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Study Cultures as Mediators of Educational Equality in Diverse University Settings

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ABSTRACT

This study conceptualises undergraduate students' academic work as both a social and didactic phenomenon, analysed across two epistemologically contrasting fields: Education and Accounting. From a perspective of educational justice, it examines how learning cultures—defined as sets of practices, values, and dispositions towards knowledge—mediate experiences of equality in higher education. A mixed methodology combining ethnographic fieldwork, qualitative interviews, archival analysis, and descriptive and inferential statistics was applied. The sample comprised 305 undergraduate students from public universities in Peru. Findings show that variability in learning strategies, rather than the amount of time spent studying, is significantly associated with higher academic achievement and more equitable educational experiences. The diversity of academic tasks and learning environments reflects both cognitive flexibility and inequalities in access to material and symbolic resources. The results indicate that learning cultures act as mediating processes linking institutional structures, pedagogical practices, and student autonomy. By connecting micro-level academic habits with broader social and institutional contexts, the study bridges the gap between structural analyses of inequality and lived experiences of educational justice. It concludes that universities should cultivate inclusive pedagogical ecologies that recognise diversity in learning approaches as a central condition for equality in higher education.

Keywords: Educational equality, Study cultures, Higher education, Academic achievement, Variability in study practices, University pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

How can university success be explained in contexts of massification and diversity? Although ambitious, this question has become pedagogically central: universities today seek not only to widen access but also to promote equitable learning trajectories (Marginson, 2016). Within institutional policy, "success" is often presented as a priority goal; however, understanding it requires examining the conditions that make it possible and the study practices that sometimes reproduce inequality while, at other times, fostering experiences of equality.

In this paper, academic success is understood in a relational sense—as the outcome of interactions between students' dispositions, teachers' (often implicit) expectations, pedagogical arrangements, and institutional

frameworks (Walker, 2019). This perspective recognises that students interpret and negotiate situated academic codes, and that such practical translations of expectations influence how they study and participate in university life.

Rather than asking "how much do they study?", our focus is on "how do they study, under what conditions, and with what institutional recognition?"—that is, on *cultures of study* as socially situated modes of relating to knowledge, time, and learning spaces (Ashwin, 2020). In this sense, study cultures connect with international debates on equality and justice in higher education—from the tensions between massification and stratification (Marginson, 2016) to the call for policies that address not only access but also learning experiences and actual outcomes. While some approaches equate success with measurable academic performance, others argue for broader interpretations grounded in participation, recognition, and social or epistemic justice (Walker, 2019; Zepke, 2018).

This approach converges with contributions from Latin American scholarship, which has long emphasised the need to rethink educational equality from structurally unequal and culturally diverse contexts. Fischman and Ott (2018) introduce the notion of *pedagogies of equality* to describe practices that, even amid persistent inequality, generate recognition and symbolic redistribution. Similarly, Valenzuela et al. (2014) argue that university equity demands policies integrating quality, inclusion, and social justice beyond the rhetoric of individual merit.

We therefore assume that differences in achievement depend not solely on the volume of work or individual attributes but also on pedagogical relationships and institutional contexts. When teaching and institutional practices acknowledge diversity and mediate academic codes, experiences of equality emerge—understood not as uniformity but as lived conditions of educational justice (Fischman & Ott, 2018; Walker, 2019; Zepke, 2018).

This theoretical shift bridges the literature on higher education equity with recent approaches to student engagement and reflexive pedagogies, as well as with studies exploring the digital materiality of learning (Gourlay, 2021). Accordingly, this article positions *cultures of study* as an analytical lens through which to understand inequalities and the potential for equality. It articulates a theoretical framework combining educational justice, participation, and recognition, deriving implications for pedagogical design and university policy aimed at equity in diversity (Biesta, 2021).

Understanding university success, therefore, requires analysing study practices in their diversity and the institutional conditions that enable or constrain them. This approach situates the question of educational equality not only in terms of access or outcomes but also in relation to modes of knowledge appropriation and the academic cultures that sustain them.

In doing so, the study brings together three interrelated dimensions—study cultures, epistemic justice, and student trajectories—to examine how learning practices mediate experiences of equality. These guiding concepts frame the central research questions: How do study cultures vary across disciplinary and institutional contexts? In what ways do they shape students' trajectories of participation and recognition? And to what extent can such variability foster conditions of epistemic justice within diverse university settings?

Moreover, this conceptual orientation also speaks to broader tensions in contemporary higher education between meritocratic logics and social-inclusion agendas. In many policy discourses, success is reduced to individual performance metrics—such as GPA or completion rates—without due consideration of the sociocultural contexts in which learning takes place (Alon & Tienda, 2007; Liu, 2011). However, studies show that access to university does not necessarily translate into epistemic access (Guzmán-Valenzuela et al., 2020). Students from historically marginalised backgrounds may enter the university system but remain excluded from full participation due to implicit academic codes, lack of institutional support, or limited recognition of their knowledge traditions.

The notion of study cultures addresses these tensions by foregrounding the situated and culturally mediated nature of academic engagement. It shifts the focus from static indicators to dynamic processes of negotiation, adaptation and transformation. In this way, it allows us to identify not only barriers to success but also conditions under which students experience recognition, belonging and agency.

Finally, this framework invites us to critically examine how pedagogical and institutional arrangements shape student experiences. Are diverse study strategies supported or penalised? Do curricula foster reflective and autonomous learning or merely reproduce dominant epistemologies? Do teaching practices acknowledge the plurality of student voices and their knowledge trajectories? By engaging with these questions, this study contributes to the growing field of research on equity and justice in higher education. It argues that cultivating inclusive study cultures is not merely a matter of pedagogy but a central challenge for universities seeking to advance educational equality in structurally diverse societies.

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The following sections outline the theoretical framework underpinning this approach, the methodology employed, and the results that allow a discussion of the implications of study cultures for educational equality in higher education. The findings reveal that students' academic success depends less on the amount of work completed than on the variability of their study practices and the institutional conditions that support equitable learning experiences.

Accordingly, this study seeks to analyse how the variability of study cultures contributes to equity in the university experience, drawing on both empirical and theoretical evidence within a justice-oriented higher education framework.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

From Structural Inequality to Experiences of Equality

Contemporary universities navigate between the promise of democratisation and the persistence of stratification. Comparative research shows that massification has not erased segmentation by social origin or cultural capital; instead, it has shifted the problem towards the quality of learning experiences and outcomes (Marginson, 2016). This situation has prompted policies that focus not only on *who enters* higher education but also on what students learn, how they participate, and what they achieve (Santiago et al., 2008).

We introduce the concept of *experiences of equality*: contexts, practices, and pedagogical relationships that enable students to understand, participate, and be recognised in university learning. Equality is conceived as *lived* rather than formal—a move from parity of access towards *substantive equality* in processes and outcomes (Walker, 2019). Fischman & Ott (2018) argue that equality in unequal contexts demands transforming both the material conditions of learning and the forms of recognition attributed to knowledge and to those who embody it.

Building on Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital and habitus, equality can be understood as a dynamic relation between structural opportunities, cultural dispositions, and institutional recognition. Bourdieu demonstrated that educational success depends not only on cognitive ability but also on familiarity with the dominant cultural codes valued by academic institutions (Bourdieu, 1986, 1990). Students from non-dominant backgrounds often face what Reay (2010) calls "institutional habitus dissonance": a mismatch between their lived experiences and the implicit norms of higher education. Consequently, learning is not a neutral process but a field of symbolic struggle in which recognition and legitimacy are unevenly distributed.

In this sense, equality in higher education entails recognising *epistemic diversity* and enabling students to mobilise their own cultural resources. As Sen (1999) argues, justice involves expanding the real capabilities that allow individuals to achieve valued functionings. Translated to education, this means enabling diverse students to convert access into genuine participation and meaningful learning outcomes.

While macro-structural analyses highlight patterns of social reproduction, recent studies emphasise the *micro-level* of students' everyday practices, focusing on how equality is enacted through study routines, peer interaction, and pedagogical mediation (Archer, 2008; Reay, 2018). This approach recognises students as active agents who reinterpret academic expectations and negotiate belonging within disciplinary and institutional contexts.

Study Cultures as Pedagogical and Social Mediation

Study cultures are defined as sets of practices, values, and representations that shape how, where, when, and for what purpose students study (Ashwin, 2020). They develop historically through dialogue with disciplinary traditions and institutional policies, mediating between structure and experience. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of *field*, study cultures can be seen as social spaces where institutional norms, disciplinary logics, and personal trajectories intersect, producing distinctive "ways of studying."

Within this framework, Tinto (1993) proposed that student persistence depends on academic and social integration within institutional cultures. However, subsequent research has critiqued Tinto's model for its limited attention to class, race, and power (Reay, 2018; van der Velden et al., 2023). A Bourdieusian perspective extends the analysis by emphasising how institutional expectations privilege certain dispositions—such as self-regulation, abstract reasoning, or assertive participation—that align with middle-class habitus (Bathmaker et al., 2016).

Recent empirical studies have examined how *study cultures* reproduce or disrupt inequality depending on how academic norms are communicated and interpreted. For instance, Guzmán-Valenzuela et al. (2020) found that Latin American universities often valorise traditional modes of scholarship that marginalise students' local and experiential knowledges. Similarly, Gourlay (2021) demonstrates that digital environments can both democratise participation and reinforce symbolic hierarchies depending on design and pedagogical mediation.

Thus, study cultures operate as *pedagogical mediators*: they structure how knowledge is accessed and valued, but they also offer opportunities for transformation through reflective and inclusive teaching practices. Research across the UK and Australia shows that when universities make academic expectations explicit and validate diverse

learning repertoires, students from non-traditional backgrounds achieve higher retention and satisfaction rates (Gale & Parker, 2017; van der Velden et al., 2023).

Student Engagement, Epistemic Justice and Inclusive Pedagogies

The field of *student engagement* has evolved from quantitative measures of participation to interpretive approaches asking: *who engages, under what conditions, and with what recognition*. Meaningful engagement requires curricula and assessments that value diverse ways of knowing and encourage agency and voice (Guzmán-Valenzuela et al., 2020; Zepke, 2018). This evolution connects with the concept of *epistemic justice*, which recognises students as *subjects of knowledge* rather than passive recipients (Fischman & Ott, 2018; Walker, 2019).

Although there is growing consensus on inclusive engagement, few frameworks link participation directly with epistemic justice. This study contributes to filling that gap by analysing how *study cultures* operate as vehicles of recognition. They enable students from different backgrounds to articulate legitimate ways of learning and to participate in the co-construction of knowledge.

Pedagogical inclusion, however, requires more than compensatory measures; it involves rethinking the epistemological assumptions of what counts as legitimate knowledge. Freire (1970) argued that education must be dialogical and liberatory, enabling learners to name and transform their world. Similarly, (Hooks, 1994) proposed an engaged pedagogy that recognises the whole person—mind, body, and emotions—as central to transformative learning.

In higher education, inclusive pedagogies aim to expand participation by addressing structural and symbolic inequalities simultaneously (Gale & Parker, 2017). They promote curricular diversification, dialogic assessment, and the co-construction of knowledge. From this standpoint, study cultures become spaces of recognition where diverse epistemologies coexist, aligning with Fraser's (2010) notion of parity of participation as a condition of justice.

Internationally, inclusive and critical pedagogies have been integrated into frameworks such as the Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which emphasises flexibility in teaching, assessment, and accessibility (CAST, 2018). In Latin America, Fischman and Ott (2018) advocate pedagogías de la igualdad—pedagogies that, rather than homogenising, affirm difference as a productive dimension of collective learning.

Digital Materialities and Learning Ecologies

Digitalisation has transformed the *materialities of learning*. Platforms and artefacts are not neutral tools but *mediators of visibility, interaction, and power* (Gourlay, 2021). From a posthumanist standpoint, learning emerges from human and non-human assemblages where design, infrastructure, and technology shape epistemic access.

Inclusive learning ecologies combine accessibility, multimodality, and temporal flexibility, thereby expanding students' capabilities for participation. Yet, the digital shift also produces new forms of exclusion linked to technological capital, digital literacy, and institutional support. Addressing these inequalities is vital to ensure genuine educational equity in hybrid and online contexts.

Gourlay (2021) demonstrates that digital environments can both democratise participation and reinforce symbolic hierarchies depending on design and pedagogical mediation. Guzmán-Valenzuela et al. (2020) found that Latin American universities often valorise traditional modes of scholarship that marginalise students' local and experiential knowledges. Therefore, digital cultures of study must be critically examined in terms of whose practices they support and whose they silence.

Moreover, recent literature highlights how digital study cultures are shaped not only by access to technology, but also by the symbolic regimes that structure online participation. Digital platforms, as noted by Gourlay (2021), mediate not just information but also legitimacy, visibility, and authority. In Latin America, where infrastructural disparities persist, the incorporation of digital environments has amplified both opportunities for innovation and risks of exclusion (Guzmán-Valenzuela et al., 2020). From a hermeneutic perspective, digital engagement requires pedagogical practices that go beyond technical skills, fostering inclusive interpretive frameworks that recognise diverse trajectories of meaning-making and visibility.

Comparative Analytical Frameworks

Analyses of study cultures and educational equity reveal both convergence and contextual variation across countries. In the UK, Reay (2018) and Burke (2012) show how working-class students navigate symbolic exclusion within elite universities by developing adaptive and resistant identities. In Australia, Gale and Parker (2017) conceptualise equity as student capabilities for participation, linking it to institutional design and relational pedagogy.

In Latin America, scholars such as Guzmán-Valenzuela (2023) and Fischman (2022) highlight how equity discourses intersect with postcolonial struggles for epistemic justice. These perspectives underscore that achieving

equality in higher education requires not only redistributive policies but also recognition of knowledge pluralism and participatory pedagogies attuned to cultural diversity.

Comparing these analytical frameworks underscores a key insight: equality in higher education is relational and situated. It depends on how pedagogical, cultural, and institutional structures interact in specific contexts. By focusing on study cultures, this study contributes to bridging macro-structural analyses of inequality with micro-level understandings of learning as social practice.

Ethical and Political Orientation of University Education

This study adopts a *world-centred* orientation (Biesta, 2021), which understands education as an opening towards a shared, diverse, and plural world. Equality, in this light, is not about homogenising students but about expanding their capabilities to understand, deliberate, and act.

A just university pedagogy must balance personal development, epistemic justice, and collective responsibility. It should transform both the conditions and the meanings of participation, recognising students not as policy targets but as co-creators of an equitable academic community (Fischman & Ott, 2018; Walker, 2019).

Through this lens, study cultures are ethical and political practices: they express what universities value, who they include, and how they imagine the purposes of higher education. In affirming diverse cultures of study, universities enact a commitment to justice that transcends formal access and engages with lived educational realities.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Hypothesis

This study is based on the hypothesis that variability in study cultures—understood as students' ability to mobilise diverse strategies across pedagogical and disciplinary contexts—enhances cognitive and social flexibility, widening opportunities for academic success and equality in the university experience.

Accordingly, academic success depends less on the amount of work than on the quality and coordination of operational, temporal, and spatial dimensions of study (Ashwin, 2020). These dimensions shape what we term *study cultures*: dynamic ways of engaging with knowledge, influenced by institutional contexts, teachers' expectations, and students' social trajectories (Fischman & Ott, 2018; Walker, 2019).

Such cultures are both structured and structuring. They reflect dispositions formed through schooling while revealing spaces of agency where students reinterpret norms and reshape their learning (Bourdieu, 1980; Walker, 2019). From a justice perspective, variability in study practices becomes a route towards substantive equality by enabling responses to institutional expectations and structural inequalities (Valenzuela et al., 2014).

Specifically, we expect that:

1. The variety of study tasks (reading, synthesis, participation, writing) and study spaces (physical and digital) correlates positively with academic achievement.
2. Adaptive variability—the ability to adjust strategies according to disciplinary or pedagogical requirements—relates to higher levels of understanding and knowledge appropriation.
3. Differences in approaches to study are partly shaped by students' implicit representations of teachers' expectations ("it depends on the teacher"), revealing symbolic and cultural interactions (Geertz, 1973; Silva, 2020).

This hypothesis integrates three interdependent dimensions: social structure, pedagogical mediation, and student experience. From the lens of educational justice, equality is understood not only as an outcome but as a formative and cultural process (Marginson, 2016; Walker, 2019) .

These hypotheses are not tested through causal deduction but explored as generative propositions within a phenomenological framework. This approach allows us to understand study cultures not merely as variables to be measured, but as lived and interpreted experiences situated in everyday university life. The focus on adaptive variability, spatial engagement, and perceptions of pedagogical expectations is thus consistent with a phenomenological interest in meaning-making, embodiment, and the relational conditions of learning.

Methodological Design

This study employed a mixed-methods design with an ethnographic orientation, selected to achieve a multi-layered understanding of how study cultures are enacted, shaped, and interpreted across disciplinary contexts. The rationale for this design lies in the complex nature of the research object—academic cultures—which involve both observable practices and internalised meanings. A solely quantitative approach would have risked reducing study practices to behaviours detached from context, while a purely qualitative lens would have limited the capacity to

detect broader patterns across the student population. Thus, combining both approaches enabled the integration of descriptive generalisation with interpretive depth, as suggested by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018).

The ethnographic orientation was especially appropriate for uncovering the symbolic and institutional dynamics of study cultures. Through immersive observation and narrative-based interviews, it was possible to explore how students negotiate meaning, time, and learning spaces within their specific university contexts. The quantitative component, via a structured survey and statistical analysis, enabled the identification of patterns and associations between variability in study practices and academic performance. In this sense, triangulation was both a methodological and epistemological strategy—facilitating the cross-validation of findings while respecting the plurivocality of student experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Context and Population

The research was conducted during the 2023 academic year in two undergraduate programmes at public universities in Peru: Accounting and Language and Literature Education. These disciplines were selected for their contrasting epistemological orientations and student profiles.

The total sample comprised 305 students (n = 180 for Accounting; n = 125 for Language and Literature), representing complete cohorts at the bachelor's level. This comparative design allowed for the examination of how study cultures take shape in distinct disciplinary fields, considering factors such as students' relationships with knowledge, pedagogical modes, and social background (Marginson, 2016; Valenzuela et al., 2014).

Data Collection Techniques and Instruments

The design and implementation of the research instruments followed a sequential exploratory strategy. First, ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 30 students. The results of this qualitative phase informed the construction of a structured questionnaire with 96 items, ensuring contextual relevance and theoretical coherence.

The validation process of the questionnaire involved multiple stages. A content validation procedure was carried out with four experts in educational sociology and higher education, who assessed the coherence, clarity, and relevance of each item. Based on their feedback, adjustments were made to improve the alignment between theoretical constructs (e.g., variability, autonomy, spatial engagement) and empirical indicators. A pilot test was then conducted with a group of 25 students from similar programmes not included in the main study sample. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which showed acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.81$ for the total scale; α ranging between 0.72 and 0.84 for subscales).

The final version of the instrument was administered to the full student cohort in both programmes. In addition to standard items on demographics, academic habits, and perceptions, the survey included open-ended questions that were later subjected to content analysis. This hybrid structure further illustrates the mixed-methods orientation, where quantifiable responses were complemented by narrative accounts of student strategies and experiences.

Ethnographic observation was conducted over a period of six weeks in both programmes, including classrooms, libraries, computer labs, and informal gathering areas. Field notes were recorded systematically to capture interactions, spatial arrangements, and non-verbal study routines. These notes were categorised thematically and later integrated with the interview and survey data during analysis.

Variables and Analysis

Three primary dimensions were operationalised: Operational (task-related), Temporal (time management), and Spatial (location and modality of study). Each dimension was assessed through multiple indicators.

For quantitative analysis, descriptive statistics were followed by bivariate (e.g., chi-square, t-tests) and multivariate analyses (e.g., ANOVA, linear regression models). Two synthetic indicators were developed:

- Variety Index (V): measuring the number of different study strategies used regularly (e.g., reading, summarising, debating, collaborative tasks).
- Variability Index (VA): assessing the capacity to adjust strategies across different contexts (e.g., disciplinary changes, assignment types).

Reliability of these indices was confirmed through item intercorrelation matrices, and their construct validity was assessed using exploratory factor analysis (EFA). Additionally, inferential models tested the relationship between variability and academic performance (measured via institutional grade averages), controlling for socioeconomic status and parental education.

For qualitative data, the interview transcripts and open survey responses were analysed through thematic coding, guided by grounded theory principles. Codes were grouped into axial categories aligned with the theoretical framework: e.g., "institutional decoding," "adaptive autonomy," "symbolic negotiation," and "peer-mediated

strategies." The coding process was facilitated using NVivo 14 software, which allowed for systematic retrieval, code frequency mapping, and co-occurrence analysis.

Integrating the results of both strands, an interpretive synthesis was elaborated to bridge the micro- and macro-level dimensions of the study. This stage was crucial for connecting patterns in student practices with broader institutional and cultural dynamics, following a sociocultural lens on educational justice (Walker, 2019).

In line with the phenomenological orientation, the qualitative analysis followed an abductive logic, whereby theoretical insights emerged through iterative interpretation of empirical data rather than being imposed a priori. This allowed the research to remain open to the meanings constructed by participants, while gradually building a theoretical synthesis rooted in their narratives. The interplay of grounded coding and conceptual abstraction reflects the dynamic logic of qualitative inquiry, where inductive and abductive reasoning converge to articulate situated understandings of educational inequality and student agency.

Sample Description

Table 1. *Sample Description by Programme*

Variable	Accounting (n = 180)	Language and Literature Education (n = 125)
Gender	75% women / 25% men	93% women / 7% men
Mean age	21 years	21 years
Residence	69% independent / 31% with parents	83% independent / 17% with parents
Employment	21% yes / 79% no	44% yes / 56% no
Extracurricular activities	63% yes / 37% no	56% yes / 44% no
Parents' employment	69% both employed / 21% one employed	67% both employed / 23% one employed
Parents' higher education	44% both / 56% none or one	16% both / 84% none or one
Family socioeconomic level	32% high / 40% middle / 28% low	13% high / 35% middle / 52% low

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered strictly to ethical standards in social research, following the principles of informed consent, beneficence, and confidentiality. All participants were informed about the voluntary nature of the study, its objectives, and the data handling protocols. Written consent was obtained for interviews and survey participation, and all data were anonymised prior to analysis.

Though formal IRB approval was waived in accordance with institutional norms for non-invasive research, the project was registered within the internal research ethics monitoring system of the host university. All procedures were reviewed by the university's research office to ensure alignment with the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013) and national regulations.

Special care was taken during the interview and observation phases to avoid coercion and to respect students' right to withdraw. Observations were conducted with prior permission from faculty and students, and all qualitative data were stored securely using encrypted digital systems.

Data Availability and Access Conditions

All anonymised datasets, coding schemes, and instruments used in this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. No proprietary or restricted-access materials were used. The study does not involve the use of secondary datasets requiring repository accession numbers.

Interpretive Synthesis

The analysis indicates that study cultures are neither homogeneous nor purely disciplinary. They are shaped by intersections of gender, class, and cultural capital, yet they also create spaces of possibility. Within these spaces, students engage in practices that foster experiences of equality—understood as acts of recognition, redistribution, and participation in diverse university contexts (Fischman & Ott, 2018; Walker, 2019).

RESULTS

Consistent with the hypotheses formulated in Section 3.1, the following results illustrate how the variability of study practices relates to equity outcomes in university learning. This section presents the main empirical findings derived from the mixed-methods design described earlier, combining statistical evidence, qualitative insights, and interpretative synthesis.

Overview of Study Cultures

Empirical findings confirm the relevance of referring to "study cultures" in university contexts, as the diversity of study modalities employed by students correlates with the variety of spaces in which they engage in these practices (n = 305). These cultures are not only behavioural patterns but also symbolic frameworks that reflect institutional and epistemic mediations.

The association analysis ($\chi^2(2) = 18.33$; $p = .0001$) indicates that students engaging in a greater number of tasks—such as complementary readings, summaries, discussions, or applied exercises—also utilise a wider range of study spaces (libraries, residences, cafés, and virtual environments).

More than 87% of those reporting a high number of tasks study in three or more locations, whereas 45% of those who study in a single location exhibit a less diverse pattern of study.

This finding supports the view that study spaces are themselves meaningful practices, where specific ways of working and rhythms of engagement reproduce a situated "this is how one studies here" (in the Wittgensteinian sense). These patterns contribute to the reproduction—or transformation—of academic norms and are therefore central to understanding how study cultures mediate educational inclusion or exclusion.

Study Time and Academic Achievement

The correlation between total study time and academic performance was not statistically significant, suggesting that longer study hours do not necessarily lead to higher academic achievement. This result challenges the conventional view that academic success follows a linear relationship with the amount of time invested.

Rather, it highlights that what matters is not merely the quantity of study time, but the quality and adaptability of the strategies employed. This is consistent with the conceptualisation of study cultures as mediators of equity: students who engage in reflexive, adaptive forms of learning are better positioned to navigate institutional demands and extract value from their learning environments.

Variety and Flexibility in Study Strategies

Comparative analyses by discipline reveal that students with higher academic performance exhibit significantly greater variety in their study practices ($mV+ = 12.2/20$; $mV- = 11.8/20$; $t = 1.89$; $p = .05$). However, this pattern is more pronounced in the Accounting programme, where performance is closely linked to a combination of repetition-based and application-based strategies.

A complementary analysis of variance (ANOVA) supports the hypothesis that students alternating between restitution strategies (e.g., repetition and memorisation) and decontextualisation strategies (e.g., non-assigned readings, debates, interdisciplinary connections) obtain higher academic scores ($mswitch = 12.4/20$; $mno\text{-}switch = 11.7/20$; $p < .001$). This adaptability functions as a symbolic resource that enables access to the implicit rules of academic success, particularly in environments where such expectations are not always made explicit.

From an educational justice perspective, the ability to navigate between different ways of engaging with knowledge—not merely reproducing it but also reinterpreting it—constitutes both a cognitive and cultural advantage. However, such flexibility is unequally distributed and is often mediated by students' prior cultural capital and the institutional frameworks that either constrain or foster autonomy.

Disciplinary and Contextual Differences

The comparison between programmes shows that the variety of study practices is significantly higher in Accounting than in Language and Literature in Education ($\chi^2(1) = 6.51$; $p = .01$). Students in Accounting are more likely to diversify their study spaces (67% study in more than three locations), possibly reflecting the experimental and practice-oriented nature of their discipline. This structural dimension—linked to disciplinary design—shapes how study cultures emerge and evolve.

Conversely, students in Language and Literature demonstrate greater flexibility in their study strategies, adjusting their approaches according to didactic circumstances or the nature of the texts. This adaptive capacity reflects more reflexive processes of academic socialisation, closely linked to the development of critical thinking and the cultural appropriation of knowledge.

In sum, the data reveal that study cultures function as mediating structures: in some cases, they reflect the material and institutional affordances of the discipline (e.g., varied spaces and tasks in Accounting); in others, they embody symbolic negotiations and identity work (e.g., adaptive strategies in Literature). These patterns provide the empirical foundation for the subsequent discussion, which explores how study cultures mediate educational equality across diverse university contexts.

DISCUSSION

The results demonstrate that the variability of study practices depends not only on individual effort but also on the pedagogical, institutional, and cultural conditions provided by the university. This study contributes to bridging the gap identified in the theoretical framework between macro-level analyses of inequality and micro-level understandings of how equality is experienced in everyday study practices. From a perspective of educational justice (Fraser, 2010; Walker, 2019), such variability can be understood as an indicator of agency and epistemic participation: students who diversify their ways of studying gain more equitable opportunities to appropriate knowledge and to participate in its construction.

However, inequalities in access to material and symbolic resources—such as suitable study spaces, up-to-date learning materials, and effective academic support—continue to limit opportunities for success. These disparities reveal the persistence of structural inequities within study cultures that cannot be explained solely by differences in motivation or individual performance. As Bourdieu (1986) emphasised, the educational field privileges certain forms of habitus aligned with dominant cultural capital. This alignment influences what counts as "legitimate" study, often marginalising alternative or community-based strategies, especially among first-generation and working-class students (Burke, 2012).

In light of the three theoretical dimensions explored in the framework—pedagogical structures, epistemic recognition, and institutional mediation—the empirical findings validate and nuance the hypotheses advanced. For instance, the evidence on study spaces as embedded practices (Section 4.1) supports the notion that study cultures are not neutral but structured environments that transmit symbolic cues about "how to study," in line with Biesta's (2021) view of learning as a dialogic and situated encounter.

Study cultures function as processes of academic socialisation (Bourdieu, 1980) through which students learn not only disciplinary content but also the implicit norms and legitimate practices of the "good student" within each field. This process creates a symbolic hierarchy between those who have internalised the hidden codes of university culture and those still learning to navigate them. As a student in Accounting put it, *"It's not just about studying more—it's about knowing how things work here, like what's expected in every course."* Consequently, educational equity cannot be reduced to guaranteeing access; it must also involve recognising the cultural and epistemic differences that shape learning processes (Guzmán-Valenzuela, 2023; Marginson, 2016).

The data from Section 4.2, where study time fails to correlate with achievement, reinforce the idea that time investment alone is insufficient without alignment with institutional expectations. This resonates with the concept of adaptive reflexivity (Gale & Parker, 2017; Thomas, 2002), wherein students translate pedagogical requirements into personally meaningful strategies. One participant from Language and Literature noted: "Sometimes I spend less time reading, but I try to connect it to what I've lived or to other texts—it helps me understand it better." Such voices illustrate the hypothesis that epistemic engagement is deeply situated and relational.

Furthermore, Section 4.3 showed that strategy switching is positively associated with academic performance. This supports Fraser's (2010) principle of participatory parity, whereby students' capacity to alternate between restitution and decontextualisation reflects an empowered stance towards knowledge. However, as shown in the framework (Section 2.5), this flexibility is not evenly distributed: it is conditioned by students' prior exposure to diverse cognitive models, institutional encouragement, and the recognition of different knowledge forms (Fischman & Ott, 2018).

The disciplinary differences discussed in Section 4.4 further reveal how study cultures are mediated by academic fields. Accounting students exhibit greater spatial diversity, likely encouraged by modular, application-oriented pedagogy; whereas students of Language and Literature show more fluidity in strategy use, rooted in interpretive discourse. This aligns with Ashwin (2020) and Trowler et al. (2022), who argue that epistemic assumptions and curricular design shape student engagement in discipline-specific ways. These contrasts validate the idea—outlined in the comparative framework (Section 2.5)—that equity is not only redistributive but contextual, shaped by local pedagogical cultures.

A further implication concerns the role of the university in shaping conditions for epistemic recognition. As the data show, variability and flexibility are not purely individual traits; they are cultivated—or constrained—by the availability of inclusive curricula, supportive faculty, and access to diverse learning spaces (Zepke, 2018; Gourlay, 2021). This resonates with the Latin American literature on epistemic justice (Guzmán-Valenzuela et al., 2020), which advocates for a pluralistic university where cultural diversity is not a problem to be managed but a resource to be embraced.

Methodologically, the mixed-methods approach proved essential. The triangulation of statistical findings, thematic coding, and student narratives enabled a multidimensional reading of equity, consistent with calls for methodological pluralism in critical education research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). It allowed us to uncover not only patterns of practice but also the meanings attributed to them by learners in situated contexts.

In sum, the concept of study cultures emerges as a robust analytical lens. Their variability is not an incidental feature of student life but a central mechanism through which educational justice is either enabled or obstructed. As such, they deserve not only academic recognition but also institutional commitment. Future research could explore how study cultures evolve in hybrid contexts or across socioeconomic groups, potentially informing more just and inclusive policies.

CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to explore how study cultures mediate educational equity in higher education, with three specific objectives: (1) to examine the diversity and variability of students' study practices and their relationship to academic success; (2) to investigate how institutional and sociocultural factors shape students' access to learning resources and support mechanisms; and (3) to analyse the role of epistemic participation and motivation in the constitution of equitable learning conditions.

The findings confirm that academic success in higher education depends not only on the quantity of study time but also on the variability and reflexivity of students' academic practices. These practices are shaped by institutional, pedagogical, and disciplinary contexts that either enable or constrain learners' engagement with knowledge. By demonstrating how study cultures operate as a mediating framework between students and institutions, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of educational equity.

The first objective was met by identifying significant associations between the diversity of study tasks, time management, the use of varied learning spaces, and students' academic performance. This underscores the importance of promoting adaptive and context-sensitive strategies. The second objective was addressed through both quantitative and qualitative evidence of disparities in access to resources and learning environments—differences that were strongly mediated by students' social backgrounds and institutional arrangements. The third objective was approached through an interpretive analysis of students' reflexivity and identity construction. Students who engaged in deeper epistemic participation—integrating critical thinking with restitution strategies—reported higher academic satisfaction and autonomy.

Quantitative analyses indicate that the diversity of study tasks, time management, and learning spaces is significantly associated with higher academic performance. Yet the data also reveal persistent inequalities in access to such plural ways of learning. These differences are influenced by social and cultural factors that shape students' university experiences. From a qualitative standpoint, students who combine decontextualising strategies—such as critical reflection and interdisciplinary connections—with restitution strategies, including repetition and consolidation, develop more autonomous and adaptive study practices. These practices are linked to higher levels of academic success and satisfaction.

The study also proposes a broader interpretation of educational equity. Moving beyond conventional metrics of access and retention, it introduces the concept of *epistemic justice*—the right and capacity to participate fully in the construction, use, and legitimation of knowledge. Equity must therefore encompass not only the redistribution of resources but also the recognition of cognitive, cultural, and symbolic diversity.

Theoretically, this research contributes to bridging sociological perspectives on learning (e.g., Bourdieu's theories of habitus and capital) with contemporary debates on epistemic justice (Walker, 2019; Guzmán-Valenzuela et al., 2020). It reaffirms the need to view learning as a situated social practice, embedded within institutional and cultural ecologies.

Practically, the study calls for institutional policies that foster inclusive and reflective pedagogical environments. Universities should diversify study spaces, clarify academic expectations, and support student agency through mentoring, peer-assisted learning, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Such initiatives may be particularly beneficial to first-generation and working-class students.

This study was based on data from a single public university, which may limit the generalisability of its findings. Additionally, although the mixed-methods design enriched the analysis, further research could adopt longitudinal approaches to explore how study cultures evolve across students' academic trajectories. Comparative studies across disciplines and institutional contexts—especially in Latin America—would deepen our understanding of how equity is shaped by diverse ecologies. Future work should also examine the impact of digital and hybrid learning environments on transforming study cultures and their implications for educational justice.

In sum, the added value of this research lies in conceptualising study cultures as both an analytical lens and a practical lever for promoting equity in higher education. By revealing how academic practices reflect and reshape conditions of justice, the study offers insights that are both theoretically grounded and contextually relevant to diverse and unequal educational systems.

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