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Perspectives, aspirations and perceived support students with low economic and cultural capital in the university in Spain and Dominican Republic

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Abstract

This paper investigates the characteristics and both material and emotional costs of upward social mobility through university education in Spain and the Dominican Republic. A comparative qualitative study has been carried out, based on biographical-narrative interviews, with a sample of 6 Dominican students and 9 Spanish students coming from an economically disadvantaged background. The results show the social mobility experiences and expectations of the participants and their families, with different nuances in the two contexts. The need to combine study with work is one of the main costs of university. The primary coping strategy in both countries is material and symbolic family support, but additional coping mechanisms to persist in studies are also evident. The conclusions highlight both the perspectives developed by the participants and the critical role of structural dimensions (social background, national context, recent history, economy, social values, culture, religious beliefs) in understanding their experiences in the university context.

Keywords: social mobility, non-traditional students, university, Dominican Republic, Spain



Introduction

The access of non-traditional profiles to universities is a characteristic feature of the mass university of recent decades on a global scale (Andreu, 2023; Marshall et al., 2016). In this scenario, the idea of university education as a social elevator has been a widely used metaphor to describe the aspirations and dreams of students from the working classes. However, universities are finding it very difficult to respond in a relevant way to the increased expectations and needs arising from the growth of new non-traditional and underrepresented audiences (Romito, 2022). Non-traditional university students is an umbrella term, related to several profiles: first generation family at university, students from working class or socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, working adults, women with inequalities, people with disabilities, people with a migrant background (Marshall et al., 2016; Andreu, 2023).

This paper investigates specifically students' perspectives with low economic and cultural capital concerning social mobility at university (Thompson, 2019). Using a biographical-narrative approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with Dominican and Spanish university students. Our focus is placed on the difficulties in their university trajectories that derive from their families' low economic and socio-cultural levels, as well on the coping strategies, resources and mechanisms the students use to compensate for the obstacles they encounter. What barriers do these students face and how do they overcome them to achieve their university degree aspirations? To what extent do they and their families trust that this degree will give them access to a better working future? What are the material and emotional costs for them to study at university? What resources do these students develop in order to access university, persevere in their studies and complete their university degree?

Two national contexts, Spain and the Dominican Republic (DR), have been taken as an element of comparison. There is a shared history between the two countries, as well as linguistic, cultural and religious similarities. Likewise, the recent history of the DR and Spain is characterised by a dictatorship and a civil war. The access of the masses to the university began simultaneously in both cases, around the 1970s. The democratisation process in both countries and the improvement of their economies led to an increase in the demand for university places, as a reflection of the aspirations for social progress of less well-off families. At the same time, there are marked differences between the DR and Spain, and between their university education systems, related to different geographical areas, level of economic development and level of modernisation, which provides an appropriate context to better explore the main objective of this research.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework is based on contributions from theories of social and cultural reproduction (Bourdieu, 1986; Martínez, 2013; Andreu, 2023), critical theory (Fleming, 2016), the sociology of educational trajectories (Castejón et al., 2020), and approaches to good practices and policies on social and educational inclusion in university contexts (Zamacona et al., 2021; Field & Kurantowicz, 2014).

The sociology of social reproduction and inequality has made relevant contributions, showing the structural and systemic nature of social inequalities and the limits of upward social mobility through university education (Bourdieu, 1986; Brown & James, 2020; Langa-Rosado & Río-Ruiz, 2013). The intergenerational reproduction of educational inequalities is one of the most striking features of historical evolution in the twentieth century (Moreno-Mínguez, 2011). Low economic, social and cultural capital is a

significant obstacle to access to university, the development of successful university careers and insertion into the skilled labour market. Study grants for vulnerable students have been reduced in many countries, making it more difficult to continue and complete university education (Langa-Rosado, 2019). Educational pathways are becoming less desirable due to increasing academic demands and the lack of economic resources (Langa-Rosado & Río-Ruiz, 2013).

In this context, the dropout and delayed graduation of students from lower classes increases. Moreover, in the cases in which they continue their education, these students are forced to work and study simultaneously (Langa-Rosado, 2020; Marte-Espinal & Lamec 2021). The traits of contingency, precariousness and intense pressure for achievement are evident in non-traditional students, in a context of neoliberal policies that have weakened the public education system (Díez-Gutiérrez, 2016; Andreu, 2023).

The contributions of Bourdieu (1986) and other sociologists are not limited to identifying the factors that constrain social actors, since the ultimate goal of the sociology of social and cultural reproduction is to offer tools to subaltern groups so that they can develop a social agency that transforms and overcomes the conditions of domination existing in the societies of cognitive and neoliberal capitalism (Giroux, 2015). This perspective is highly relevant for interpreting the educational careers of vulnerable and unequal groups, including university students, overcoming the potential risk of a biased, deficit-based perspective.

The habitus and cultural capital of the family have a significant influence on the pathways of access and career development at university. The influence of the institutional habitus of secondary schools, as a preparatory environment for university entrance, has also been investigated recently. Understanding these processes is necessary to identify the barriers and limitations faced by working-class first-generation students, with the ultimate aim of proposing educational policies and practices that help to overcome these factors of exclusion and inequality (Romito, 2022; Reay, 2022).

The social capital and support networks of low-income students are essential dimensions, which can act as facilitators or barriers to educational career progress (Field, 2017). Four categories of social support provided by informal networks of family, friends, neighbours, and work or study colleagues can be distinguished: economic, instrumental or tangible, information or advice, and social validation (Contreras-Tinoco & Hernández-González, 2019).

Social capital in low-income students has an important family component. Family support is a facilitating factor for successful educational careers (Yuksel & Onur, 2020; Martín-Lagos López & Luque-Suárez, 2020; Rodrigo & Palacios, 2005). Figuera et al. (2003) distinguish two types of family support: effective family support, which includes the perception of intellectual interest, commitment and social participation, and affective family support, understood as self-perception of receiving emotional support based on concern, trust and interest in relationships.

From a macro-structural point of view, family participation and support can be differentiated according to different regimes or modalities. Martín-Lagos López and Luque-Suárez (2020) have proposed four regimes of welfare states in Europe: Anglo-Saxon, continental, Nordic and Southern countries. This last model -referred to Spain, Greece, Italy and Portugal- is characterised by familism, understood as strong family support for children by women (Sánchez & Bote, 2009). In Latin America, this familism is even more relevant than in southern Europe (Naciones Unidas & Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe, 2006).

Research contexts: the Dominican Republic and Spain, two sides of the same coin

In this section, an overview is presented of the national contexts of Spain and the DR to better contextualise the presentation and comparison of the results of this research.

Spain is integrated into the European Union and the neoliberal global economy. After the dictatorship of General Franco (1939-1975), the country experienced a solid economic development and went from being an emigrant-sending country to a receiving country of a large number of immigrants. As a result, Spain has high indicators of quality of life, human development, but, at the same time, it presents a growing social inequality, which in some Spanish regions are among the highest in the European Union (Martínez, 2013).

Dominican history in the last century was dominated by the dictatorship of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo (1930-1961) and subsequent authoritarian governments (1966-1978). Throughout the last few decades, the DR has been trying to overcome the problems of authoritarianism, corruption, clientelism and lack of democratic culture (Castillo de la Cruz, 2015). The country has a medium level of development. Almost half of the population lives below the poverty line. The informal sector is estimated to absorb between 50% and 60% of national jobs (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2012). The majority of the population declares itself Catholic, which is reflected in many aspects of daily life and the values of Dominicans.

The university systems of the two countries have grown significantly in recent decades. In DR, the university is characterised by important shortcomings: low funding, precariousness and low teacher training, little internationalization, and a scarcity of educational policies aimed at vulnerable students (OECD, 2012; Cedeño, 2019; Sánchez-Costa, 2017). In 2021 there were 51 universities in the DR, of which only nine were public. Fifty-seven per cent of students were studying in private universities and 43% in public universities, with a predominance among the latter of the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo. The quality indicators of the Dominican education system are poor (Amiama-Españat & Mayor-Ruiz, 2017), and the percentage of university completion stood at 25% (OECD, 2012).

Although the cost of credit at the Dominican public university is very low, there are many factors that limit the academic success of non-traditional students: high cost of transportation, food and study materials; need to combine study with work; systemic violence and citizen insecurity, making it difficult to commute between home and university; lack of access to new technologies; low level of educational spending in the country, including scant attention to scholarship policy; low level in pre-university academic preparation; gender inequality; and scarcity of resources and educational policies to support non-traditional students, such as first-generation, disabled, immigrants, adult workers and women dedicated to family care (Marte-Espinal & Lamec 2021; Figuereo-Matos, 2016).

Spanish universities have also seen a significant increase in the number of students that has led to the massification of classrooms, producing a diversification of new university audiences, with a greater presence of students from working classes (Langa-Rosado, 2019). During the last few decades, there has been a progressive improvement in educational practices and policies to boost and accompany the academic success of non-traditional groups, including students with low economic capital. But this process was slowed down as a result of the economic crisis that began in 2008, which has had a very strong negative impact on non-traditional groups. Indeed, the university education reform promoted in 2012 by the conservative government led to a significant increase in fees and a restrictive reform of the scholarship policy. The result was very negative for

lower-class students, contributing to dropout and delayed graduation (Langa-Rosado & Río-Ruiz, 2013; Langa-Rosado, 2019).

The analysis of the two national contexts shows that working class students face structural conditions that make it difficult for them to access university and complete their studies. This demonstrates the need to investigate the perspectives of these students and proposals for improvement to favour social and educational inclusion in university contexts. In this context, this study offers an original contribution to this field, taking into account the following issues: (a) it is a qualitative and comparative study between a Southern European country and a Latin American country, an under-researched area; (b) it explores the perspectives of first-generation and working-class students on their family contexts, material and symbolic supports received, coping strategies and resources put in place to favour access, continuity and completion of university studies; c) it presents an interdisciplinary perspective, integrating contributions from sociology, psychology, cultural anthropology, and educational studies.

Method

This article draws on data from two previous studies on university access and progression for non-traditional students in the Dominican Republic and Spain. Both studies adopt a qualitative approach and focus on understanding the experiences and perspectives of the participants. Specifically, these are two biographical-narrative studies (Blakely & Moles, 2017), in which in-depth biographical interviews were conducted, focused on the social context of origin, academic and personal trajectories, and experiences at university. While the original studies explored the university experience of various groups of non-traditional students, for the purposes of this paper, only those participants who came from a family background with low socio-economic status were selected. The identification of social class and traits related to non-traditional students (first generation in the family, working class adults) was made by the participants themselves in a form prior to the interview and confirmed during the interview.

Given the limited number of participants, this study has an exploratory character, although it is also intended to develop a comparative approach, as a starting point for future research with larger samples. The study sample consisted of 6 Dominican and 9 Spanish students.

Table 1. Participants' profiles

Country	Participant	Features
Dominican Republic	Alberto	Male, 21 years old History Student First-generation
	Tami	Female, 22 years old Industrial Psychology Student
	Adrian	Male, 24 years old Medical Student
	Carolina	Female, 22 years old History Student First-generation Two children
	Yajaira	Female, 31 years old Psychology Student First-generation One child

	Cristina	Female, 21 years old History Student First-generation Two children
Spain	Álvaro	Male, 24 years old Business Studies Student
	Magister	Female, 24 years old Teacher training student (Primary Education) First-generation
	Cristi	Female, 23 years old Student of Pedagogy One child First-generation
	Noa	Female, 20 years old Teacher training student (Special Education) First-generation
	Fran	Male, 32 years old Student of Pedagogy
	Maria	Female, 18 years old Teacher training student (Nursery Education)
	Hernán	Male, 25 years old Journalism Student First-generation
	Lidia	Female, 21 years old Student of Pedagogy First-generation
	Lola	Female, 24 years old Teacher training student (Special Education) First-generation

Difficulties were encountered in obtaining a larger sample in the RD, due to the disadvantaged profile of first-generation Dominican students from working class backgrounds, characterised by the need to combine university studies with long working hours and the great distance between the place of residence and the university, which implied considerable travel time. These circumstances were not present in the Spanish sample. In order to balance the number of participants from the two countries, it was decided to select a limited number of cases in Spain. A combination of purposive and snowball sampling was used to identify and recruit participants. Participants were recruited through the researchers' connections at first; subsequently, interviewees suggested new candidates for interviews based on their own personal contacts. The Spanish participants come from one of Spain's largest public universities. This institution has an important presence of non-traditional students. It is located in Andalusia, a region in southern Spain that has a weaker productive fabric than the rest of the country, lower weight of industry and a greater weight of seasonal activities. In turn, Dominican students were selected from the largest public higher education institution in the country, which has campuses in the capital Santo Domingo and in different regions. This university is characterised by a predominance of working-class students, with a large presence of first-generation profiles, informal economy, precariousness, poverty and rural population (OECD, 2012; Cedeño, 2019). Given that Andalusia is one of the poorest regions in Spain and also in the European Union, a comparison with the Dominican Republic is relevant, as this country has medium economic development indicators. However, the students' narratives presented in this paper are not assumed to be representative of the totality of working-class students in the DR and Spain, but only illustrative of the cases under study.

Despite this, there are numerous coincidences with previous studies in the Spanish and Dominican context (López et al., 2009; Marte-Espinel & Lamec, 2021).

The technique used was the biographical-narrative interview, in the format of an in-depth life history, conducted on the basis of an open-ended guideline, which allows for a broad understanding of the students' educational, family and everyday experiences. The interview guideline was initially created, implemented and validated in the context of a large transnational European research project. Subsequently, it was adapted for this study, including the following topics: social and family background; learning and formal education; access and adaptation to university; experiences, learning and relationships in university contexts; personal and educational identity; role of the family as a symbolic and material support structure; work experience and economic issues; resources and strategies to favour access and continuity at university. The interviews were conducted in a conversational format on the aforementioned topics, favouring the expression and freedom of discourse of the participants. The average length of the interviews was approximately 75 minutes. The shortest interviews lasted approximately 50 minutes, while the longest were close to two hours. All interviews were conducted before the covid 19 pandemic.

The interviews were transcribed and coded. The interviews were analysed in two successive phases. The first phase involved an exploratory analysis of the data, carried out by a team of seven researchers, members of the research projects within which the interviews were conducted. This team included the three authors of this study. Subsequently, in a second phase, the three authors developed a qualitative analysis of the transcripts of the interviews, generating the following emerging categories: economic deprivation and working class family background; identities, expectations and value of university; costs of studying and coping mechanisms; material and symbolic support from the family; and resilience versus religiosity. The literature review helped to generate analytical perspectives on these dimensions to deepen the reflective and critical approach of the study. The process of data analysis was iterative and recursive, and involved multiple readings of the transcripts and constant comparison between them. All names are pseudonyms chosen by the students to preserve anonymity. At the time of the interviews there were no ethics committees or similar structures in place in any of the universities to which the participants belonged. All students signed an informed consent form.

Results

The presentation of results follows the aforementioned categories, focusing on the perspectives and voices of working-class and first-generation students about their social and family contexts, the value of university studies, the costs of education, family support, and the resources and strategies developed by participants to foster successful educational careers. It should be clarified that in the participants' narratives, testimonies emerged about their pre-university histories, formal schooling and other issues, which are not addressed in this study.

The same family context in Spain and the Dominican Republic? Economic deprivation and lack of resources

Despite certain differences, the socio-economic context of the families of all the participants is characterised by precariousness and significant economic deprivation. In almost all families, even if both parents work, the purchasing power is very limited.

In the interviews in Spain, a frequent pattern prevails in working-class families, typical of the historical moment of General Franco's dictatorship. The parents had to leave the educational system at an early age, in order to be able to help with the family economy.

The education my parents received was elementary (...), so they had to go to work, selling fruit in the street (Cristi, Spain).

As you can deduce, my parents have not been able to study, as they had to start working at a very early age (Noa, Spain).

These 'failed' educational trajectories are at the basis of the parents' aspirations for their children, because they link education, including access to university, with social advancement and success in life. Parents attribute their precarious living conditions to the lack of education that would allow them to 'prosper'. Hence, they aspire for their children to break the cycle of poverty in which they were trapped.

Since we were little, our parents have instilled in us that studies are very important and working hard to give us a good future (...). They have always explained to us that they have those jobs because they didn't want to or couldn't study; and that they don't want that kind of life for us (Cristi, Spain).

In the case of participants from the DR, this historical progress towards greater social and economic well-being is not so clearly perceived. The differences between the living conditions of parents and participants are not as marked. Although university education can lead to greater economic well-being, poverty is more widespread. A certain level of parental education does not guarantee more favourable conditions on a permanent basis. This is the case for Tami, who cannot fully afford her studies, despite the fact that her mother works in a grocery store and that her father also works. In this context, moonlighting and the informal economy are very common practices.

(Regarding his father's work) Right now, he is distributing goods, but he is also self-employed. In my house, we have opened the business. My mother has a beauty salon and also a grocery store (Alberto, DR).

My father has a stand selling empanadas. My mother is a housewife; she does her housework and has a small business (Carolina, DR).

The value of the university: Identities and expectations

The value attributed to university education is, in the first place, its potential to open up a 'better future'. However, a 'better future' translates into getting out of the job and economic precariousness, and not necessarily in obtaining wealth.

I wanted to grab hold of something safe in the job market, careers where there were more job opportunities. In the end, I opted for a degree in Business Studies (Álvaro, Spain).

The truth is that I don't know if my life will change much or little when I finish my degree; what I am sure of is that I will be more protected and with more possibilities for the future, when it comes to opening new work horizons (Fran, Spain).

In the case of Spain, these and other testimonies are a reflection of parental aspirations, but also of the prevailing conception in Spanish society that the university is a powerful social elevator, the necessary means for upward social mobility. However, the students question this premise more implicitly than explicitly.

My parents have always instilled in me the importance of education, and above all of training for a profession, as if a degree was a guarantee of finding a job (Maria, Spain).

The times in which students live have changed compared to the times of their parents. Today, a university degree is no guarantee of a better job. That is why, when asked what the university brings them, the answers of the participants are directed towards other types of 'gains', referring to personal development and recognition.

It makes you look at the world from a different perspective, and going to university opens your mind; it's amazing (Hernán, Spain).

Dominican students, however, do trust that the future university degree will produce an improvement in their work and economic situation. Their testimonies refer above all to expectations of economic progress, insisting on personal and vital gains.

And working in my area, with a position, with a good salary, because not only a job, but also a good salary... (Tami, DR).

Costs of being at university and coping mechanisms

Studying at university has significant financial costs. As mentioned above, the participants and their families do not have sufficient finances to meet the costs of education. These financial requirements go beyond the payment of tuition fees, as they also include the purchase of books and materials, transport and meals away from home.

It is already a myth; not a myth, a fable, I don't know; it seems to be that a university, which is public and very cheap, that it is free, but it is almost like a private university, because it also costs money; there are many collateral expenses: in transportation, food, and teaching expenses for books, materials... (Adrián, DR).

State aid, in both countries, is very limited and tends to be focused on the payment of fees. In addition, to get a scholarship and keep it, it is necessary to be a full-time student to meet the academic requirements. In the case of many adult students or students with dependent children, it is impossible to meet these grants' requirements.

The scholarship and aid system is focused on the traditional student (...). But for those who are different ... for example, students with children, what happens, that you are going to demand the same credits as someone who does nothing? (Fran, Spain).

This is why the participants find themselves in need to implement numerous strategies that allow them to overcome difficulties and deal with complex situations through the most diverse mechanisms, ranging from small survival tricks (volunteering in the library to have preferential access to books) to complex family reorganizations.

The main cost of studying at university for these working-class students lies in the constant need to reconcile time and responsibilities. Even as recipients of state scholarships, this income does not cover university expenses. For this reason, they have to work, either permanently or temporarily. The need to combine work and study makes it more difficult to obtain a good academic performance. As the level of commitment to studies is very high, this means that sometimes participants have to delay their itineraries, or make constant readjustments to work and achieve a good academic performance.

That's how I got my first job in a supermarket. On the one hand, it was very good for me to have some extra money, but on the other this job made it very difficult for me to get my

degree. It was very hard for me to get my university degree and it took me 6 years (Álvaro, Spain).

I went to university for the first time in 2001, but I had to drop out at that time because our economic situation worsened (Cristina, DR).

In some cases, the family's economic situation improves and university costs can be met. This gives rise to non-linear itineraries, periods in which the usual academic course is followed, combined with periods in which progress is slower, due to the need to combine study with work.

The first and second year I was working so that my parents didn't have to spend so much money (...). In the third year, seeing that it was difficult for me to combine my studies with the jobs I was doing, I decided to focus on my studies and my parents supported me in my decision (Cristi, Spain).

But when it is not possible to resort to family support, a dilemma arises for the student, who has to assess the best options to ensure the continuity of academic progress.

I don't mind working; what's more, I want to work, but I know that if I do, I won't dedicate myself fully to psychology; and this doesn't seem fair to me, after all that it has cost me to get there. I want to be the best and I want to continue as I have been (Noa, Spain).

And it is here that numerous strategies are deployed, with little impact on academic performance, aimed at defraying university costs. This pattern is more evident in Dominican students, since the amount of state aid is considerably lower than in Spain. We illustrate it here with the cases of Adrián and Alberto.

Shortly after entering university, Adrián, a medical student, realised the high cost of his studies and his difficulty in paying for them. He discovered tutoring (an option offered by the university to students with good performance) as a way to compensate for his financial needs.

I didn't know anyone who could help me. So, I began to identify a way to deal with my difficult situation. And one way is to be an assistant instructor (...). So, students with good grades are chosen to help the professor. These students are given a financial allowance and other benefits... So, I saw this and I said: 'I'm going to be an assistant instructor' (Adrián, DR).

A similar case is that of Alberto, a history student. In addition to his studies, he contributes to the family economy, but he has difficulty accessing books and study materials. His way of resolving this situation is to volunteer at a university association, because this allows him access to books for photocopying, thus avoiding major costs.

Well, I wouldn't do it in the sense of being a volunteer, but the benefit of being a student here at the university, because sometimes I don't have the resources to buy a book. If the book is in the Association, then I borrow it and photocopy it, at a lower cost (Alberto, DR).

However, despite the ingenuity and efficiency of these strategies, it is clear that they continue to take time and dedication away from study, especially if we take into account other vital conditioning factors that some of these students experience, such as motherhood and the need to collaborate in the domestic economy. In this precarious context, the interviews in the two countries show that organised and controlled use of time is a necessity for the university.

To become something in life, you have to get organised first. You have to organize yourself first, and layout the plans. That is, as if we were an engineer, to put the plans on the table... (Alberto, DR).

I often make plans and schedules to organize my time (Maria, Spain).

Both [her children] are at school in the morning and I get up in the morning, dress them, give them breakfast... Then, when they leave, I go to work (...). Then they arrive at noon (...) When I arrive at noon, I cook and leave them bathed... Then, I leave for the university, and a neighbour takes care of them until I arrive... (Cristina, DR).

Without this organizational and planning capacity, vulnerable students would not be able to persist in their studies.

Family support: Symbolic and material value

In order to cover the lack of state aid, the main point of support for students in both contexts is the family. There are numerous references found in the interviews that abound on the multiple ways in which the family supports the academic activity of the participants. It is evident, therefore, the Latin and Mediterranean familism, that reveals the preponderance of the family as a protective agent and procurer of well-being.

Today I am still waiting for the scholarship to be granted, which I am eagerly awaiting, as it is one of the supports along with my mother's salary that help me to finance myself (María, Spain).

I think that if my mother wasn't here, I wouldn't be able to continue studying... (Yajaira, DR).

Even during exam time my mother tries to leave me alone, so that I can study or she takes the housework away from me, as I often seem overwhelmed or worried (Maria, Spain).

As can be seen, material family support consists not only of economic help, but also of care, time and other tasks to facilitate study. An outstanding example refers to the students with children, who need someone to look after their children, particularly when the students are mothers, according to several participants.

A differentiating aspect of the two contexts is the bidirectionality of material support observed in Dominican students. While family support is in both countries a key element to ensure continuity in studies, Spanish students do not need to support their families in turn. In the DR, however, the support relationships within the family are more complex, since the students collaborate more decisively in the family's economic activity. Alberto's testimony is very clarifying. His mother runs two businesses at home (a beauty salon and a shop), so her help is essential.

We organize ourselves in the following way: If, for example, a lady arrives for the beauty salon, my mother leaves the grocery store and I stay with it and she stays in the salon. When I have time to study and if she has not finished in the salon, I take the notebooks to the grocery store and I study little by little, until she finishes (Alberto, DR).

In turn, the Spanish cases present a particular element that is not perceived in the interviews with Dominican students. It is a form of support that is not material, but affective and motivational, which ends up having an important influence on individual decisions, being a protective factor against dropping out. Those parents, who were not able to study and who associate university with social progress, are proud of their

university-educated children. This, together with the material support they also provide, ends up becoming the motive that drives university students to persist, even to become a new reference model in the family.

I thought I was privileged to be the first granddaughter, niece, sister and daughter of the whole family to go to university, that I would be an example for my cousins and my brother to follow (Lidia, Spain).

My family, on both my father's and mother's side, really appreciate the fact that I am the only member of the family studying at university; they are very excited and proud that I am finishing my studies (Lola, Spain).

In any case, this family support, both material and symbolic, is the pattern that appears most frequently in the interviews, although it cannot be generalised to all the participants. In a small number of cases, the family appears as a neutral element, neither supporting nor hindering:

With respect to how they value my studies, yes they value them, but perhaps not enough. My mother hardly asks me anything about it, because I think she doesn't know what to ask either, and she has her mind on things that demand more of her attention. My father doesn't even know, most of the time, what I am studying (Noa, Spain).

I think my family doesn't value it, or doesn't value it as much as I would like. My brother doesn't even know what degree I'm studying; and my mother often tells me, jokingly, that I'm going to retire studying. My mother has never told me to stop studying, ... for her it's something neutral. (Magister, Spain).

In some cases, family attitudes can become an obstacle to academic development:

Also, in my house they don't respect that I'm studying. If I'm in the living room, and my brother plays the music too loud, nobody calls his attention to it. If my mother is watching TV and she likes something, she calls me to go and watch it... Don't they understand that I'm studying? Those things make me lose concentration (Magister, Spain).

The testimonies of the participants show that the universities where they study continue to have a traditional organisation of educational time, which considerably hinders the educational itineraries of students with working class profiles or in vulnerable situations.

Resilience versus religiosity: Elements that differentiate Spanish and Dominican students?

Studying at university has a high cost in terms of time and money, as well as sacrifices and readjustments. Although the interviewees subscribe to the notion that a university degree helps them to progress in life, they are also critical (especially the Spaniards) of the benefits they expect to receive from their time at the institution. What motivates them, then, to make this investment, if the outcome may be somewhat uncertain?

In the Spanish case, in almost all the interviews there is a clear awareness that the life conditions of the participants imply that university studies involve twice as many difficulties compared to traditional students.

(For a non-traditional student) you have to contribute more to achieve the same thing; that is, you have to do twice as much to achieve the same thing (...) in order for me to do the same as someone else does, I have to do twice as much, that's my conclusion (Fran, Spain).

But that does not mean that they give up studying. On the contrary, there is a strong personal engagement that helps them to overcome all the barriers and difficulties they encounter.

Yes, they are all obstacles, but you have to overcome them. Trying is not enough, trying if you fall behind is not enough, you have to overcome them (Hernán, Spain).

Well... that everything that a person proposes can be carried out, if they are in a circumstance like this... they should fight, shouldn't they? That he should do whatever he has to do but that he should not forget and that if his dream and his illusion is to enter the faculty and study anything, he should do it (Magister, Spain).

I am where I am because of my efforts, my eagerness and my desire to study and train, not because I have been encouraged to do so (...) I am the one who encourages me and motivates me to continue (Noa, Spain).

These testimonies show an intrinsic engagement, related to the individual person and their personal desires. However, in some cases, extrinsic factors are also evident, but related to the family and people close to them, referring to not disappointing the expectations created for the participants.

Of course, expectations are created; that motivates you to say: 'I can't fail' (...) when you involve your family in this project, you not only fail yourself, you fail the teachers, you fail your family. For me, the family issue is very important (...) how would I dare to tell my family that I'm quitting, I'd be ashamed (Fran, Spain).

In a sense, many of the Spanish participants are destined to fulfil the aspirations and dreams of their ascendants; they are the children of parents who were unable to study. They have to satisfy the expectations that weigh on them, even more so when the whole family makes efforts to support their studies. Their university careers may be non-linear, with periods of abandonment, or with slower rhythms, but they have to conclude successfully, in order to give meaning to the sacrifice and expectations.

In the Dominican case, this element of individual implication is also present in the interviews. This is what seems to justify the long working days, the hours of study, the numerous family responsibilities, and the long transport times to the university, which can be up to an hour and a half. However, the testimonies do not emphasize individual factors so much, perhaps because this is taken for granted. Instead, religious convictions appear as a regulating element of individual life and decisions.

(Important elements in her life) First of all God; then my children and my parents. (Carolina, DR).

INTERVIEWER: Which is more important to you: profession or faith? TAMI: Which is more important? Well, I know that God first and foremost is indispensable, so it would be difficult for me to choose. I don't know which would come first. But God first and foremost (Tami, DR).

Despite the fact that Spain is a country with relevant religious tradition, in any of the Spanish interviews it is found the recourse to God or religion to narrate individual trajectories. On the other hand, in all the Dominican interviews the expression 'if God allows it' appears frequently. Although it is an idiom, it shifts part of the responsibility to an external entity. When Carolina (DR), for example, talks about her professional and life goals, she says 'I ask God that they be true. Let's believe in God!'. A good example of how divine intervention can explain individual results is found in Alberto's testimony:

I depend a lot on my Christian values, and sometimes, in order to do things, I present them to God before I do them. That is to say, God, if You want this to happen, then let it be Your Holy Will. Now, if You don't want it to happen, let it also be Your Holy Will, because You brought us into the world and we are here for a purpose (Alberto, DR).

Despite the apparent difference in the values of both groups of students, a common element can be seen in these two worldviews. Instead of questioning economic and social inequalities, individual capacity (in the Spanish case) or an external entity (in the Dominican case) is used to explain and accept university achievement. This analysis ignores the lack of state aid and support, and ignores the lack of responsibility and measures on the part of the state. As Hernán says in the following quote, 'if you want to, you can', which implies that, if you do not achieve, it is because of your lack of individual effort.

My experience can simply be summed up in one sentence: 'who wants to, can'. I wanted to study, and everything indicated that I would not study, but I studied, with hardly any economic or moral resources, but I studied: having to work in the mornings, but I studied... I studied because I wanted to (Hernán, Spain).

Or, as Alberto suggests, we are what God chooses us to be.

I live very aware of what God is in my life and of all the wonders He has done with me. For if He had wanted to, when I was eight years old, He would have taken me when I was still an innocent child. But if He left me here on this earth, it is for a purpose, which will end on the day of my death (Alberto, DR).

Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative study has been to describe, understand and value the narratives of students with low economic capital, about their experiences and itineraries at university, with a focus on inequality, the challenges they face, the support networks available and the resources students develop to undertake successful educational itineraries (García-Andreu et al., 2020; Thompson, 2019; Reay, 2022).

The participants' testimonies have shown the many and varied forms of inequality, precariousness and difficulty they face in continuing and completing university education (Andreu, 2023; García-Andreu et al., 2020). Beyond individual stories, the analysis of the results has shown the key role of structural characteristics such as social origin, national context, recent history, economy, social values, culture and even religious beliefs (Field & Kurantowicz, 2014). This is coherent with recent research undertaken with VET students by Aldinucci et al. (2021), that has argued students' aspirations are high as a strategy of adaptation to the labour market and neoliberal society. Nevertheless, these aspirations are not fully realisable, due to structural constraints and inequalities (Reay, 2022).

The idea of the university as a social elevator, which largely articulates the aspirations of participants, has evidence to support it. Indeed, the possession of university degrees is associated with higher levels of quality of life and higher salaries (Cunninghame, 2017). Moreover, social origin has a mediating effect that helps to explain the different options for post-compulsory education (Castejón et al., 2020).

Students' narratives have shown the relevance of social capital and informal support networks (Field, 2014; Santos-Anaya, 2018). In particular, the crucial role of family support as a facilitator of participants' educational careers is confirmed. The accounts collected evidence that this support is deep and continuous, reflected in economic

collaboration, the dedication of time, provision of care of all kinds and emotional support (Contreras-Tinoco & Hernández-González, 2019; Sánchez & Bote, 2009).

The results of this research show that this family support adopts different characteristics in the two countries studied. In Spain, the children receive this support from parents. In contrast, in the DR, the support is two-way: the parents support the children and the children, in turn, offer important collaboration to the parents, including economic contributions, dedication of time and various forms of care. In addition to possible cultural and religious reasons, this difference between the two countries stems from the very different level of development, since in the DR there is more poverty and precariousness, as well as a much weaker supply of public social services, which means that working-class parents are less able to provide support for their children.

On the other hand, the level of parental expectations and aspirations for their children is also a distinctive feature. While in Spain working-class parents (who do not usually have a university degree) tend to consider their children's university education as highly desirable, in the Dominican Republic parents initially do not have a high level of aspiration for their children, although this does not prevent them from supporting their children's educational careers.

The cases discussed show the prominence of personal initiative and resilience in developing successful learning careers (Aldinucci et al., 2021; Ambrósio et al., 2016). The participants are very active and resilient individuals, who try to create and implement appropriate strategies to complete their studies, overcoming economic scarcity, job insecurity, lack of time and scarcity of institutional supports. In order to overcome all these difficulties, the participants highlight the value, both material and symbolic, that the university has for them. On the one hand, they aspire to achieve a qualified job, including an adequate salary to improve their quality of life, in relation to their parents' generation. These results are consistent with studies that found a higher degree of resilience in non-traditional students compared to traditional students (Chung et al., 2017).

On the other hand, in the interviews, the recognition of university studies by the family and the local community is positively valued (Field, 2017). Recognition constitutes a central dimension for the participants. This recognition is related to the effective promotion of equality, within the framework of the right to participation and the social visibility of the experiences and voices of underrepresented groups, which have been historically excluded and marginalised (Field, 2017; Fleming, 2016). These intangible benefits of the recognition of university training pathways are a powerful driver for participants in the prospect of completing the degree and subsequently competing for a qualified job.

The high percentage of university dropouts requires specific political, institutional and pedagogical measures if the dropout rate is to be reduced (Chalela-Naffah et al., 2020; Marte-Espinal & Lamec, 2021). There is a need for more support measures, more services and greater allocation of economic resources, in relation to the cost of fees, accommodation, food, transport and educational materials (Zamacona et al., 2021). Some specific strategies to favour the educational pathways of students with non-traditional profiles are: (a) promoting a greater presence of non-traditional students in degrees that have greater value in the labour market, as a strategy to improve the salary and professional expectations of working-class students; (b) exploring strategies to involve the families of non-traditional students from family engagement approaches, beyond a more restricted perspective, based on the traditional idea of participation (Marquez Kiyama & Harper, 2018); c) strengthen the social, cultural, community and institutional integration of students in the university, both in curricular and extracurricular

activities, as this integration prevents dropout and contributes to educational success (Chalela-Naffah et al., 2020).

The voices of the participants highlight the difficulties for the development of successful university careers when there are structural factors of inequality, low economic capital and family contexts far removed from the university habitus. These testimonies also show that universities, in the two national contexts studied, continue to be institutions that adapt slowly and in a limited way to the needs of new university publics. In this sense, the analysis of the data produced in this research offers some indications of possible improvements that should be implemented, among which are mentioned the following: making the organisation of educational and curricular times more flexible, in order to facilitate the reconciliation of working class students with work; making the profiles of non-traditional, vulnerable and unequal students visible in the university, to favour the recognition of these groups; the development of educational policies of material and symbolic support; and the training of lecturers and managers to accompany processes of educational inclusion in relation to these non-traditional students.

This research has two main limitations. It is an exploratory study, within an area under-researched in Spain and the DR, which aims to document the perspectives of working-class students on their educational pathways at university in two countries. In addition, the sample of 15 participants is relatively small, due to difficulties in obtaining participants in the Dominican Republic, as previously explained. Nevertheless, this paper offers an original comparative research proposal, focused on vulnerable university students, which could be the starting point for more ambitious and in-depth studies in the future. In this sense, the following topics are proposed for future research: exploring the role played by the social capital of non-traditional students and the way in which this capital can be expanded; documenting good practices and educational policies in university contexts to favour the inclusion and educational success of students with low economic and cultural capital; and delving into the strategies developed by working-class families to offer material and symbolic support to their children in their university itineraries.

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The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

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