

ARTICLE/ARTÍCULO

# Perceptions of Class Inequality among Undergraduate Students: The Case of the University of Granada

Percepciones sobre la desigualdad de clase en el estudiantado de grado: el caso de la Universidad de Granada

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**ABSTRACT**

This study examines perceptions of social self-placement – that is, the position students believe they occupy within the stratification system – and views on wealth distribution in Spain among undergraduate students at the University of Granada. Drawing on a survey based on validated questionnaires (Funcas, UCM), the sample comprises 1,437 students drawn from across the university's faculties and degree programmes. The findings reveal a marked overidentification with the middle class, limited awareness of existing levels of inequality and an idealised vision of a more egalitarian distribution that nonetheless concentrates wealth in the upper classes. The data further demonstrate the reproduction of familial educational capital and the underrepresentation of working-class students in higher education. The study concludes that there is a significant gap between students' objective socioeconomic positions and their subjective self-perceptions, alongside a clear tendency for resources to remain concentrated among more privileged social sectors. These findings underscore the need for universities to strengthen their critical and educational role in fostering socially aware, informed and equity-oriented citizens.

**KEYWORDS:** social class; perceptions of inequality; university students; social stratification; wealth distribution.

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## RESUMEN

Este estudio analiza mediante encuesta, basada en cuestionarios validados (FUNCAS, UCM), a 1.437 estudiantes de grado de diversas facultades y titulaciones de la Universidad de Granada, la percepción que tienen sobre su autoubicación social (posición que ocupan en la estratificación social) y sobre cómo está distribuida la riqueza en España. Los resultados revelan una sobreidentificación con la clase media, conocimiento limitado de la desigualdad real y una visión ideal más igualitaria que, no obstante, concentra riqueza en clases altas. Se constata reproducción del capital educativo familiar y una presencia menor de clases populares en la universidad. Se concluye un desajuste significativo entre la posición socioeconómica objetiva y la autopercepción estudiantil, junto con una tendencia a concentrar recursos en sectores privilegiados. Estos hallazgos subrayan la necesidad de que la universidad refuerce su función crítica y pedagógica para formar ciudadanos conscientes, informados y comprometidos con la equidad social.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** clase social; percepción desigualdad; estudiantado universitario; estratificación social; distribución de la riqueza.

## 1. Introduction

Class inequality is one of the central themes of sociology, as it directly shapes life opportunities and conditions access to economic, educational and symbolic resources in contemporary societies. However, research has shown that subjective perceptions of inequality are not always consistent with objective reality, particularly among younger sectors of the population.

Examining how university students perceive class inequality is therefore essential from a sociological perspective for several reasons. First, perceptions of inequality are not merely individual opinions but social representations that reflect and reproduce structures of power, legitimacy and social mobility (Bourdieu, 1982; Jost, 2019). Analysing how future professionals interpret inequality allows us to understand the symbolic mechanisms by which social hierarchies are naturalised or questioned. Second, university students constitute a key social group in processes of cultural and political change. Their conceptions of social justice, meritocracy and mobility shape their behaviour and future professional and institutional decisions. Understanding how they perceive economic inequality and social class thus offers valuable insight into the kind of citizens universities are producing (García *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, examining how students interpret their own class position allows us to assess the extent to which they may be developing a critical awareness of social structures.

Third, although the university has historically been conceived as a space for social mobility, it continues to reproduce inequalities rooted in the economic, cultural and social capital of families (Bourdieu, 2022; Gairín and Suárez, 2017).

This raises the question of whether higher education fulfils its democratising function or, on the contrary, reinforces existing social distances.

In sum, studying how university students perceive class inequality not only reveals the extent to which they are aware of their position within the stratification system but also invites critical reflection on the role of higher education in building a more equitable and socially conscious society.

This article examines perceptions of class inequality among undergraduate students at the University of Granada (UGR), with the aim of investigating how they place themselves within the social structure and how they conceptualise wealth distribution in Spain. Drawing on a quantitative, survey-based methodology, it seeks to provide empirical evidence on the mechanisms of legitimisation, ignorance and critical engagement with social inequalities among university students. As noted above, analysing these perceptions is central to understanding the extent to which higher education contributes to reproducing or questioning the established social order.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Perception of inequality and class self-placement

Research has consistently shown that social perceptions, particularly regarding structural phenomena such as inequality, tend to diverge from objective reality. This perceptual dissonance is shaped, in the first instance, by individuals' daily social practices and their position within the social structure: people from lower classes tend to perceive lower levels of inequality than those in higher strata, a pattern associated with more limited access to information about the actual distribution of wealth (Castillo, Miranda and Carrasco, 2012; García *et al.*, 2022).

Beliefs, personal experiences and ideological positions all shape how inequality is perceived (Irwin, 2018). Unequal access to essential resources can also alter individuals' understanding of what constitutes wealth or well-being, while the immediate social environment serves as a frame of reference. Dawtry, Sutton and Sibley (2015) found that people who interact primarily with individuals of high economic status tend to overestimate the average wealth of society as a whole and, consequently, to be less supportive of redistributive policies.

Subjective socioeconomic status (SSES) is a key variable for understanding attitudes towards redistribution. This concept – capturing an individual's self-placement within the social hierarchy – predicts political attitudes and behaviours more accurately than traditional objective measures, as it incorporates comparative assessments and subjective perceptions (Kraus *et al.*, 2013). SSES helps explain why individuals with modest incomes identify as middle class and display moderate redistributive preferences (Operario *et al.*, 2004).

Several approaches from social psychology explain why individuals tend to minimise inequality. The motivational perspective holds that people tend to justify the status quo, reducing their sensitivity to inequality when it is perceived as consistent with dominant ideologies (Jost *et al.*, 2009). The intergroup perspective proposes that inequality fosters social segmentation and the consolidation of hierarchies that reinforce the symbolic and material distance between groups (Jetten *et al.*, 2017). The cognitive approach argues that individuals rely on mental shortcuts to simplify complex economic phenomena, producing biased interpretations of inequality (Eidelman and Crandall, 2012).

Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) introduces a further dimension to the analysis of perceived legitimacy. From this perspective, individual responses to inequality depend on whether one's position is perceived as just or unjust. When people regard their position as legitimate and deserved, they tend to accept inequality and show less willingness to challenge it; when they perceive it as unfair, attitudes favouring social transformation emerge.

Political ideology also plays a decisive role in the interpretation of inequality. Those who identify with progressive or left-wing positions tend to view inequality as a structural problem requiring redistributive policies, while conservative or right-wing ideologies tend to legitimise it as the outcome of individual merit or personal decisions (Guzmán, Barozet and Méndez, 2017). Neoliberal ideology has contributed to normalising inequality by presenting it as a natural consequence of meritocracy.

System justification theory (Jost, 2019) holds that people tend to legitimise the existing social order to reduce dissonance and uncertainty, even when that order is unfavourable to them. This mechanism of self-justification and hierarchy normalisation explains why a cognitive recognition of inequality can coexist with limited support for redistributive policies (Jost and Hunyady, 2005). Consequently, system justification acts as a buffer that prevents perceptions of inequality from translating into political demands.

Sensitivity to inequality thus appears to depend on class position and institutional context. Haddon and Wu (2021) showed that people in different social positions can respond heterogeneously to changes in inequality, while Kenworthy and McCall (2008) demonstrated that the relationship between market inequality and support for redistributive policies is mediated by ideology and political structures. Taken together, these studies underscore that the perception of inequality serves as a crucial link between objective inequality and redistributive attitudes. Research shows that providing accurate information about income concentration increases support for redistribution (Gimpelson and Treisman, 2018; Iacono and Ranaldi, 2021). Ignorance or underestimation of inequality therefore reduces citizen pressure for change, particularly among those who perceive themselves as middle class or who justify the existing system (Haddon and Wu, 2021; Jost, 2019; Kenworthy and McCall, 2008).

International comparative programmes – including the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), the European Values Study (EVS) and the World Values Survey (WVS) – show that beliefs about inequality and distributive justice vary substantially across countries according to institutional, cultural and objective inequality factors (Hadler, 2005; Niehues, 2014). These programmes, which aim to conduct comparative social analysis and examine the transformation of values across different cultural contexts, allow researchers to examine the correspondence between objective and subjective inequality, revealing how the informational and political context shapes social perceptions.

## 2.2. Perceptions of inequality among university students

Higher education is a key space for the analysis and transformation of perceptions of inequality. Hipólito and Castro (2021, p. 89) argue that ‘education is not limited to the transmission of knowledge but also produces subjects, identities and aspirations, and its purpose is not to mould individuals but to inspire, lead and empower them to imagine a better world.’ The university is thus simultaneously a site of technical and instrumental learning and a space for critical formation aimed at identifying and transforming social inequalities. From this perspective, its essential function should be to foster citizens who are capable of actively participating in social, cultural and political life, and contributing to a more equitable society.

Gairín and Suárez (2017) likewise argue that universities are not neutral institutions but can function both as reproducers of inequality and as agents of democratic advancement. Brito and Moya (2017) further contend that the university must preserve its historical mission while adapting to contemporary social transformations, working towards greater equity and social cohesion. Higher education institutions must therefore promote the formation of an active citizenship that links educational processes with social change.

Regarding the social position of students, the analyses of Alonso *et al.* (2017) examine young people qualitatively as one of the groups most affected by economic crisis, social spending cuts and growing inequality in recent years. Facing a landscape marked by high unemployment and profound uncertainty, young people constitute a vulnerable group of considerable sociological interest for exploring how social, political and economic changes are perceived and experienced.

It is worth noting that the study distinguishes between precariously situated young people and young adults with different social backgrounds, personal and educational trajectories and varying family obligations, identifying several groups across social class lines, with job insecurity, the middle classes and new policies emerging as key themes. Notably, all groups – with the exception of the most affluent private university students – have developed work survival strategies in response to the adverse conditions they encounter. Students across the

social spectrum report difficulties accessing employment for which they have been trained and describe the need to take whatever work is available.

When discussing rising inequality and the decline of public services, the study concludes that ‘an impoverished old middle class feels compelled to maintain a sense of privilege – despite having lost well-being – because the crisis has brought extreme poverty into view’ (Alonso *et al.*, 2017, p. 162). As one moves down the social profile of student groups, the perception of impoverishment and social polarisation – regarded as indisputable – becomes increasingly stark (Alonso *et al.*, 2016). This impoverishment is reflected in near-unanimous agreement around the widespread reduction of wages and the radical deterioration of working conditions, with those from upper social classes least concerned. Nevertheless, the prevailing perception among the young people in this study is that inequality will continue to be entrenched and driven by low wages and the radical deterioration of working conditions.

Data from the Funcas think tank survey on perceptions of inequality in Spain confirm this trend: the majority of respondents acknowledge the existence of wide income differences but show limited awareness of the real magnitude of poverty. While 45.6% of respondents express willingness to pay higher taxes to reduce inequality, 54.4% reject this option, suggesting a disconnect between recognising inequality and the willingness to act on it.

### 3. Objectives and methodology

Despite the relevance of social class perception as an axis of inequality, its subjective dimension has received limited attention specifically in the university context (Reay, 2005). The literature tends to focus on objective indicators of social stratification, neglecting those aspects that make social class a lived reality that shapes the expectations and academic habitus of the student body (Bourdieu, 1987). Given this situation, this article, which is markedly exploratory in nature, aims to map the perceptions and beliefs of undergraduate students regarding their position in the social structure.

#### 3.1. Objectives

The main objective of this study is to examine how students at the University of Granada (UGR) perceive their position within the social structure – and more specifically, their sense of class belonging – as well as their understanding of how wealth is distributed in Spain.

The study is organised around the following specific objectives:

1. To examine the socioeconomic conditions – income, educational level and occupation – of the parents of UGR students.
2. To analyse students' perceptions of class belonging according to family income.
3. To explore how students perceive the distribution of wealth in Spain and what they consider a fair or desirable distribution in an ideal scenario.

#### 3.2. Data collection and sampling techniques

The study adopts a quantitative methodology with a descriptive and comparative approach. Data were collected through a self-administered questionnaire, applied predominantly in person under classroom supervision to undergraduate students at the UGR. Fieldwork was conducted between March and May 2024 across 21 faculties and 67 degree programmes spanning the following branches of knowledge: arts and humanities, sciences, educational sciences, health sciences, legal sciences, social sciences, economics and business, and engineering and architecture. The reference population comprises 46,599 students enrolled during the 2023/24 academic year (2023/24 academic year report).

The sample was designed using a multi-stage cluster approach: in the first stage, degree programmes were selected by branch of knowledge; in the second stage, groups and classes within each programme were selected for questionnaire administration. The final sample comprises  $n = 1,437$  valid cases, of which 498 (34.5%) identify as male, 911 (63.2%) as female and 28 (1.9%) as another gender identity. Assuming max-

imum population variance ( $p = q = 0.5$ ), a 95% confidence level and a design effect (DEFF) of 1.5, the theoretical sampling error was 3.1%. This estimate should, however, be interpreted with caution. Participant recruitment combined face-to-face classroom administration with distribution of the questionnaire via class WhatsApp groups (link/QR code), meaning that effective participation was conditioned by class attendance and voluntary response. Although the research design achieved broad coverage across degree programmes and branches of knowledge, the results should be regarded as a solid empirical approximation of the student population of the UGR rather than a strictly probabilistic representation free of selection bias and non-response effects. It should also be noted that the absence of an explicit ‘working class’ category in the questionnaire may have encouraged overidentification with the middle class, a limitation that should be borne in mind when comparing findings with other studies.

The questionnaire comprises 15 questions organised into three thematic blocks: 1. Sociodemographic data. 2. Perceptions of class belonging. 3. Perceptions of wealth distribution.

In developing the questionnaire, we drew on the following reference sources:

1. the Funcas Survey on Perceptions of Economic Inequality in Spain (2019),
2. and the questionnaire developed for Teaching Innovation Project no. 40 (Call 2021/2022): ‘Inequality in front of the mirror: a tool for learning social stratification through sociological self-analysis’, directed by Professor Celia Díaz Catalán from the Faculty of Political Science and Sociology, Department of Sociology, Methodology and Theory.

### 3.3. Statistical analysis

Data analysis was exclusively descriptive; all percentages, statistics and tables were produced using SPSS version 28.

The analysis incorporates a comparative dimension, setting the UGR data alongside those of the Complutense University of Madrid (UCM) (Teaching Innovation Project no. 40, Call 2021/2022, cited above) and the broader Spanish population, drawn from CIS Survey 3427, November 2023 Barometer, Centre for Sociological Research (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, CIS).

Results are presented partly in comparative tables showing data from the UGR, the UCM and the general Spanish population simultaneously, as well as ‘real’ figures alongside ‘subjective’ perceptions, with the aim of visualising mismatches between objective and perceived inequality.

Following a widely used methodological scheme (Debbeler, Schupp and Renner, 2021; Bublitz, 2016; Faggian, Michelangeli and Tkach, 2023), respondents were first asked to estimate the actual distribution of wealth (perceived distribution) and then to indicate what they considered a desirable distribution (ideal distribution). This design allows for analysis of: 1. The degree of perceptual error. 2. The direction of bias (underestimation or overestimation of inequality). 3. The gap between perceived and ideal distributions. 4. The implications for redistributive policy preferences.

## 4. Results and discussion

We begin by presenting a socioeconomic profile of the University of Granada (UGR) student body, drawing on data on household income, parental education level and parental occupation.

### 4.1. Family socioeconomic conditions

#### 4.1.1. Annual household income

Table 1 shows the annual household income of respondents: approximately 38% report income below €21,000, 40% between €21,000 and €47,000, and 20% above €47,000. Comparison with national income data reveals broadly similar distributions: 38%, 40% and 17%, respectively.

The proportion of households with income below €13,000 is notably lower among UGR students (9.4%) than in the general Spanish population (14.4%), suggesting that the student body tends to occupy a somewhat more favourable socioeconomic position in the lower strata. By contrast, the share of households with income above €60,000 is smaller at the UGR (5.2%) than the national average (7.0%), indicating that, while low-income households are underrepresented, very high-income households are also less present. This may be because families at that level are more likely to be able to afford to send their children to private universities or even to study outside Spain.

**Table 1**

*Annual household income UGR (%)*

Income brackets	UGR	Spain
€13,000 or less	9.4	14.4
€13,001 to €21,000	29.5	24.3
€21,001 to €32,000	23.2	21.7
€32,001 to €47,000	17.5	18.2
€47,001 to €60,000	15.2	10.3
Above €60,000	5.2	7.0

Source: own research. CIS Survey 3427. November 2023 Barometer.

#### 4.1.2. Parental education level

Table 2 shows the educational level of the parents of UGR students. Higher education and secondary education together account for the majority, which stands at 58.9% among mothers and 53.9% among fathers. In addition, these figures are compared with national parental education data and with those from the Complutense University of Madrid (UCM). The results show that doctoral (7.7% and 7.4%, respectively) and higher education (35.4% and 28.4%, respectively) qualifications are substantially more prevalent among the parents of students at both universities than among the average Spanish parent, a pattern that points to the intergenerational transmission of educational capital: families with higher education credentials have considerably greater access to university. Conversely, university access remains limited for children of parents with low educational levels – particularly those with no formal education or only primary schooling, who are markedly underrepresented. At the UGR, 14.4% of mothers and 17.3% of fathers fall into this category, while it is even more pronounced at the UCM (11.1% of mothers and 12.8% of fathers).

The proportion of parents with vocational training qualifications (18%) may be a significant factor in young people’s tendency to choose non-university training pathways, reinforcing the preference for technical and professional options that offer faster entry into the labour market.

Having only secondary education is markedly less common among the parents of university students than in the general population of the same generation: while almost half of Spaniards aged 48–62 did not progress beyond this level, this figure is nearly halved among the parents of students at both the UCM and the UGR. This pattern suggests a combination of upward social mobility, expanding educational aspirations and the partial democratisation of access to higher education. Secondary education thus functions as an intermediate social space where strategies of upward

mobility and mechanisms of reproduction coexist: some families manage to surpass the educational level of the previous generation, while others remain constrained by cultural and economic resources.

It is also worth noting that the gender gap in educational attainment is smaller than in the general Spanish population, with mothers of university students tending to hold relatively high qualifications – a pattern that may reflect a generational shift in women’s education in urban and middle-class contexts.

This confirms that the current student body at both the UCM and the UGR comes disproportionately from families with above-average educational levels, reinforcing the role of cultural capital as a key determinant of access to higher education. While there has been some progress in the inclusion of middle-class sectors, the presence of working-class students – particularly those from families that did not progress beyond primary education – remains limited. Universities continue to be predominantly the preserve of the children of graduates, which poses a significant challenge to equal opportunities and genuine social mobility.

**Table 2**  
*Parental education level (%)*

Education level	Spanish population - women (48-62 years)	Spanish population - men (48-62 years)	Mothers UCM	Fathers UCM	Mothers UGR	Fathers UGR
Doctorate	1.0	1.0	6.8	6.0	7.7	7.4
Higher education	28.0	18.0	48.8	32.6	35.4	28.4
Vocational training	15.0	14.0	19.8	22.6	18.2	18.0
Secondary	46.0	46.0	21.5	26.1	23.5	25.5
Primary	14.0	19.0	9.2	9.8	10.9	12.2
No formal education	3.0	3.0	1.9	3.0	3.5	5.1

Source: own research. Teaching Innovation Project 40, UCM.

### 4.1.3. Parental occupation

Across Spain as a whole, the most common occupational category is professional support technicians (25.5%), followed by scientific and intellectual professionals (19.8%) and service workers (catering, personal, protective and sales workers) (11.8%). Directors and managers account for 11.2%, reflecting a moderately high share of senior occupational profiles in the general population.

At the UCM, a more polarised profile emerges. While professional support technicians remain the most represented group (20.4%), there is a notably higher share both of directors and managers (14.1%) and service workers (21.7%), suggesting greater social diversity in the student body and a stronger presence of families whose primary income derives from the service sector.

The UGR presents a distinct profile. The largest occupational category is accounting, administrative and clerical employees (16.8%), followed closely by service workers (16%) and scientific and intellectual professionals (11.9%). Particularly striking is the relatively high presence of workers in agriculture, livestock and fishing (9.7%) and in elementary occupations (9.2%), pointing to greater representation of students from rural backgrounds or households with lower professional qualifications.

Directors and managers barely reach 9.6%, reinforcing the picture of a less elite social composition compared to the UCM.

Compared with the national picture, the two universities display distinct occupational profiles that bear the marks of their respective territories, regional labour markets and student body characteristics.

**Table 3**

*Occupation of the highest earner in your household (%)*

Occupation	Spain	UCM	UGR
1. Directors and managers	11.2	14.1	9.6
2. Scientific and intellectual professionals	19.8	10.9	11.9
3. Professional support technicians	25.5	20.4	7.8
4. Accounting, administrative and clerical employees	9.7	10.6	16.8
5. Service workers (catering, personal, protective and sales workers)	11.8	21.7	16.0
6. Skilled agricultural, livestock and fishing workers	2.2	2.2	9.7
7. Skilled craft and trade workers in manufacturing and construction	5.8	7.3	9.2
8. Plant and machinery operators and assemblers	2.1	3.0	5.5
9. Elementary occupations	4.6	4.3	9.2
10. Military and police occupations	1.7	5.4	4.0

Source: own research. Teaching Innovation Project 40, UCM. CIS Survey 3427. November 2023 Barometer.

## 4.2. Perceptions of inequality

The following sections analyse how UGR students perceive inequality, how they self-place in terms of social class and how they understand the distribution of wealth in Spain.

### 4.2.1. Perceptions of social class position

This section examines the self-perception of relative social position according to family income, interpreted through a social class lens. Two classification frameworks are used: the income brackets established by the OECD to define social classes and the classification used by the Centre for Sociological Research (CIS) (Table 4). The aim is to identify which class individuals would fall into according to their income. For this purpose, the CIS classification was adopted for the analysis of university students' household income, since this classification more appropriately locates the upper class at incomes above €60,000.

**Table 4**

*Classification of social classes by income*

Social class	OECD annual income brackets (€)	CIS income classification (€)
Upper class	Above 41,840	Above 60,000
Upper-middle class	31,380 to 41,840	47,001 to 60,000
Middle-middle class	20,920 to 31,380	32,001 to 47,000
Lower-middle class	15,690 to 20,920	21,001 to 32,000
Working class	Not included	13,001 to 21,000
Lower class	15,690 or less	13,000 or less

Source: own elaboration based on OECD (2023), Income Distribution Database and CIS Survey 3427. November 2023 Barometer.

Table 5 compares class self-perception across students at the two universities and the general Spanish population, and includes a column of objective data on social structure to allow subjective perceptions to be set against real class positions. The aim is to identify mismatches between actual and perceived class, and to examine how university students understand their place in the social hierarchy. It should be noted that the 'working class' category was not included in the self-perception questionnaire administered to UGR students. Placing it alongside upper, middle and lower class categories within the same classification scheme risks confusing respondents, since a theoretically consistent classification would also require including the capitalist or bourgeois class and a middle class defined by the mechanisms of exclusion governing access to educational credentials and technical skills (Wright,

2018). Accordingly, the 29.5% of UGR students whose household income falls between €13,000 and €21,000 are distributed across the middle-middle, lower-middle and lower class categories. This accounts for the notably higher combined percentage of middle-middle and lower-middle class self-identification among UGR students (57.1% and 25.1%, respectively) compared to both the UCM (47.8% and 17.9%, respectively) and the general Spanish population (44.6% and 13%, respectively).

**Table 5**

*What social class would you say you belong to?*

Social class	Spain		UCM		UGR	
	Perceived	Actual	Perceived	Actual	Perceived	Actual
Upper	0.2	7.0	1.3	8.1	0.3	5.2
Upper-middle	3.6	10.3	14.9	7.6	14.6	15.2
Middle-middle	44.6	18.2	47.8	52.3	57.1	17.5
Lower-middle	13.0	21.7	17.9	15.8	25.1	23.2
Working	11.8	24.3	17.1	8.5	*	29.5
Lower	16.2	14.4	1.0	7.7	2.6	9.4

Source: own research. Teaching Innovation Project 40, UCM. CIS Survey 3427. November 2023 Barometer.

Table 5 reveals that class self-perception does not necessarily correspond to objective class position, particularly among university students. Self-identification as ‘middle class’ dominates the collective imagination, driven by meritocratic narratives and a desire to distance oneself from stigmatised categories such as ‘working class’ or ‘lower class’. Access to university itself varies based on social origin, as the preceding data confirm, reflecting the persistence of structural inequalities within the educational system.

This tendency is evident across all three contexts – Spain, the UCM and the UGR – with particularly strong concentration in the ‘middle-middle’ category among the general Spanish population and UGR students. Three factors help account for this pattern: (a) The desire for normalisation and social stability. Many people avoid identifying with ‘lower’ or ‘working’ class categories because of the stigma and precariousness associated with them. This is what the literature terms the ‘middle-class illusion’ (Castillo, Miranda and Cabib, 2013), which blurs class boundaries, neutralises the perception of structural conflict and weakens awareness of inequality. (b) The cultural construction of the middle class as synonymous with success and progress. Haddon and Wu (2021) argue that the subjective experience of class is shaped not only by material conditions but by cultural and symbolic narratives that diminish

the perception of social distance. In this context, self-identification as ‘middle class’ functions as a form of aspirational identity that offers symbolic stability in the face of precariousness, particularly among young people transitioning to the labour market. (c) The buffering effect of higher education. University attendance can generate an optimistic perception of upward mobility even when objective class position has not changed. Drawing on system justification theory (Jost, 2019), individuals – including those from subordinate groups – tend to legitimise the status quo and perceive the existing social order as just or inevitable.

Symbolic identification with the middle class thus sustains a sense of normality and distributive justice, reducing the dissonance between mobility aspirations and real conditions of inequality.

These findings are consistent with the concept of subjective socioeconomic status (SSES), which – as discussed in the theoretical framework – captures how individuals perceive their relative position in the social hierarchy beyond objective income indicators. The data suggest that class self-perception is not determined solely by household income brackets but is mediated by social, cultural and symbolic discourses that ‘normalise’ middle-class identification, as can be seen in Table 6. The MacArthur Scale (Adler *et al.*, 2000) similarly shows that middle-class identification can be decoupled from objective socioeconomic indicators.

#### 4.2.2. *Wealth distribution by quintiles*

It is important to distinguish conceptually between two related but distinct dimensions: income and wealth, with wealth referring to accumulated assets rather than earnings. The literature consistently shows that wealth inequality is considerably greater than income inequality in most countries (Piketty, 2015). The OECD report *Income and Wealth Inequalities: Society at a Glance 2024* notes that, across OECD countries, the wealthiest 10% own on average more than 50% of total household wealth, compared to a considerably lower share of total income. When asked to estimate the distribution of wealth in Spain (Table 6), students display a widespread underestimation of real inequality. Wealth in Spain is highly concentrated: the richest quintile (5) owns 67.3% of total wealth (with Conde and García [2025] assigning 21% of total wealth to 1% of Spanish households); yet UCM students estimate this share at only 45.5%, and UGR students at 39.9%. This reflects a significant distortion of economic reality in both universities.

At the other end of the distribution, the poorest quintile (1) – which actually holds just 0.5% of total wealth – is assigned 6.1% by UCM students and 9.8% by those at the UGR, further illustrating the tendency to perceive a more equal society than the data support.

This discrepancy between the actual distribution of wealth and students’ perceived or ideal distribution reflects a pattern widely documented in the international literature on misperceptions of inequality and redistributive preferences (Gimpelson and

Treisman, 2018). As Hauser and Norton (2017) argue, what matters is not only how unequal society actually is, but how unequal people believe it to be.

The data show that students underestimate the real concentration of wealth and overestimate the share held by the lowest quintiles, constructing a more egalitarian representation of the economy than objective evidence warrants. This perceptual gap carries significant implications: research has consistently shown that ignorance or underestimation of inequality reduces support for redistributive policies and strengthens individualistic narratives, to the detriment of a more critically aware citizenry.

Nevertheless, students propose an ideal distribution of wealth considerably more equitable than the actual one. At the UCM, students assign the richest quintile an ideal share of 26.9% and the poorest 13.4%. At the UGR, an even more egalitarian model is proposed, with the richest quintile at 21.3% and the poorest at 16.2%. This suggests that inequality is experienced less as a structural reality than as a moral or ethical problem – though it is notable that even in students’ ideal scenarios, the richest quintile retains a substantially larger share than the poorest.

**Table 6**  
*Perceived and ideal wealth distribution (%)*

Wealth distribution	Actual	UCM Perceived	UCM Ideal	UGR Perceived	UGR Ideal
Quintile 1	0.5	6.1	13.4	9.8	16.2
Quintile 2	5.4	10.5	16.8	12.6	17.7
Quintile 3	10.0	15.6	20.0	17.4	23.5
Quintile 4	16.8	22.4	22.9	20.2	21.3
Quintile 5	67.3	45.5	26.9	39.9	21.3

Source: own research. Teaching Innovation Project 40, UCM.

#### 4.2.3. *Income relative to mine*

Table 7 examines the perception of relative socioeconomic status, specifically, how students compare their household income to that of others. The analysis of household income in relation to the perception of relative economic status allows us to delve deeper into one of the central concerns of this study: the mismatch between objective socioeconomic position and the way students interpret their place in the social structure. As established above, perceptions of inequality are not shaped solely by material conditions but are mediated by social, cultural and symbolic processes that influence class self-placement.

Among students in the lowest income bracket ( $\leq$  €13,000), almost half consider that the majority of families are better off economically: 40.7% estimate that 75% of families have higher incomes than their own, compared to only 8.9% who believe that three quarters of households are worse off. This reflects a clear awareness of economic disadvantage but limited downward comparison, suggesting that inequality is understood as a structural trait rather than as a relative situation open to change.

In the middle income brackets (€13,001–€32,000), although the proportion of students who acknowledge the existence of lower-income households increases, upward comparison remains dominant. In the €21,001–€32,000 segment, for instance, 46.6% consider that at least half of all families have higher incomes than their own, compared to 43.8% who place half or more of households below them. This near-symmetry does not reflect balance but class ambivalence, characteristic of the contemporary middle classes.

Following Bourdieu (1982), this ambivalence can be interpreted as the product of an intermediate position marked by the accumulation of cultural capital – in this case, access to university – that does not necessarily translate into equivalent economic security. Constant comparison with those ‘above’ reflects both aspirations for upward mobility and fear of social descent, producing a sense of vulnerability that fuels symbolic identification with the middle class even when material conditions are precarious.

Among students from medium-high and high-income households ( $\geq$  €47,001), Table 7 reveals a greater awareness of economic privilege, though upward comparison does not disappear entirely. Among those in the over-€60,000 bracket, 56% consider that 75% of families have lower incomes than their own – a perception broadly consistent with their objective position. Yet 24% still estimate that at least half of households are better off, suggesting that even the most privileged sectors define their status in relation to groups that are still more advantaged. This constant displacement of the reference group upwards obscures the perception of privilege and reinforces the idea that inequality is always external and other.

These empirical patterns take on their full meaning when analysed through the lens of system justification theory. As Jost and Hunyady (2005) and Jost (2019) argue, individuals tend to accept and legitimise the existing social order as a means of reducing cognitive dissonance. The data in Table 7 suggest that generalised upward comparison – even among those in relatively advantaged positions – functions as a symbolic mechanism that places inequality at ‘other’ social levels, weakening identification with disadvantaged groups and diminishing awareness of structural conflict.

Taken together, the data show that objective household income does not translate directly into a clear perception of class position. The interaction between SSES, Bourdieu’s logics of capital and the legitimating mechanisms of the system produces a class self-placement characterised by insecurity, upward comparison and

persistent identification with a generic ‘middle class’. This explanatory framework helps to account for why, even against a backdrop of structural inequality, university students tend to acknowledge inequality without translating that recognition into a critical reading of social hierarchies or any greater disposition to challenge the existing order.

**Table 7**

*What percentage of families do you think have higher/lower income than yours? (UGR, %)*

Household income	Higher than mine			Lower than mine		
	25	50	75	25	50	75
€13,000 or less	23.0	36.3	40.7	65.9	25.2	8.9
€13,001 to €21,000	22.4	57.2	20.5	48.9	41.2	9.9
€21,001 to €32,000	31.3	56.3	12.3	20.8	61.4	17.8
€32,001 to €47,000	41.4	51.5	7.1	11.1	57.6	31.3
€47,001 to €60,000	62.5	31.9	5.6	5.6	50.0	44.4
Above €60,000	69.3	24.0	6.7	6.7	37.3	56.0
Overall total	34.2	50.5	15.3	29.2	49.1	21.7

Source: own research.

It should be noted that, according to data from the Spanish National Institute of Statistics (INE, 2025), the AROPE rate (At Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion) stood at approximately 26.5% of the population in Spain in 2023, meaning that almost one in four households faces poverty or social exclusion risk; by 2024 this figure had fallen to 25.8%.

## 5. Conclusions

The findings of this study yield a number of substantive conclusions in relation to the stated objectives.

First, the data on parental income, education and occupation show that UGR students come predominantly from households with somewhat more favourable socioeconomic positions than the Spanish average, particularly in the lower strata, though very high-income households are also underrepresented. A high proportion of parents hold higher education qualifications, while families with low educational levels – especially those who did not progress beyond primary school – are markedly underrepresented. Although some families with secondary and vocational qualifications have managed to partly overcome the educational barriers of the previous generation, university access remains socially selective. The data thus confirm the persistence of structural barriers to access to higher education and the continuing reproduction of intergenerational patterns of educational and cultural capital transmission, which limits the scope of the university's democratising potential.

Second, there is a clear mismatch between the objective socioeconomic position of students at the University of Granada (UGR) and their class self-perception. Despite a significant proportion coming from low or lower-middle income households, the majority self-place in a generic 'middle class', pointing to a 'middle-class illusion' sustained by aspirations of upward mobility and the stigmatisation of lower social categories. This leads individuals to place themselves in the middle class even when their material conditions do not warrant it, contributing to the naturalisation of inequality and undermining the capacity to recognise and address real differences in power and resources.

This pattern of middle-class self-placement and underestimation of wealth concentration is consistent with two theoretical frameworks. On one hand, research on subjective socioeconomic status (SSES) shows that relative self-placement – rather than objective income – structures political attitudes and assessments of distributive justice, helping to explain the middle-class self-identification observed among UGR students. On the other hand, system justification theory identifies the motivational mechanisms by which individuals, including those from lower social classes, rationalise and normalise inequalities, thereby reducing citizen pressure for redistributive policies.

Comparative evidence (ISSP, EVS, WVS) and recent studies of class sensitivity (Had-don and Wu, 2021) further confirm that the relationship between objective inequality, perception and redistributive preferences is heterogeneous and contingent on class position and informational context.

Third, students display limited knowledge of the actual distribution of wealth: they substantially underestimate the concentration of wealth in the highest quintiles and overestimate the resources held by the most disadvantaged groups, constructing a

far more egalitarian image of society than the objective data support. This perceptual distortion coexists, however, with a markedly more egalitarian ideal distribution, pointing to normative values oriented towards social justice even in the absence of accurate knowledge of real inequality.

In sum, the university continues to operate according to a logic that favours students from families with established educational trajectories. A phenomenon of ‘subjective centrism’ is also apparent, whereby class self-perception obscures the real boundaries of social stratification. A notable paradox emerges: despite limited knowledge of the actual magnitude of economic inequality, university students express a clear normative inclination towards more egalitarian models of wealth distribution.

These findings underscore the need to strengthen the university’s role as an active agent in the formation of a critical and engaged citizenship, to mainstream the analysis of structural inequalities across curricula, to foster reflective thinking and to promote spaces for dialogue and transformative action within the university community. These are key conditions for building more inclusive, aware and equitable institutions that actively engage with the symbolic barriers that shape students’ university experience according to their social origin.

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