their motives for learning certain knowledge.

In this context, it is worth highlighting some enablers and barriers that drive students to want to learn. The teaching action is identified as an enabler that not only contributes value to what is to be learned but also to the construction of a sense of self-efficacy [26] and expectation of mastery of the content by the student. The teacher's influence as a motivating agent for learning stands out as a central element, mainly if they generate an adequate classroom climate, are pleasant, and emphasize the professional utility of knowledge to be learned.

The teacher's influence is mainly relational and is understood from a need for recognition as people who can learn [27]. In this sense, teachers who recognize students as people with the capacity to learn are considered enablers, while the opposite operates as an obstacle to learning. Consistent with it, in the context of the health crisis, classes conducted in virtual mode appear as an important barrier to motivation for

learning. Students state that it influenced and negatively affected their motivational process based on restrictions in socialization, interaction with peers, attention, and concentration for learning. This is consistent with other studies conducted in this context [28], [29]. The latter allows us to reflect on how online learning is installed in emergency situations [30]. Thus, connectivity problems and the lack of face-to-face interaction have meant a gap in learning motivation.

5. CONCLUSSION

The study examines three key factors influencing students' motivation to learn. Firstly, students perceive their teachers' expectations as a crucial motivational factor. Positive expectations from teachers enhance motivation, while low expectations act as barriers to learning. Secondly, the shift to online learning during the health crisis has negatively impacted motivation due to reduced socialization, interaction, attention, and concentration. Virtual classes have hindered the formation of learning motivations. Thirdly, students highly value practical experiences, which allow them to apply theoretical knowledge gained early in their professional education. Engagement with real-world challenges generates strong learning motivations. In this sense, it is interesting how the subjects analyze with a certain degree of concern in not valuing some theoretical subjects of the first formative cycle and that, in practice context, they acquire a strong relevance.

The study's design carries both strengths and limitations. Conducted in a virtual context, it enabled diverse participant inclusion and enriched group interviews with a range of perspectives. However, virtual interactions required the interviewer's mediation, potentially reducing dialogic engagement among students. The study's findings are valuable but should be extended to a broader student population to mitigate potential self-selection bias. While not universally transferable, the identified categories offer insights, particularly regarding the significant role of teachers in motivating university students to learn. Future research should consider a broader student population to avoid possible self-selection bias. Although the reported study is not intended to be transferable, the proposed categories provide clues for a better understanding of the phenomenon, especially of the teacher as a relevant agent in the motivation to learn in university students.

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