





How Life Skills Transform the University Experience?

'Skills to feel, live and enjoy' is the new proposal from the Dean's Office of the University Environment at Universidad del Rosario, aimed at transforming elective courses known as Humanities and the Wellfare (HM) into a space where students can develop social qualities that they can integrate into their professional lives.

By Stefany Hernández Arrieta

Photos by Milagro Castro, URosario

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Enology, or knowledge about wine making, is an [elective course](#) in the Humanities and the Environment ([HM, by its acronym in Spanish](#)) area, which, together with 48 others such as stress management, taekwondo and sexuality, are part of the current offer of academic training at Universidad del Rosario offered through the Wellfare Deanship ([DMU, by its acronym in Spanish](#)). of Universidad del Rosario These courses are just as important as the core courses, not only because they involve academic credits and qualifications, but also because they complement the professional and human profile of the student.

However, what contributions does enology offer, for example, to the study of medicine? For this Deanship, the answer is summarized in one sentence: to develop social skills for life.

"The HM electives have been at Universidad del Rosario for about 25 years, and were implemented with the purpose of ensuring that students obtain comprehensive training and at

the same time meet the requirements of the elective courses within the university curriculum, which is what the Ministry of Education demands,” explains [Nadia García Sicard](#), academic coordinator of the Deanship. “The university is committed to achieving a comprehensive education for students, grounded in the values and mission of the rosarista tradition,” she adds.

According to [Decree 2566 of 2003](#) of the Ministry of Education, “which establishes the minimum quality conditions and other requirements for the offering and development of higher education academic programs and dictates other provisions,” the importance of the institution having a strategic plan for university well-being is mentioned, for the individual and collective development of students, teachers and administrative staff.

Therefore, in the constant search to improve the quality of university education, Universidad del Rosario has strived to go beyond the transmission of theoretical and practical knowledge related to academic disciplines, through the specialized center in emotional education, [URemotion](#), which began operations in 2019 and is led by the dean of Wellfare [Ana María Restrepo Fallón](#). In this, the importance of preparing students to face the challenges of everyday life has been recognized, equipping them with strengths that transcend the classroom, such as skills to socialize, be creative, manage emotions and maintain good physical and mental health.

Transformative skills

For the URemotion center, social and emotional skills contribute to individual and collective well-being, and they not only work while learning, but are also applied throughout life. Nadia García shares with us that DMU chose to classify skills into three large groups, according to the three main qualities that the elective program seeks for the comprehensive development of the student profile:

- **Feel:** Skills focused on emotional management that are developed in the electives of emotional intelligence, the science of happiness and humor studies, among others.
- **Living:** Skills focused on the development of the mind and body that are developed in electives such as creative writing workshop, football and values, thinking with the body, etc.
- **Enjoy:** Skills focused on the ability to function in the social environment



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that are developed in electives such as feminism for beginners, climate change, and enology for example.

Nadia García explains that these courses are changing according to the environment and needs of the students. As an example, the career professor of the Wellfare Deanship, [Caleb Saldaña Medina](#), comments that currently the issues of sexuality, cybersecurity and psychoactive substance use are of short-term necessity and that the call for new elections will give priority to these issues.

These skills are carried out in the course of the semesters under the name of Electives of Humanities and the Wellfare with a value of two credits each, taking into account that a university credit equals 48 hours of academic work. “Students are expected to complete six credits from these courses throughout their career, and when they finish, they will have a suitcase full of theoretical and practical knowledge, but at the

same time he will take a suitcase full of skills that will allow them to develop and face their future lives better,” asserts García.

A Study of Perception

In 2021, García and Saldaña worked together with monitors [Sophia Salamanca Gómez](#), from the journalism career, and [Daniel Alejandro Jiménez Roa](#), from the social sciences teaching program, to conduct an investigation about the perception of skills that monitors, students and teachers have about HM electives and how they coincide with the objective of each group of skills in the three categories. The specific objectives of the research were:

- Explore the perception of key actors in the teaching-learning process.
- Define developed life skills in accordance with the perceptions explored.
- Select the skills in which participants agree according to their perceptions.

This study comprised four elective courses chosen by the monitors: enology (enjoy), stress management (feel), creative writing workshop (live) and map of the senses: reflections on living in Bogota (enjoy), and was carried out in three phases according to the study groups:

- Phase 1: Data collection from surveys designed for four professors (one for each course).
- Phase 2: Perception logs from the monitors who attended the aforementioned classes.
- Phase 3: Surveys designed for the 72 students who took these courses and voluntarily participated in this research.

The methodology used, specifies Professor Saldaña, was the coding of the keywords through a comparison in the responses of the three groups. For example, “in the case of enology, students responded that they had developed skills for social life and for expressing themselves in public, because they had to conduct a wine tasting and go to their knowledge of general culture to present them, since within the course they studied topics such as geography and history of both exporting and wine producing countries,” argues Saldaña. “Professor Catalina Rugeles Montoya is in charge of teaching general culture and knowledge about countries. It should be noted that the monitors agreed with these reflections. So, by collecting this information we encode the answers and unite them into a single perception: that the elective course develops the social ability of critical thinking.”

Although the results obtained from the three groups evaluated show that the proposed objectives were met, the research group concluded that the measurements of perceptions are very broad and that for the electives to really meet the mission and vision of the Welfare Deanship it is necessary to build a more standardized plan that allows to measure more accurately the relationship between the student with the skill and the objective of the course.



Professor Caleb Saldaña explains that “having a skill is the ability to do something and each person develops a skill with greater or lesser degree, that is, people who take the electives would be expected to have more developed some of the skills for life than those who have not taken them .”



“It is expected that students will complete six credits from these courses throughout their studies, and when they finish, they will have a suitcase full of theoretical and practical knowledge, but at the same time, they will carry a suitcase full of skills that will allow them to develop and face their future lives better,” asserts Nadia García, academic coordinator of the Welfare Deanship.

In Saldaña's words, "having skill is the ability to do something and each person develops a skill with greater or lesser degree, that is, people who take the electives would be expected to have more developed some of the skills for life than those who have not taken them." Under this premise, the DMU decided to build the protocol for measuring life skills with the aim of improving the method of evaluating the impact of electives on students.

The case of empathy

After the perception study, which was the beginning for the HM courses to be evaluated by skills, Nadia García and Caleb Saldaña developed a more precise methodology in their most recent study entitled "[The development of life skills from the elective curriculum in higher education: the case of measuring empathy.](#)" For its implementation they used psychometric techniques in order to evaluate the degree of ability that students obtain by course, throughout the semester. Psychometrics is the discipline responsible for measuring and quantifying human behavior, thinking, qualities, and other cognitive processes. In this case, the pilot study was for the elective of emotional intelligence and its ability to empathize; thus a 5-step protocol was created with the aim of being generalized for all courses of the branches to feel, live and enjoy.

The five steps of the pilot test were:

- 1- Theoretical and operational definition of the ability to develop in each elective.
- 2- Choosing (or creating) a questionnaire that measures the defined skill.
- 3- Assessment of the skill test at the beginning and end of each semester.
- 4- Analysis of differences in ability in students.
- 5- Feedback and improvement plan in the elective.

According to Saldaña, the emotional intelligence elective was chosen as a pilot test of the study because at the end of the semesters it has been the best valued by students, and they consider that the teaching topics coincide with the objectives proposed by the course. However, the skill that develops there, according to the teachers who teach it, is something complex to measure. How Can Empathy Be Measured?

"What could we do? Either we chose a questionnaire that was already validated and that existed in the scientific literature, or we



had to create our own questionnaire," the spokesperson notes. For the case of empathy and emotional intelligence, creating the questionnaire was a collaborative effort between the faculty teaching the course and the researchers directing the protocol. In this way an agreement was reached on the possible questions that could be asked to the student and measure the level of empathy acquired during the course.

At the beginning of the semester, 31 students participated in answering a questionnaire that measured the level of empathy they showed in their student life, which generated an average response of this skill in 3 (1 being low and 5 the highest). At the end of the semester, the same questionnaire was carried out to the same students and an average of 3.5 was obtained. The results were communicated to the faculty, so that they had new alternatives to improve this skill in class. Although there are different variables that affect the results, this constant measurement is a means to feedback the teaching work and have tools for future decision making.



“For us this 5-step protocol has no end, because we are always in constant evaluation of the skills,” emphasizes Saldaña, since the perception of skills varies with time and the needs of students constantly change. Therefore, to obtain the best possible information, this survey has been administered every semester since 2021. This year, began with the evaluation of seven courses, and to date 35 of the 49 courses belonging to the HM electives have been analyzed.

The pilot of the course of emotional intelligence obtained a favorable result by observing an increase in empathy among the students who attended the class. At the same time, it was favorable for the teacher of elective and co-author of the research [Karen Tautiva Ochoa](#), as this allowed her to improve her methodology and better understand the outcomes of her course.

“This greatly motivates the teacher; it invites them to engage in research and to periodically evaluate how we are

improving. Additionally, the good results open the door for us to invite them to participate in the dynamics of their class, and we can improve the methodology of other courses. This is how the pilot test began,” adds Saldaña.

On the other hand, the two researchers assure that evaluating skills is not in itself evaluating the theory of the course, but, beyond, analyzing the implicit content that forms the integrity of the student and that allows to see if what the university wants for its students is equivalent to the quality of education that it is teaching. Furthermore, it provides information on the application of skills in the students' daily lives and whether they benefit from the knowledge acquired.

A curious case was the course of stress management and negative results at the end of the semester. “This class is often taken by medical students, who have to deal with a very high stress burden,” Saldaña says. “When we evaluated it, we were surprised that the stress was higher at the end of the semester than at the time of the start. How can that be possible? Then we realized that the instrument we used measured the stress level and not the stress control. When they enter, students are more relaxed, still not having the workload associated with their career. Instead, at the end of the semester they are facing midterms and a thousand more topics, then they are more stressed. Stress is an emotional state that varies over time. Partials, for example, affect the student's stress level, and studying and measuring these levels makes us make new and better decisions.”

On the other hand, the researchers mention other skills implicit in their courses such as patience for embroidery class, the development of social qualities for enology, self-knowledge and personal branding for etiquette and protocol, among others. “It is what is usually called a hidden curriculum, in the sense that there is nothing explicit about patience, for example, but, hidden behind a class of embroidery is what you learn,” concludes Saldaña.

Currently, this evaluation method continues to be applied in HM electives to understand how skills influence the construction of the student's professional profile, while helping the teachers who teach the electives so that they can complement teaching with activities that can be seen in everyday life and in the same theoretical courses of the respective careers. ■