

Analysis of proactivity in university students and professors

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Abstract

Proactivity is a necessary skill among teachers in the 21st century. The objective of this research is to understand and analyze the levels of proactivity among university students and teachers. A longitudinal study subsidized by the University of Zaragoza was carried out over seven years (2012-2019). A mixed methodology was used, including a quantitative study, in which a questionnaire was used as an evaluation instrument, and a qualitative study with three discussion groups. The sample included 717 participants (130 professors and 587 students) from 12 centers belonging to the five macro university areas. The results show that compared with no proactive people, proactive people are more positive, care more about the quality of what they do, are more entrepreneurial, and tend to expand their studies and accept their mistakes more easily.

Keywords: university, entrepreneurship, proactivity, attitude, commitment, skills, quality

1. Introduction

Society has demanded changes in universities in recent decades. In higher education, there is a commitment to a competency-based learning approach, in which it is not enough to work on the theoretical (knowing) and practical (knowing how) contents; social relations (knowing how to live together) and social values (knowing how to be) must also be reinforced.

This research examines concerns that professors are indifferent toward student participation in voluntary activities that are apparently interesting for them in different facets of the university. In addition, there are concerns among students regarding the use of active methodologies, authentic evaluations and coherence between what they learn and what they can later apply in their environment in the short, medium and long term. The question that arises is as follows: Are professors and students proactive? This question should be examined by the university system to evolve in the direction of knowing how to coexist and knowing how to be. Otherwise, there is a greater risk of progressive displacement of both students and teachers regarding institutional (university) and social involvement.

This work presents an epistemological analysis of the term proactivity, and we approach positions regarding what is and what is not considered to be proactivity. Leaning on the approach of the proactivity construct that other authors use, we elaborate and validate our own construction of the term, breaking it down into five concepts: 1) attitude, 2) commitment, 3) responsibility, 4) adaptation to change, and 5) emotional sense (Belschak & Den Hartog, 2010; Covey, 2003; Frankl, 1993; Grant & Ashford, 2008; Parker & Collins, 2010). To assess levels of proactivity and initiative, it is advisable to start from personal and contextual aspects (Muñoz-Cantero & Losada-Puente, 2018; Parker & Collins, 2010). Findings from several authors suggest that a proactive person has an emotionally committed attitude, is responsible and is open to change.

Once the epistemological analysis of the construct is completed, we proceed to evaluate students' and professors' level of proactivity and to break down the aspects that favor and/or are detrimental to proactive attitudes. We intend to use an interpretive paradigm to construct a reality that allows us to advance towards a horizon in which the university system takes notoriety and is filled with quality.

2. Concept and Theoretical Framework

We define proactivity as a transversal competence that, following the classification of the Tuning project (Tuning Educational Structures in Europe, 2003), is included within personal competences, which have a high component of personal and professional expression (Fatimah et al., 2016). Following Parker and Bindl (2017), we highlight the significant relationship between proactivity in young people and their level of responsibility, adaptation to change and level of personal and social commitment; we examine these aspects in the different phases of the instrument developed for this research.

In line with research by Wu et al. (2017), we understand that proactivity implies initiative, willingness, action and energy, in addition to the five concepts adjuvant with the worldview of the proactivity construct, namely, 1) attitude, 2) commitment, 3) responsibility, 4) adaptation to change, and 5) emotional sense. These constructs correspond to each of the sections of the questionnaire used in this investigation. Recently, the term proactivity has been increasingly used in the scientific world, although it was Frankl (1993) that defined it as "the freedom to choose our attitude facing the circumstances that our own life offers us. We can always choose how to act..." It is noteworthy that Frankl offers an important contextual content to the term proactivity despite stating that proactivity is a personal decision. On the other hand, Covey (2003) has a very complementary vision of proactivity: the ability to lead one's life in a specific context and time. In his book "The 7 Habits of Personal Workbook", he describes proactivity as the first habit, indicating that we are responsible for our own effectiveness, our happiness and, ultimately, most of our circumstances.

Based on a report by the International Commission on Education for the 21st Century and following Delors (1996), proactivity implies pro-positivity, reflection and the organization of action. This term is made up of four pillars: to know, know to do, know how to be together and know how to be. Previous researchers have found a positive relationship between proactivity and learning processes among graduates (Tomás-Miquel et al., 2016); learning acquired in playful and proactive environments is more durable over time, as this type of learning invites reflection and conceptual relationships. Therefore, the stimulation of the referred competence in the global educational, business and contextual field is of academic and social interest. As we can see, many authors describe proactivity as a behavioral and cognitive component based on an intrinsic, autonomous and change-oriented motivation (Belschak & Den Hartog, 2010; Grant & Ashford, 2008; Parker & Collins, 2010; Tornau & Frese, 2013). One of the contributions of our research is to link the term proactivity to not only cognitive but also emotionally active attitudes that allow changes to be managed from a useful and adaptive perspective. Another of the fundamental debates regarding proactivity competition is to define whether it has biological components (Tejada & Ruiz, 2016) and/or can be learned and developed in the different vital stages.

3. Method

The methodological framework of this research is based on quantitative and qualitative approaches and uses descriptive and longitudinal methodologies. The research covers the period of time from 2013 to 2019.

We start from an interpretive paradigm in which the description and analysis of the data help us to understand and develop a reality, which is a key aspect for achieving our objective.

3.1 Objective

The objective of this research is to understand and describe the level of proactivity among students and professors at the University of Zaragoza.

3.2 Sample

Simple random sampling is carried out by selecting students and professors involved in the innovation project. An average participation of between 100 and 110 participants per year is maintained. Specifically, between 15 and 20 professors and between 80 and 85 students per year are selected.

Our initial sample included 717 participants (130 teachers and 587 students), 66.5% of whom were men and 33.5% of whom were women.

3.3 Investigation procedure and analysis

Once the data from the questionnaire were collected, a statistical analysis of the results was carried out using the SPSS 22.0 statistical program from IBM.

Quantitative results obtained during these seven years were complemented with data from three discussion groups: two of the groups were homogeneous and composed of all students or all professors, while a third heterogeneous group included both students and professors.

The purpose of the discussion groups was to analyze the fundamental factors obtained in the quantitative results, such as the relationship between proactivity and attitude, lifelong learning, entrepreneurship, and the quality of what is done.

The qualitative analysis focused on two initial categories, namely, gender and the group (student or teacher), and five predefined categories, namely, attitude, responsibility, commitment, adaptation to change and emotional sense. Once the results from the three discussion groups were analyzed based on different segments of intervention, three new categories emerged: the sociocultural environment, emotional intelligence and social desirability (see Table 1).

Table 1. Categories analyzed in the discussion groups

Predefined categories	Emerging categories
Attitude	Sociocultural environment
Commitment	Emotional intelligence
Responsibility	Social desirability
Adaptation to change	
Emotional sense	

3.4 Instruments

Due to the lack of validated questionnaires that could measure students' and professors' level of proactivity, we developed and validated an ad hoc instrument. It started with five dimensions included in the concept of proactivity created by other authors (Belschak & Den Hartog, 2010; Grant & Ashford, 2008; Muñoz-Cantero & Losada-Puente, 2018; Parker & Collins, 2010; Tornau & Frese, 2013). These dimensions are reflected in the five macro sections of the instrument (questionnaire) used in this research (see Table 2).

Table 2. Dimensions of the proactivity questionnaire

1. I consider myself a proactive person	Scale	
<i>Attitude</i>		
2. I have the full freedom to choose my attitude towards life	1 2 3 4	
3. I maintain a positive attitude towards the different situations I face in life	1 2 3 4	
4. My attitude helps me face different situations	1 2 3 4	
5. I am a person with the ability to excel.	1 2 3 4	
6. I anticipate situations and take measures to face them	1 2 3 4	
<i>Commitment</i>		
7. I enjoy learning new things	1 2 3 4	

8.I am committedto myself	1 2 3 4	
9.I am committed to others	1 2 3 4	
10.I am concerned about the quality of what I do	1 2 3 4	
<i>Responsibility</i>		
11.I take responsibility for my actions	1 2 3 4	
12.My failures depend on me	1 2 3 4	
13.My achievements depend on me	1 2 3 4	
14.I tend to put off my responsibilities	1 2 3 4	
<i>Adaptation to change</i>		
15.I have mental flexibility	1 2 3 4	
16.For me it is hard to change my mind	1 2 3 4	
17. For me it is hard to accept my mistakes	1 2 3 4	
18.I adapt easily to new situations	1 2 3 4	
<i>Emotional sense</i>		
19.I am aware of my emotions	1 2 3 4	
20.I can manage my emotions	1 2 3 4	
21.I am an empathetic person	1 2 3 4	
22.I am an assertive person	1 2 3 4	
23.I have hope in life	1 2 3 4	
24.I have clear goals in life	1 2 3 4	

A Likert-type response scale was used, where 1 = not at all, 2 = a little, 3 = enough and 4 = a lot. The questionnaire consists of 24 items divided into five dimensions or categories. Each of the dimensions includes an average of five items (between four and six) that give a homogeneous consistency to each of the categories: attitude, commitment, responsibility, adaptation to change and emotional sense. The reliability of the scale was assessed; the Cronbach's alpha value was 0.821. The questionnaire could be answered both in paper and electronic format.

4. Results

4.1 Quantitative results

The results obtained are presented below and are organized in two blocks: 1) level of proactivity and its relationship with gender and group status (student or teacher), and 2) significant relationships found between proactivity and five study variables:

1. Proactivity and attitude
2. Proactivity and level of anticipation-coping
3. Proactivity and quality
4. Proactivity and entrepreneurship
5. Proactivity and acceptance of mistakes

4.1.1 Students' and professors' proactivity level

The level of proactivity of the research participants was low, and these results are similar to those found in other studies (Rodríguez et al., 2016). Both students and professors are considered nonproactive people, with an attitude capable of being improved in many aspects (Russell, 2018). We found low levels of commitment, motivation, responsibility, adaptation to change and emotional sense, with deficiencies in the areas of management and frustration. Of the 717 participants in the research, 70% of teachers and students "failed" in their assessment of the level of proactivity.

These results have already emerged in other investigations carried out at universities (Gilar-Corbi et al., 2019), with this educational stage being one of the most pronounced in terms of distance between teachers and students. We do not intend to focus on comparisons that mark gaps; our purpose is to develop a reality that can help us to improve it. The trends and relationships presented in this section were constantly repeated during the seven years of the research.

4.1.2 Comparison between students' and professors' proactivity levels

The number of students who indicated that their level of proactivity is "a lot" (4 in the scale) was fourfold the number of professors who indicated the same level; this characteristic was similar in all evaluations. The high percentage of professors and students whose proactivity level was 1 or 2 is remarkable (76.2% of professors and 67.8% of students). This result is striking since the research initially focused on the low participatory proactivity of the students. It is interesting to reflect on the perception of other people's behavior (between professors and students). The results of this section suggest that an attitudinal approach would be useful to avoid negative expectations of students towards teachers and vice versa. Both groups are more aligned than it might initially seem.

4.1.3 Relationship between proactivity, gender and employment situation

There is a statistically significant association between proactivity and gender, $X(2) = 2,398$, $p < 0.05$; this relationship was low and directly proportional, with a contingency coefficient = 0.058, $p < 0.05$. Based on these results, we can affirm that the men in our sample are more proactive than the women. There is no appreciable statistical relationship between the proactivity, gender and employment situation of the participants, although it is interesting to assess the results, which indicate that there is a higher level of proactivity among those who are expanding their studies and among men. These results are aligned with the conclusions reached by Tejada and Ruiz (2016), in which training throughout life is more permanent and constant in people with initiative, concern, proactivity and mental flexibility. Based on the results, we affirm that training throughout life favors proactive skills and vice versa.

4.1.4 Relationship between proactivity and employment situation

If we analyze the relationship between proactivity and employment situation, it is observed that the most "proactive" group includes those who are pursuing higher education, which is shown in participants who rated their proactivity level as 3 or 4; most of the participants who rated their proactivity level as 1 or 2 work in a position related to their studies (more than 85% of those surveyed). Given this striking result, we explored the causes of this lack of proactivity in people who work in positions related to their studies. Participants, students and professors, state that the disagreement is mainly caused by three issues: 1) working in lower positions relative to their degree, 2) having low expectations of career development in the company or institution, and 3) the lack of the possibility of making decisions that truly contribute to a change in the system. These results indicate that it is not enough to work in a position related to one's studies; individuals need commitment and personal and institutional flexibility.

4.1.5 Significant relationships were found between proactivity and the five study categories

As we can see in Table 3, people who are more proactive also maintain a more positive attitude, are able to anticipate and deal with situations more easily, care more about the quality of what they do, are more enterprising and accept mistakes better.

Table 3. Significant relationships between proactivity and other categories

Variable	Relationship	Contingency coefficient
Relationship between proactivity and attitude	$X(2)=447,73$; $p<0.05$	0.620; $p<0.05$
Relationship between proactivity and level of anticipation-coping	$X(2)=216.51$; $p<0.05$	0.482; $p<0.05$.
Relationship between proactivity and quality	$X(2)=306,86$; $p<0.05$	0.547; $p<0.05$.
Relationship between proactivity and entrepreneurship	$X(2)=136.84$; $p<0.05$	0.400; $p<0.05$
Relationship between proactivity and acceptance of mistakes	$X(2)=314.81$; $p<0.05$	0.552; $p<0.05$

4.1.6 Relationship between proactivity and attitude

There is a statistically significant association between "I consider myself a proactive person" and "I maintain a positive attitude towards the different situations I face in life", such that the greater the level of proactivity, the more a person can maintain a positive attitude. We found that more than 80% of the people who indicated that their level of proactivity was 4 also indicated that their level of positive attitude was 4. These results are not

far from those obtained by Grant and Ashford (2008), who found a significant relationship between attitude and action towards decision-making in university contexts. It is advisable to work on critical and constructive thinking and attitudes throughout one's university career. The modeling that the professor represents is the engine of change (Belschak & Den Hartog, 2010); therefore, and in conjunction with these results, we propose examining positive attitudes first among faculty (professors will serve as a model) and then among students (see Figure 1).

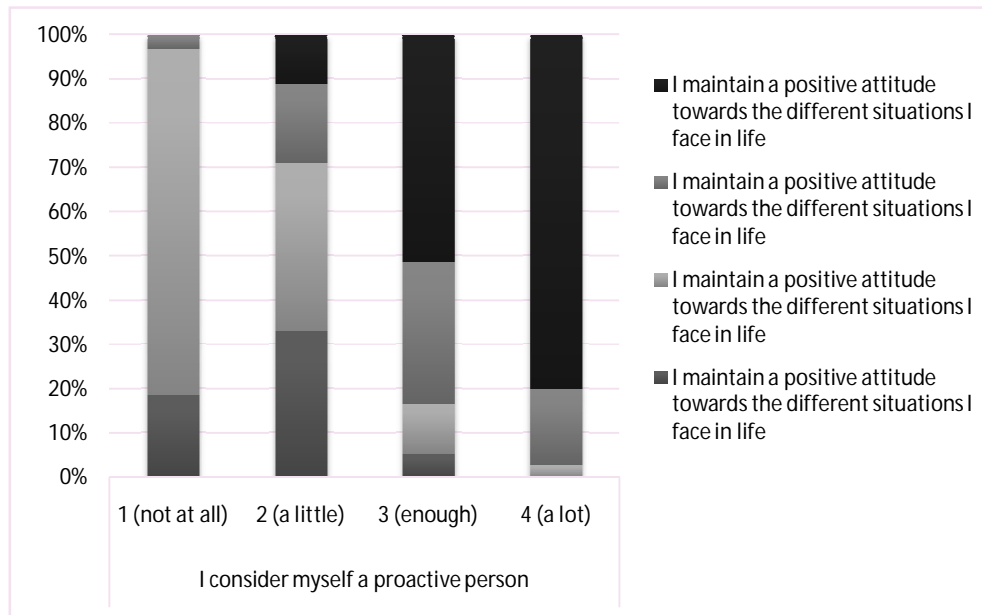


Figure 1. Relationship between proactivity and attitude level.

4.1.7 Relationship between proactivity and level of coping

When analyzing the results, there is a statistically significant relationship between the level of proactivity and the variable "I anticipate situations and take measures to face them." In this case, more than 85% of the people who indicated that their level of proactivity was 4 also reported the same level for anticipating situations and facing them. There is extensive research that establishes relationships between anticipatory ability and academic success (Belschak & Den Hartog, 2010; Grant & Ashford, 2008).

4.1.8 Relationship between proactivity and quality

There is a direct and statistically significant relationship between proactivity and quality $X(2) = 306.86, p < 0.05$; this relationship was high and directly proportional, with a contingency coefficient = 0.547, $p < 0.05$. A total of 90.3% of those who indicated that their level of proactivity was 3 also reported the same level of concern about the quality of what they do; 85.7% of those who indicated that their level of proactivity was 4 also reported the same level of concern about the quality of what they do. This result is similar to those found in the studies carried out by Tomás-Miquel et al. (2016), in which there is a significant relationship between quality and success in the university context. We focus our attention on the utility of investing resources and developing proactivity among first-year university students, as this investment is a commitment to the improvement and quality of the university institution (De la Orden, 1988).

4.1.9 Relationship between proactivity and entrepreneurship

In turn, we found a statistically significant relationship between the level of proactivity and the variable "I am a proactive person", with $X(2) = 136.84, p < 0.05$; this relationship was high and directly proportional, with a contingency coefficient = 0.400, $p < 0.05$. Most of the people who indicated that their level of proactivity was 3 or 4 also have high ratings for entrepreneurship. These results are consistent with the vision of transformative strategies for education proposed by Cortés et al. (2018), in which a bond is established between proactive and entrepreneurial skills, with proactive people being more likely to be entrepreneurs and vice versa.

4.1.10 Relationship between proactivity and acceptance of errors

The relationship between proactivity and acceptance of errors is very interesting. In this case, $X(2) = 314.81, p < 0.05$; this relationship was high and directly proportional, with a contingency coefficient = 0.552, $p < 0.05$.

Those with a higher level of proactivity more easily accept their mistakes. This result complements the research by Tornau and Frese (2013), in which they show concern about the difficulties that students have in accepting mistakes, which is one of the reasons that higher education students drop out. Perhaps investing in proactivity should focus on modifying not only the acceptance of mistakes but also the tolerance of frustration (Tejada & Ruiz, 2016).

4.2 Qualitative results

The quantitative results indicated the benefits of being proactive and its many significant relationships. In this section, we will complement that information with a description of the features that facilitate or hinder proactivity, and we will breakdown the skills that affect one's level of proactivity to be successful with higher education.

If we return to the main concern of this research, we can answer the following question: are university students and professors proactive? The answer is no, they are not proactive. Both teachers and students have low levels of proactivity, and this finding is reinforced by the qualitative results.

To describe the situation, more deeply understand the reasons for these low levels of proactivity, and examine the characteristics of proactive people, we conducted three discussion groups.

1. A discussion group with students (9 participants; 4 men and 5 women).
2. A discussion group with teachers (8 participants; 5 women and 3 men).
3. A mixed discussion group with students and teachers (9 participants; 5 men and 4 women).

After analyzing the data, we found that there are characteristics that favor proactivity and characteristics that hinder it (see Table 4). Emotional management, positive thinking, and mental flexibility enhance proactivity. In contrast, a lack of motivation, a fear of change and a scarcity of resources hinder proactivity in students and university professors.

Table 4. Characteristics that favor and hinder proactivity

Characteristics that favor proactivity	Characteristics that hinder proactivity
1. Taking action and not only reacting.	1. Reactive and external locus of control attitudes
2. Taking risks	2. Ignorance of the term proactivity and the benefits that being proactive can have.
3. Facing rejection and error	3. Fears
4. Mental flexibility	4. Searching for social acceptance
5. Coping with and overcoming frustrating situations	5. Lack of motivation
6. Positive thoughts	6. Rejecting changes
7. Useful management of emotions	7. Lack of resources and tools to be proactive

In these discussion groups, the hypothesis that proactivity is learned and can be developed at the university stage arises. This hypothesis is shared by authors such as Grant and Ashford (2008). Following this theory, the research participants themselves share the premise that non-formal, informal and formal learning have a positive impact on the level of proactivity of both students and professors. Training is considered to favor proactivity, and having been proactive in the past increases the probability being proactive in the future, even if the results of proactivity were not been successful (Miño-Puigcercós et al., 2019). To a lesser extent, there are also theories with a biological approach that consider proactivity as a factor defined, in part, by genetic predisposition (Tejada & Ruiz, 2016). Beyond this genetic focus, in this work, we focus on factors that educators can alter. Once the qualitative data analysis was performed, we detected three emerging skills that arise inductively and repeatedly in the discussion groups with students and teachers. These skills are included in the level of proactivity of the research participants.

Table 5. Emerging skills that affect the level of proactivity

Emerging skills			
	Sociocultural environment	Emotional intelligence	Social Desirability
	Motivation.	Management of own emotions	Security level
Students	Educational Model	Social skills	Social integration
	Financial situations		Critical thinking
Professors	Stress	Communication (intra- and interpersonal)	Expectations
	Requirement		Work-life balance

As we can see in Table 5, sociocultural environment, the level of emotional intelligence and social desirability influence proactivity. Although there are specific factors in the sociocultural environment, such as financial situations or family educational models, which are difficult to modify, the other factors can be developed, learned and improved through theoretical-practical intervention programs. There are recent studies that demonstrate the effectiveness of working motivation, social skills and emotional intelligence in higher education contexts (Gilar-Corbi et al., 2019). The university is a privileged place due to the important role it has in the life of those who study and work in it. Thus, the university period is considered to be full of opportunities to work on aspects related to proactivity and all its components.

5. Conclusions and Discussion

Once the analysis was completed, it was observed that the objective of the research was achieved, since we better understand the level of proactivity among the students and teachers of the University of Zaragoza, although the results invite reflection. This study is interpretive in nature and reinforces the need to work proactively among both teachers and students. The results indicate that although students are not very proactive, they are up to four times more proactive than teachers. We will highlight the conclusions that can provide us with a course of action for future scientific work and interventions. People who have a high level of proactivity maintain more positive attitudes towards life, tend to anticipate everyday situations and confidently face challenges. Therefore, we value the relationships among proactivity, attitude and success that recent studies have examined (Ferreira et al., 2019; Miño-Puigcercós et al., 2019). These relationships are accompanied, in addition to the results of this work, by other international investigations with similar approaches that consider a two-way relationship between positive attitudes and higher-quality and successful results (Belschak & Den Hartog, 2010; Grant & Ashford, 2008; Parker & Collins, 2010; Tornau & Frese, 2013; Wee & Monarca, 2019).

Proactivity can be developed and learned (Grant & Ashford, 2008). Some of the factors that stimulate it are motivation, mental flexibility, positive thinking and initiative. The fundamental reasons why students are not proactive include a fear of errors, rejection, demotivation, a lack of commitment, attributing responsibility to external factors and a lack of resources to be proactive. These same reasons apply to professors who are not proactive, with some added nuances such as the lack of recognition of the work and the inconsistency of the system. To teach proactivity, it is necessary to teach individuals how to think positively and critically since the anticipation of negative thoughts blocks and/or inhibits proactive action (Ursin, 2017). People who have generated reactive habits create imprints that are difficult to modify.

In conclusion, we must note that proactive people are concerned about the quality of what they do, both personally and professionally, and it is necessary to assess the impact this fact has in the local context (Sancho-Gil et al., 2017) and in society in general. The concern for quality is not only personal; it is a group issue and involves the environment. Developing proactivity at early ages prevents school failure in advanced school stages (Fatimah et al., 2016).

There is a growing social need to work on proactive-entrepreneurial competence and carry out correct accompaniment throughout the educational stage in general and university education in particular (Fernández & Delgado, 2016). Changes in teaching practices are slowly established (Ursin, 2017); therefore, although the university can and should be a place of intervention to teach proactivity and entrepreneurship, we should not solely blame this stage for something that can be taught in previous stages, as tutoring is an ideal way for teaching these skills (Almedina & Rodríguez, 2019).

We consider it important to develop evaluation instruments to assess proactive skills, since none valuable knowledge does not evolve at the rate it should, as related research has been affirming (Sancho-Gil et al.,

2017). To improve the levels of proactivity, teamwork and collaborations among teachers, students and/or tutors-mentors from different educational stages can be proposed (Nájera et al., 2017). It is recommended that such collaborations and works be based on an ethical approach to character and centered on universal values (Esteban, 2018). Proactivity is understood as one of the most demanded transversal competences by the labor market (Tejada & Ruiz, 2016); therefore, its development is not only a challenge but rather a social responsibility, with special emphasis on the stage of higher education, as it represents an essentially functional model that links it preferentially and closely to the world of work (Wee & Monarca, 2019).

Following the research of Fernández and Delgado (2016), there is a relationship between the level of proactivity and the handling of situations with a conciliatory and positive attitude; this relationship was also observed in this research. In line with this finding, proactivity is a skill that implies commitment, responsibility and the management of emotions, as well as attitudes and initiative (Muñoz-Cantero & Losada-Puente, 2018). Numerous studies highlight the importance of proactivity in career development and decision-making (Mok et al., 2016); thus, we consider the university stage a period in which it should be necessary to promote the integral development of students and teachers. The idiosyncrasy of the human race is broad, although with this type of research, we aim to focus on aspects that can be improved through formal, informal or non-formal intervention, such as attitudes, commitment, responsibility, adaptation to change and emotional management in response to the stimuli that students and teachers receive. In a society where there is so much fear of making mistakes, it is at least significant to know that proactive people are better at facing failure and that they accept mistakes more elegantly from a learning perspective. In conclusion, although the results regarding the levels of proactivity were not high, with the development of proactivity, we can improve attitudes, cope with situations, enhance the quality of the work carried out, increase entrepreneurship and enhance the ability to accept mistakes. As an important aspect to work on proactivity, we propose triple A theory (acceptance, attitude and action). This theory consists of accepting situations from an attitude without judgment to take action.

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