

Formative assessment in Higher Education: Perceptions of students and teachers

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Abstract

Formative assessment, understood as part of the teaching-learning process, is a topic of growing interest in the field of Higher Education. This study analyzed the assessment process in a university Humanities program in Gipuzkoa (Basque Country) to determine its alignment with formative assessment. To this end, a qualitative design with content analysis was used to collect the perceptions of 122 students and 15 lecturers through interviews, discussion groups, observations and documentary analysis. The results show that both students and lecturers recognize the teacher's role as a guide in evaluation; however, students perceive their participation as limited. Feedback is provided primarily at the end of the process, mainly in written form by lecturers, showing a lack of alignment with the principles of formative assessment. The need for improved planning and communication in the assessment process is highlighted, as is the necessity for aligning teaching and student roles with the principles of formative assessment. These findings suggest the importance of updating the official program documentation to reflect these principles. Likewise, the improvement of formative assessment implementation could contribute significantly to a quality university Education, as well as to the comprehensive development of students.

Keywords: Formative Assessment. Teacher role. Students. Perception. Higher Education.

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1 Introduction

Today, individuals are constantly evaluated, not only for what they do, but also for how they do it, in reflection on their shortcomings and areas for improvement (Ocampo, 2017). It is essential to understand evaluation not as a synonym for grading or rating but as a learning process (Sanmartí Puig, 2017). This process will be participatory, formative, and shared between students and lecturers (Moreno Olivos, 2021), both of whom are essential elements in the teaching-learning process (Morales Lobo, Fernández Fernández, 2022; Ruiz Cuéllar, 2021).

According to Galán (2016), assessment should be an integral part of the learning process at all times. Even if the process concludes with a grade or rating, this grade cannot be the sole basis of the assessment (Cañadas Martín, 2020). Thus, for the sake of quality Education, we must commit to a formative assessment (Azpilicueta, 2020).

The implementation of the aforementioned assessment approach involves adjusting activities and strategies, as well as planning for the student's needs (Lovatón-Huilca, 2021). All of this requires a shift in the current culture of assessment and its application, for which it is necessary to be familiar with the principles of the approach and to ensure that it is integrated into the educational system (Hidalgo Apunte, 2021).

However, assessment in formal Education at various universities is often understood as continuous rating rather than continuous evaluation (Abella *et al.*, 2020), resulting in a predominance of summative assessment over formative assessment. According to Salas Castillo (2019), the prevalence of this approach results in a lack of clarity regarding the evaluation objectives, as well as the absence of a design or preparation of evaluation instruments. Such deficiencies do not contribute to the student's performance or learning process.

This study aims to determine and understand the assessment process of a university degree program and to analyze whether that process is framed as a formative or summative evaluation. To this end, a qualitative research approach was employed to gather the opinions of students and lecturers within their context (Hernández, Mendoza, 2018).

2 Formative assessment

Formative assessment is carried out throughout the teaching-learning process, with the primary objective of improving both the process and its outcomes. According to authors such as Rosales (2014) and Sanmartí Puig (2020), its function is to promote self-assessment, self-control, and metacognitive self-regulation, as well as to provide feedback at various points during the process. From the beginning of the process to the end, formative assessment enables students to reflect on and apply what they have learned (Dixson, Worrell, 2016). That is why the focus of this approach is essentially the students, although the lecturer also plays a relevant role.

Formative assessment is flexible, continuous, student-centered, multidirectional, systemic, and deliberate, promoting and encouraging learning (Cañadas Martín, 2018). Additionally, it is based on the improvement of the teaching-learning process and is, therefore, a fundamental element in enhancing the quality of Education (Ríos-Cabrera, 2021).

Furthermore, formative assessment requires continuous learning (Fernández Medina, 2021). To this end, once the process has been followed up and the detected strengths and areas for improvement have been identified (Nolasco, Hernández, 2019), it becomes possible to enhance the activity and educational process, benefiting both students and lecturers.

The approach to formative assessment influences not only the student but also the evaluation of teaching practice and the teaching-learning process (Hortigüela, Pérez-Pueyo, González-Calvo, 2019). Thus, this approach can be considered a powerful tool for lecturers to influence their teaching practice (Morales Lobo, Fernández Fernández, 2022), resulting in an improvement in the quality of the students' learning process, their motivation, and their participation (López Pastor *et al.*, 2020). Likewise, some authors (Fraile *et al.*, 2021) note that interaction among students has a positive impact on learning and self-regulation. Therefore, formative assessment stands out as the best approach in Higher Education, as it not only supports academic growth but also cultivates a more engaging and dynamic learning environment (Santa Cruz, 2024).

Thus, it can be seen that evaluation affects the entire teaching-learning process, and for this effect to be positive, constructive alignment, as described by Biggs (2003), should be present. To this end, its main aspects must be taken into account: the contexts offered throughout the process, the opportunity to develop learning

objectives or outcomes, and the design of the assessment process. Authors such as Black and Wiliam (2018) and Torre and Schuwirth (2024) emphasize that evaluation cannot be understood without taking the context as a whole into account. In this sense, it is necessary to ensure the alignment and balance of learning outcomes, context, and assessment (Biggs, Tang, 2011).

The implementation of formative assessment offers several benefits. First, greater knowledge and training in the dimensions related to assessment means a better teaching-learning process (Ruíz Cuéllar, 2021). Additionally, the implementation of formative assessment has an impact on the active participation of students during the learning process. This leads to an increase in the student's motivation and involvement, as a higher degree of motivation also corresponds to a higher degree of involvement. Furthermore, formative assessment enables the delivery of higher-quality learning, with a positive impact on student development (Azpilicueta Amorín, 2020).

This assessment approach requires several elements to be taken into account: the determination of the learning outcomes, the presentation of the instruments that will be used for assessment throughout the entire process, and the definition and form of the moments associated with the assessment, as well as the collaboration between lecturers and students (Hortigüela, Pérez-Pueyo, González-Calvo, 2019).

The formative assessment process consists of three steps (Morales Lobo, Fernández Fernández, 2022): first, collecting evidence of learning; second, analyzing this evidence; and finally, making a decision based on the analysis. If this process is not respected and complied with, the grades and training of students and lecturers will be affected (Salas Vicente, Vicente Escuder, 2020).

In the implementation of formative assessment, several elements that favor this process can be highlighted (Cañadas Martín, 2020): sharing and clarifying learning objectives and outcomes with students; encouraging self-assessment and co-assessment; using new assessment instruments at different points in the process; collecting evidence, interpreting the evidence and reflecting on students' perceptions of their evolution; and later dedicating time to feedback to identify new challenges and be able to face them. However, some authors (Asiú Corrales, Asiú Corrales, Barboza Díaz, 2021) argue that the fundamental basis for addressing personal strengths and challenges lies in creating a pleasant and comfortable environment that encourages personalized feedback.

According to Kinash and Knight (2013), feedback can be a potent tool for the learning process, as it allows the identification of strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for improvement when carried out constructively. However, it should be emphasized that the function of feedback is not solely to identify gaps but also to promote personal development (Ramírez, Valdés, 2019). Thus, it is essential to distinguish between comments made as feedback and the numerical rating (Morales Lobo, Fernández Fernández, 2022). That is, when comments and ratings are given simultaneously, the presence of the rating can obscure the value of the feedback provided. This can lead the student to believe that they have reached the end of the process without devoting sufficient time to exploring the feedback offered. Carless and Boud (2018) emphasize that feedback should be provided in real time to help the recipient make sense of the learning process. Thus, it is essential for the lecturer to design and execute feedback moments throughout the process (Morales Lobo, Fernández Fernández, 2022). Jiménez Segura (2015) also highlights the importance of communicating the purpose and usefulness of feedback in the process, as well as when and how it will be offered. However, some lecturers are concerned about the lack of time to provide quality feedback and interact meaningfully with students (Harland *et al.*, 2015).

In the formative assessment process, the participants are both lecturers and students (Rodríguez Gomez, Del Valle, de la Vega Marcos, 2017). In the case of students, some studies (Chávez *et al.*, 2021; Hidalgo Apunte, 2021) suggest that the student is the primary focus of the process and bears the most responsibility for reflecting on their learning, even when they do not feel entirely comfortable with this responsibility. This may be due to the student questioning their ability to put different strategies into practice and reflect on them (Souto Suárez, Jiménez Jiménez, Navarro Adelantado, 2020). Consequently, those who design assessments could gradually allow students to select their preferred assessment methods, promoting increased independence and active involvement in their learning journey (Baartman, Quinlan, 2024).

On the other hand, some authors (Morales Lobo, Fernández Fernández, 2022) mention that this process does not imply that the lecturer must be constantly supervising or grading. The primary role of the teacher in implementing formative assessment can be based on creating and utilizing tools, as well as determining the most effective way to provide feedback (Torres, Chávez, Cadenillas, 2021).

3 Methodology

3.1 Participants and context

This study was conducted at a non-public university in the Basque Country, an autonomous region in northern Spain endowed with legislative authority over its educational system. While the Basque Higher Education framework aligns with the national Spanish structure, it benefits from considerable regional autonomy, allowing for the implementation of policies specifically tailored to the socio-cultural and economic needs of the area. The distinctive political, cultural, and geographical characteristics of the Basque Country significantly shape its academic landscape and educational practices.

Within this context, the study adopts a case study approach, focusing on an undergraduate program in Humanities at a university located in Gipuzkoa, Basque Country, during the 2022–2023 academic year. The research was carried out between February and May 2023. The selected program reflects the region's educational priorities, as it is aligned with a pedagogical framework that emphasizes meaningful, autonomous, and competency-based learning through active methodologies.

Although the degree program consists of four years of study, it was agreed to limit the study to the first three to avoid interference in the data due to the implementation of different plans of study. A total of 122 students and 15 lecturers participated in this research. It was deemed unnecessary to distinguish participants by other possible variables, such as sex and age.

Participation in this study was completely voluntary and all students and lecturers who agreed to participate signed informed consent prior to any data collection. The procedures of the research were approved by the Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects of Mondragon University (IEB-0910).

3.2 Instruments

Taking into account the study's objective, four research instruments were employed: interviews, discussion groups, observation, and the analysis of official documentation from the degree program.

The interview format consists of a previously planned interaction between two people who respond to a specific objective (Sánchez Bracho, Fernández, Díaz, 2021). For the present study, we used semi-structured interviews, which allow

questions to be adapted, eliminated, or added to obtain more comprehensive information (Hernández Sampieri, Fernández Collado, Baptista Lucio, 2014). Six of the participating lecturers were randomly selected for interview. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then provided to the teaching staff for review and approval.

A variety of questions were raised in the discussion groups to promote and analyze the interactions among participants in a relaxed and informal environment (Sánchez Bracho, Fernández, Díaz, 2021). Following the recommendations of Castaño Molina *et al.* (2017), the number of participants in each group ranged from 5 to 10 to prevent controversies and cross-conversations in subgroups. In the present research, discussion groups were conducted with students in their second or third year of study. The groups consisted of 6 to 8 people, and the group conversations were recorded and transcribed. To avoid distorted data, it was decided not to hold group discussions with first-year students because they do not yet have a complete perspective of the degree program.

Through observation, the voices of the participants were recorded, and their roles in the process were analyzed. According to Hernández Sampieri, Fernández Collado and Baptista Lucio (2014), observation is a powerful tool in any qualitative research. However, given the importance of prior planning (Schettini, Cortazzo, 2016), a template based on the research objective was created before beginning the observation. In addition to recording notes in the research notebook, we implemented a rubric based on a four-level Likert scale. This choice was based on the need for participants to take a stance, thereby avoiding the neutrality of the average level of the Likert scale, as per the work of Estévez López and Jiménez Gutiérrez (2014). In the present analysis, observations were made of participants in the first three years of the degree program under consideration, totaling 15 hours. A rubric was completed every half hour. During observation, we examined the influence on the context of the two agents investigated in this study: the lecturer and the students.

Finally, an analysis of the official documentation of the degree program was carried out. This examination focused on the resources available to students on digital platforms. This was intended to clarify the details of the degree program and contrast information collected from various sources (Hernández Sampieri, Fernández Collado, Baptista Lucio, 2014). A total of seven different courses were analyzed, with two in the first year of study, two in the second, and three in the third. In this analysis, a rubric based on the Likert scale was used, allowing space for qualitative comments to gather more detailed information.

3.3 Procedure for data analysis

Data analysis was carried out using MAXQDA and triangulation. MAXQDA was used for the transcripts of the interviews and discussion groups. Triangulation was employed using the previously obtained data, observations, and documentary analysis. Triangulation acts as a filter, allowing us to understand the situation in a more comprehensive and specific way (Kaprawi, Razzaly, Wan Ali, 2015; Paramita, Darwaman, 2021; Franco, Vallejos, 2009).

4 Results

For the data analysis, the information collected from students and lectures was examined, and the provided documents were reviewed. Observations were made. This information was subsequently classified into three categories: the role of the teacher, the role of the student, and the feedback provided.

4.1 Role of the lecturer

Students value the role of the teacher as a companion in the assessment process. Likewise, they stress the role of the teacher as the person responsible for grading, taking into account elements such as active listening and/or feedback:

Depending on the lecturer, some do direct the work, they listen to us, give us feedback and grade us (Student 1, S1); [They] help us along the way, we still have to provide the initiative, but they can also see that student X needs help, so I'll help him (S2).

Teachers agree with students regarding their role as companions in the assessment process. In addition, they understand that the design of the assessment process and the grading are an integral part of their role:

Almost my main and only objective is to help this person create their own learning process (Teacher 1, T1); So that's what we're trying to do here, have the teaching staff give a grade or evaluation to the students (T2); We carry out the design work to create the rubric and the indicators (T3).

In the observations, it was noted that the prominent leader in the assessment process is the lecturer, as they are not only responsible for making corrections but also providing feedback, thereby contributing to the development and improvement

of student learning. However, in the documentation analyzed, the role of lecturers in the assessment process is not specified.

4.2 Role of the student

According to the students' perceptions, their participation in the assessment process is mainly limited to submitting work and receiving feedback. Additionally, they sometimes have the chance to evaluate themselves and their classmates. However, the students feel that this evaluation does not directly impact the process:

Submitting work and listening to work (S6); but we need feedback to improve, to be able to have that option (S3); We also grade each other, but when we work as a team (S1); Self-assessment is done, but it doesn't have much impact (S7).

On the other hand, lecturers recognize that students have a limited influence on the assessment process. In addition, the lecturers state that the students were taken into account in the design of the assessment process but that, in practice, that process has not been implemented according to the design. Regarding self-assessment and co-assessment, it is noted that these are currently carried out in some disciplines but have not yet been implemented comprehensively across all undergraduate subjects. Currently, self-assessment does not have the desired impact, according to some lecturers:

Not during the process. There's not much time for it. We haven't advanced beyond what was proposed (T2); We also have to do a lot of fine-tuning in self-assessment and co-assessment. I believe that things are done there too, but I think they could also be done more thoroughly (T5); in the design we said that co-assessment, self-assessment would be carried out and perhaps they are in some modules, but in general it has not been put into practice (T4); Well, I would say that self-assessment has very little impact (T2).

During the observed sessions, it was noted that the students had done one or more self-assessments. However, their purpose or effect was not addressed before, during or after they were carried out. Regarding the analyzed documentation, no information was found on the roles or functions assigned to students.

4.3 Feedback

Concerning feedback, the students note that it is provided only by lecturers and is limited to the end of the process. They also mention that it is not specified when they will receive it in the different disciplines. That is, although they expect to receive feedback at the end of the process, this is not clearly defined. It was also highlighted that most feedback is received in writing, with the oral modality being the least common:

In a subject, you do five assignments, but you don't receive feedback until the end (S4); We don't usually know when we're going to receive feedback (S1); Maybe too little feedback. With the final grades, they give you observations that say you did well, this too, but in the end... Or even after you finishing the course (S6); When it comes to oral feedback, we receive it in the middle of the process, but rarely (S5).

According to the lecturers, the importance of providing feedback continually is highlighted in the design of the assessment process. However, since its frequency is neither planned nor defined, it is not easy to ensure its continuity. Regarding the modality, unlike the students, the lecturers believe that they offer feedback primarily orally and informally:

I think feedback is given informally, that is, not in written form. But it takes a long time to write it down and make it thorough (T2); together with the grade at the end there are usually comments and so on (T4); we don't have agreed-upon criteria, everyone does it their own way (T3); I think we leave it in the hands of each lecturer, each one has their own style and no one else has gotten involved; there have never been explicit requirements from the degree coordinator when it comes to giving feedback (T1).

When analyzing the observed sessions, we found that throughout these sessions, the lecturer provides oral feedback to the students at various points. However, the documentation examined provides no details about feedback, such as its characteristics, frequency, timing, or modality.

5 Discussion

The analyzed results indicate that students and lecturers agree on the teacher's role as a companion in the assessment process. However, our analysis of the

observations revealed that the perception is that the lecturer is the prominent leader of the process, contrary to the results of various previous studies (Chávez *et al.*, 2021; Hidalgo Apunte, 2021).

Both groups confirm that the grade is the responsibility of the lecturer, in contrast to the findings reported by Morales Lobo and Fernández Fernández (2022). In addition, regarding the role of the teacher, it was observed that they include the design of the assessment process as part of their role, as noted by Torres, Chávez and Cadenillas (2021).

Regarding the role of students, both lecturers and students emphasize that their participation in the assessment process is limited to submitting evidence. Once their work has been submitted, the students are limited to waiting for feedback from the lecturer. Likewise, in our analysis of the observations, we found that even when students occasionally conduct self-assessments or co-assessments, the purpose of these assessments remains unclear to them. Thus, this practice has no impact on the assessment process, contrary to what various authors have stipulated as key elements for implementing formative assessment (Cañadas Martín, 2020; Rosales, 2014; Sanmartí Puig, 2020).

Concerning feedback, the present results indicate that both groups believe lecturers are the primary source of feedback. On the other hand, lecturers emphasize the importance of continuous feedback, as noted by Carless and Boud (2018). However, in the present study, various difficulties in providing continuous quality feedback were mentioned, including a lack of time (Harland *et al.*, 2015) and inadequate design (Morales Lobo, Fernández Fernández, 2022). These difficulties lead students to feel that feedback is given only at the end of the assessment process.

Regarding the feedback modality, both written and oral forms are used. However, the students perceive feedback as primarily written, while the lecturers believe that feedback is given chiefly orally. In the present observations, oral feedback stands out as a notable feature. Therefore, it can be concluded that students do not perceive the presence of oral feedback. This may be due to the failure to communicate the purpose and usefulness of the feedback, as well as the timing at which it will be offered (Jiménez Segura, 2015).

6 Conclusions

This study analyzed a proposal for formative assessment in a Humanities degree program. Based on the analyzed data, it can be inferred that the proposal does not align with the parameters of formative assessment outlined in the literature review, despite the desire for change in the evaluation culture within the degree program under consideration. Thus, we recommend that the official documentation of the degree program be updated to reflect its alignment with the principles of formative assessment (Biggs, Tang, 2011). We further recommend that agreed-upon criteria be established and detailed planning carried out to ensure the continuity and effectiveness of formative assessment throughout the process (Sanmartí Puig, 2020).

The importance of planning and communication in the assessment process must be highlighted. Formative assessment is not only about improving academic results but also about promoting the comprehensive development of students (Nolasco, Hernández, 2019). This approach, supported by careful planning and collaboration between lecturers and students, can significantly contribute to a high-quality university Education. On the other hand, the present results indicate that the lack of communication has led students to perceive assessment as the sole responsibility of lecturers (Jiménez Segura, 2015).

Additionally, the need for the roles of the lecturer and the student to align with the principles of formative assessment has been confirmed. The active participation of students in their own learning process (López Pastor *et al.*, 2020), the effective implementation of self-assessment and co-assessment, and greater clarity in feedback are key areas for improvement (Cañadas Martín, 2020).

While the findings reveal limited formative assessment practices within the program, it would be reductive to conclude that formative assessment is absent. Instead, the data suggest a lack of intentional integration between assessment and learning. In Higher Education, assessment tools—such as written exams, portfolios, and project work—are not inherently formative or summative; their function depends on their design, implementation, and use within the teaching-learning process. Promoting a pedagogical shift, where these instruments both certify learning outcomes and actively support student development, could bridge the gap between assessment and curriculum. For example, embedding feedback loops, revision opportunities, and self-assessment tasks into existing evaluative practices would foster a more formative use of current tools. Aligning such practices with curricular

goals centered on autonomy and competency development would foster a more coherent student-centered assessment culture.

This study had several limitations. First, the fourth-year students were not included because they were not involved in the research process described. However, the result of this exclusion is that it was not possible to obtain a comprehensive view of the degree program. In future studies, it would be advisable to research the entire program.

Second, the lecturers expressed significant resistance to participating in this research due to their own perceptions and insecurities regarding the aspects analyzed. Consequently, we were unable to form a representative research *corpus*.

The passivity shown by the students was another issue, as it caused difficulties in implementing the research tools. Such difficulties can lead to a bias in data collection and affect the diversity of opinions of the student group.

In future studies, contextualizing and sharing the study's objectives from the outset should be positively valued by both lecturers and students. This could make it easier to attract more subjects, making the sample more representative. Additionally, the use of various research tools that can help us understand the situation in greater depth should be considered.

We acknowledge that this study is limited in scope, as it focuses on a specific Humanities program in Gipuzkoa. While the findings provide valuable insights into this particular context, their generalization to other teaching environments should be approached with caution. Some of the issues identified—such as institutional resistance, the importance of clearly communicating research objectives, and the need for broader participation—may nonetheless be relevant to similar educational settings. To better assess the broader applicability of the results, future research should aim to replicate and expand this study across different academic disciplines and geographic regions.

Regarding the research instruments, the fact that this study focused on a single academic year limited the observation of possible trends in the innovation process of the analyzed degree program. Consequently, in the future, it would be advisable to conduct longitudinal research, building on the present research as a starting point.

Avaliação formativa no Ensino Superior: percepções de estudantes e professores

Resumo

A avaliação formativa entendida como parte do processo de Ensino-aprendizagem é um tema de crescente interesse no campo do Ensino Superior. Este estudo analisa o processo de avaliação em um programa universitário de Ciências Humanas em Guipúzcoa, País Basco, buscando seu alinhamento com a avaliação formativa. Para isso, foi realizado um desenho qualitativo por meio de análise de conteúdo, de entrevistas, grupos de discussão, observações e análise documental para compilar as percepções de 122 alunos e 15 professores. Os resultados mostram que tanto alunos quanto professores reconhecem o papel do professor como orientador na avaliação, mas os alunos percebem uma participação limitada. O feedback é fornecido no final do processo pelos professores, por escrito, preferencialmente, mostrando uma falta de alinhamento com os princípios da avaliação formativa. Destaca-se a necessidade de melhor planejamento e comunicação no processo de avaliação, bem como o alinhamento dos papéis docente e discente com a avaliação formativa. A conclusão sugerem a importância de atualizar a documentação oficial do programa para refletir estes princípios. Da mesma forma, melhorar a implementação da avaliação formativa pode contribuir significativamente para uma Educação universitária de qualidade, além do desenvolvimento integral dos estudantes.

Palavras-chave: Avaliação Formativa. Papel do Professor. Estudante. Percepção. Ensino Superior.

Evaluación formativa en la Educación Superior: percepciones de estudiantes y docentes

Resumen

La evaluación formativa entendida como parte del proceso de Enseñanza-aprendizaje es un tema de creciente interés en el ámbito de la Educación Superior. Este estudio analiza el proceso de evaluación en un programa universitario de Humanidades en Guipúzcoa, País Vasco, buscando su alineación con la evaluación formativa. Para ello se realiza un diseño cualitativo mediante el análisis de contenido, a través de entrevistas, grupos de discusión, observaciones y análisis documental para recopilar las percepciones de 122 estudiantes y 15 docentes. Los resultados muestran que tanto estudiantes como docentes reconocen el papel del docente como guía en la evaluación, pero los estudiantes perciben una participación limitada. El feedback se proporciona principalmente al final del proceso, mayormente de forma escrita por parte de los docentes, mostrando una falta de alineación con los principios de la evaluación formativa. Se destaca la necesidad de una mejor planificación y comunicación en el proceso de evaluación, así como la alineación de roles docentes y estudiantiles con la evaluación formativa. Estos hallazgos sugieren la importancia

de actualizar la documentación oficial del programa para reflejar estos principios. Así mismo, la mejora de la implementación de la evaluación formativa podrá contribuir significativamente a una Educación universitaria de calidad, además del desarrollo integral de los estudiantes.

Palabras clave: *Evaluación Formativa. Papel del Docente. Estudiante. Percepción. Educación Superior.*

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