



Guidance and Counseling in Higher Education: The Role of the Lifeline in the Personal Development of First-Year Students

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Received: 19 November 2025 / Accepted: 28 April 2026
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Abstract

This study examines the narrative identities of first-year university students through the lifeline technique and investigates how these autobiographical accounts reflect indicators of emotional and mental distress. A mixed-methods design was applied to 233 lifelines to quantify five indicators of emotional and mental distress: loneliness, sadness or depressive symptoms, low self-esteem, bullying, and other psychological difficulties. Quantitative analyses identified exploratory differences in the distribution of indicators across academic programs and cohorts, suggesting potential patterns of psychosocial vulnerability shaped by developmental history, disciplinary environments, and post-pandemic contextual conditions. Reflexive thematic analysis demonstrated that levels of narrative coherence and self-awareness were strongly associated with adaptive meaning-making processes, supporting theoretical links between narrative integration, self-regulation, and subjective quality of life. A central contribution of this work is the delineation of an integrated reflective model combining the lifeline with the personal development project (PDP). The four reflective steps of the PDP, which involve clarifying identity, determining actions, defining future goals, and planning pathways, interact dynamically with the autobiographical reconstruction facilitated by the lifeline. Together, they create a cyclical reflective process that promotes well-being, agency, and intentional life planning. The findings highlight the value of narrative-based assessment for early identification of psychosocial needs and for strengthening mentoring practices in higher education.

Keywords Higher education · Accompaniment · Lifeline · Narrative identity · Personal development project · Psychosocial distress

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Introduction

Sometimes freshmen arrive at the university with a passive role, lacking motivation and a sense of responsibility for interaction with faculty or classmates. The transition to university represents a critical developmental period in emerging adulthood, during which students consolidate their identity, adapt to new social contexts, and confront academic and emotional demands that influence their overall well-being. Research in higher education has consistently shown that first-year students experience heightened vulnerability in motivation, psychological needs, and socioemotional adjustment (Chevrier & Lannegrand, 2022). In the post COVID-19 pandemic period, multiple studies have documented increased loneliness, emotional distress, and relational difficulties among university populations (Campbell et al., 2022; Diehl et al., 2018; Ellard et al., 2023).

Among the factors associated with students' psychological adjustment, loneliness has received particular attention in the literature. Loneliness has been conceptualized as a subjective discrepancy between desired and actual social relationships and has been consistently associated with poorer mental health outcomes in young adults, including depressive symptoms and reduced well-being. Furthermore, many students experience prolonged periods of loneliness, especially during transitional stages such as the beginning of university or academic breaks (Diehl et al., 2018). In addition to loneliness, depressive symptoms represent another central dimension of psychosocial distress in university populations. These symptoms may include persistent sadness, emotional exhaustion, and loss of motivation, and have been consistently linked to academic difficulties and reduced quality of life during emerging adulthood (Li et al., 2022; Weber et al., 2022). Low self-esteem has also been identified as a relevant factor in students' psychological adjustment. It refers to negative self-evaluations and feelings of inadequacy, often associated with social comparison and academic pressure, and has been linked to increased vulnerability to emotional distress (Kohls et al., 2023). Interpersonal factors such as bullying further contribute to psychosocial distress. Experiences of peer victimization, including exclusion, mockery, or aggression, have been associated with long-term emotional difficulties and challenges in social integration among university students (Weber et al., 2022). These factors are not independent but tend to co-occur, forming interconnected patterns of psychosocial distress that may influence students' subjective well-being and perceived quality of life, particularly during the transition to university, a developmental stage characterized by increased vulnerability and adjustment demands (Kohls et al., 2023; Li et al., 2022).

Narrative identity offers a robust framework for understanding these processes. Through their life stories, individuals integrate past experiences, current concerns, and future aspirations into a coherent internalized narrative (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Higher levels of narrative coherence and self-awareness have been linked to psychological well-being, resilience, and life satisfaction (Hardy, 2017; London et al., 2023; Vazire & Carlson, 2010). Tools that facilitate autobiographical reflection are therefore particularly valuable for exploring how students interpret their experiences and for identifying emotional and psychological difficulties that may remain invisible in standardized mentoring sessions. The lifeline technique, widely used in biographical and life history research, enables individuals to map significant life

events and describe their emotional meaning, offering insight into indicators such as loneliness, depressive symptoms, low self-esteem, bullying, and other psychosocial challenges (Adriansen, 2012; Gramling & Carr, 2004; Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995).

Understanding students' well-being also requires attention to the future-oriented dimensions of identity development. The personal development project (PDP) provides a structured process for promoting personal reflection and intentional growth by guiding students to clarify who they are, determine what they will do, define who they want to become, and plan how they will achieve it Barbosa-Martínez et al. (2016); Clegg and Bradley (2006); Jackson (2001). When combined with the lifeline, the PDP helps students connect autobiographical insight with future planning, creating a reflective cycle that enhances agency, coherence, and purpose. This process aligns with growing evidence on the importance of mentoring and supportive faculty student relationships in promoting well-being and academic engagement (Law et al., 2020; Pianta et al., 2012; Snijders et al., 2022).

Mentoring activities in higher education have been shown to enhance students' academic and personal development by offering structured, individualized guidance that complements formal instruction (Snijders et al., 2022). Effective mentoring fosters critical thinking, reflective capacity, and the acquisition of cognitive and interpersonal skills that are essential for navigating the increasingly complex demands of adult life (Sharma, 2022). Freshmen students, in particular, often enter university with limited experience in self-regulation, decision-making, and personal planning, which can hinder the transfer of personal competencies beyond the academic context. Evidence indicates that mentoring processes are closely associated with improvements in students' engagement, attitudes, persistence, and overall adjustment to higher education (Law et al., 2020). By providing a supportive relational framework, faculty-student mentoring contributes to students' sense of belonging and facilitates meaningful connections that strengthen their psychological well-being and their ability to articulate coherent life projects.

From a methodological perspective, the integration of narrative tools within mixed methods designs has been increasingly recommended in quality of life research. Mixed methods approaches allow researchers to quantify the prevalence of distress indicators while also examining the interpretive and affective processes through which these indicators emerge (Suárez-Ortega, 2013; Taylor et al., 2015). Comparative analyses across programs and cohorts provide additional insight into how contextual and historical conditions affect students' emotional and psychological trajectories, particularly in post-pandemic contexts where social reconnection and adaptation challenges are still unfolding.

Guided by this framework, the present study addressed the following five inter-related objectives:

1. To identify the presence and distribution of narrative indicators of emotional and psychological distress (loneliness, sadness or depressive symptoms, low self-esteem, bullying, and other psychological difficulties) in the lifelines produced by first-year university students.

2. To explore differences in the distribution of these indicators across academic programs and student cohorts, in order to identify potential patterns of psychosocial vulnerability.
3. To explore the cognitive-affective processes underlying students' autobiographical narratives through reflexive thematic analysis.
4. To integrate quantitative and qualitative findings to characterize patterns of co-occurrence between narrative indicators and thematic content, and to examine how students represent their experiences in relation to subjective well-being and quality of life.
5. To explore the pedagogical potential of combining the lifeline and the PDP as a reflective framework for generating autobiographical narratives related to psychosocial experiences among first-year university students.

Background

Socrates indicated twenty-six centuries ago that the path to happiness begins with self-knowledge. Both the lifeline and the PDP are based on this premise: the fundamental human need to understand oneself as a prerequisite for self-realization and individual well-being (Hardy, 2017).

Due to different personal reasons or the structure of one's mind, it can be difficult for people to know themselves. Often attempts are made to block unwanted thoughts and feelings, other times it is difficult to access mental processes involved in perception, motor learning, personality, attitudes or self-esteem. Introspection cannot provide a direct pathway to these mental processes, although some types of introspection can help people construct beneficial personal narratives. Other ways to increase self-awareness include examining oneself from the perspective of others and observing personal behavior (Rodríguez-Jiménez et al., 2022).

Self-knowledge or personality self-awareness can be understood as accurate self-perceptions of how an individual habitually thinks, feels and behaves, and how others interpret those patterns. The idea that one can know who a person is, how she feels, what she does and what she thinks is very appealing, but this is not always the case. Vazire and Carlson (2010) analyzed three types of evidence on the accuracy of self-perceptions and concluded that the glass is neither full nor empty.

On the one hand, different publications suggest that self-perceptions are objectively related to reality, i.e., that people are not completely unaware of how they behave (London et al., 2023). On the other hand, other studies examine the extent to which people's own self-perceptions are consistent with, but not identical to, the perceptions that others have of them (Kim et al., 2019). Finally, other studies examine whether people are aware of the impressions they make on others, suggesting that individuals have only partial insight into how they are perceived, and that many remain unaware of these differences. The findings from all three approaches point to the conclusion that self-knowledge exists, but leaves something to be desired. The degree of self-knowledge individuals possess regarding their own personality carries significant implications for understanding human rationality and for advancing methods in psychological research (Vazire & Carlson, 2011).

Lifeline

The scientific literature does not contain many papers on the lifeline or timeline as such, but mainly life histories or narrative life history are used as a qualitative research method. Life histories refer, according to McAdams (2001), to narratives of human beings about their behavior and lived experiences. That is, it is the way in which people know themselves through their own experience and history and the reflection they make on it Hatch and Wisniewski (1995).

This qualitative research methodology ensures that the theory fits the data and the data allows for a holistic analysis of people in their current life situations. It is not a matter of reducing individuals to variables or equations, analyzing concepts such as pain, suffering, beauty, etc., which would be lost in other analyses (Taylor et al., 2015). The biographical-narrative research is an open and flexible methodology, somewhat personal, since the level of deepening of each actor fluctuates according to many variables, in addition to the pre-established connection or link with the researcher (Suárez-Ortega, 2013).

The lifeline is a tool that, when properly developed, is very well received by students, as it allows them to realize how useful it is for their future, both personally and professionally. It begins by raising the question of 'who one is' in the present, derived from a realistic self-assessment, and progresses toward envisioning 'who one want to become' in the future, covering different aspects of life. Being an open and flexible methodology is a great advantage, as students feel very free to elaborate it because they can narrate whatever they want, but at the same time, from the researcher's point of view, sometimes not enough information comes out of it Syaripudin (2023).

Life histories talk about and construct history, society and reality, each one like drops of water that make up an ocean. For this reason, each student's life history constitutes their closest 'society'. In addition, they define the climate that will be generated in each classroom, which, without any doubt, will depend on the experiences and life experiences of each person, on how they reflect their idea of reality (McAdams et al., 2008).

For some authors, a life history is a tool that allows students to conduct individual and contextualized analysis, which facilitates the development of their potential and strengthens their ability to face the challenges they encounter throughout their lives (Sharma, 2022).

Strictly speaking, although they were significant events in students' lives, not all of them have gone into the same level of depth. Some authors speak of 'life stories' or they use lifeline interviews as part of life history research (Adriansen, 2012). Then, the lifeline would be a shorter narrative than the life history, perhaps lifelines are more like life stories or biograms or narrative portraits, i.e. chronological representations of the most significant events in a person's life (Bernárdez Gómez et al., 2022; Bonato et al., 2012; Poletto et al., 2014).

A distinction must be made between a life story and a life history. In the former, the narration is done by the protagonist; in the latter, it can be done by anyone. They would be like an autobiography and a biography, respectively (Bernárdez Gómez et al., 2022). However, the lifeline can be for both.

In any case, with the richness found in the students' work, as in the case of Ferrarotti (2007), the question arises as to what to do with the students' lifelines, which are nothing more than summarized life stories that narrate the way they see themselves and, in many cases, talk about how they would like to become. This information is of great value, both for them, to know themselves as a group, and for teachers and people who accompany them and want to know better the reality that surrounds them.

In psychology, the lifeline, or timeline, can be used as a therapeutic tool, as in the study of Poletto et al. (2014), in which the actors temporally delimit the occurrence of traumatic events. In this case they studied the spatio-temporal interaction. Monico et al. (2020) used the lifeline as a visual thinking tool, and collected data from youth with opioid use disorder and their caregivers, enabling the former to make progress in their drug treatment.

Educators observe distinct variations in classroom climate at the beginning of each academic term, which seems to be strongly influenced by the composition and disciplinary context of the student group. Teaching dynamics differ significantly across academic programs, e.g., between Fine Arts, Advertising, and Humanities, highlighting the student backgrounds on the learning environment. The classroom functions as a dynamic socio-educational system, where the collective atmosphere emerges from the interaction of students' individual life histories, which contribute to a shared group identity and influence learning-related interactions. This aligns with socio-constructivist and ecological models, which highlight the interaction between individual experiences and the broader educational environment (Pianta et al., 2012).

To develop a lifeline with the students, it can be done in the classic way; that is, drawing a line on a sheet of paper and chronologically marking on it the events that they consider to have been most significant throughout their lives. Positive events can be marked on the upper part of the line and negative ones on the lower part; both the interviewer and the interviewee can make notes and drawings (Adriansen, 2012; Gramling & Carr, 2004). It can also be performed, as already mentioned, in a parceled way, depending on the type of events to be emphasized, although it is advisable for first-year students not to do it in parcels, since they do not yet have much life experience and the subsequent reflection could be scarce.

Examples of what are significant facts can be given to students to help them better understand the exercise or the teacher or facilitator can provide his or her own lifeline to enhance understanding of the activity. It is important to accompany the reflection on the lifeline, as it will help to objectify facts and experiences and build a coherent project (Monico et al., 2020).

After knowing the histories and analyzing them, significant problematic events emerged, which revealed deficiencies of the students. This alerted accompanying teachers to the specific needs of students and, this was the starting point to develop a mixed tool in the hope that they could be helped and accompanied in a more adequate and personalized way.

Personal Development Project

The person, due to the intelligence he/she possesses, can orient his/her actions with the objective of personal growth and elaborate a project according to his/her voca-

tion. However, some people are not able to discern what their purpose in life is, which can lead them to develop difficulties in interpersonal relationships and sometimes some kind of psychological pathology (Damon et al., 2019; Ribeiro et al., 2023).

Etymologically, the word project comes from the Latin word *proiectus*, which means to launch forward, i.e. towards the future (Barbosa-Martínez et al., 2016). For this reason, there is no life project without a projection into the future, creating a confrontation between the present self and the envisioned future self, what one is currently and what one aspires to become.

The PDP, also known as personal development plan or life project, seeks to satisfy human needs for well-being by integrating personal and academic development, allowing to monitor one's own progress and personal knowledge, to recognize one's strengths and weaknesses, to be better prepared to face the constant challenges of one's professional career and, in general, of life, etc. Jackson (2001). When the life project is properly elaborated, it is also necessary to analyze the context (reflected in the lifeline) to determine what are the opportunities and threats, and also to identify what would be its competitive advantages. On the other hand, personal values and principles must also appear (Suárez-Barros et al., 2018).

The PDP is an integrated process that encourages people to learn and reflect on themselves, to value their own achievements and to identify ways to improve their performance (Jackson, 2001).

In fact, the personal project is based on the subject's questioning of what is important. So much so, that a key question to be addressed in the context of accompaniment has to be what holds significance in an individual's life. It is a question of confronting individuals with their scale of values and with the implication that they have with each of the items that they consider important. The personal project deals with the totality of the individual, i.e., it studies the personality in a coherent totality (the comprehensive study of personality) (Beusaert et al., 2013).

Suárez-Barros et al. (2018) provides a humanistic perspective, since they speak of the life project as "a dynamic process of seeking satisfaction" (p. 506), so that individuals' actions must be oriented towards their personal progression. This process is defined as dynamic as opposed to a static process, i.e., the goals and objectives set out in a life project are not immovable, but adapt to the context and circumstances (Domínguez Prieto, 2013), as well as to the maturity of the vital moment of each person and their own gradualness.

The PDP details how to achieve the proposed objectives, learning from experience, recording ideas and experiences, reflecting on what has happened, and making judgments about oneself in order to detect the aspects on which to focus in order to improve and progress (Gough et al., 2003). According to Bloxham (2005) and Bintani (2019), the PDP favors awareness of reality, so it helps to adequately contextualize the subject, that is, it favours a broader look at oneself. Moreover, a PDP can be seen as a simulation of the future, so that individuals can choose beforehand what they would like to happen to them and put the necessary means in place to make it happen or come close to it.

It is a construction of the self, towards a goal of the subject to guarantee its future, which, as mentioned in this study, has to contain the objectives, the strengths and weaknesses of the person, the management of external resources, etc. (Suárez-Barros

et al. 2018). In this sense, the SWOT tool (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats), which in the business world is used to analyze the state of companies and which, when applied to the individual, can lead to an enriching dialogue about the person's vision of him/herself, is routinely used in the mentoring process.

The development of the PDP helps students to integrate their personal development with their academic development, being more effective in monitoring and reviewing their own progress and identifying learning opportunities; to be more aware of how they learn and what they are looking for with the methodologies used; to identify their own strengths and weaknesses; to better prepare themselves for their future professional career (Bintani, 2019; Jackson, 2001).

In addition to all that has been said, it is understood that a life plan for the future is part of the integral formation of the students, since it addresses all its dimensions, when it is well constructed, based on the guidelines that have been developed previously. In short, as long as it is built in coherence with the essence of the person, that is, in coherence with who he/she is.

Thus, the life project can be summarized in "hope and life expectations" (Barbosa-Martínez et al., 2016) (p. 32), in a way, the life project anticipates and prepares for the future from the present, and manages to make students aware of the importance that making decisions in the present is going to have for their future.

Different higher education institutions have introduced their own policies to support the PDP process with the aim of helping students to integrate their personal and academic development and improve their ability to plan their own academic programs (Clegg & Bradley, 2006). Furthermore, the PDP will also encourage teachers to help students become more independent and autonomous; improve the personal tutoring system; make more effective use of learning opportunities outside the classroom; create a mechanism for recording career-related skills and abilities; improve their understanding of individual student development. Finally, for departments and institutions, the PDP facilitates more effective tracking of student progress, results in more effective guidance and academic support systems, and improves their ability to demonstrate the quality of the support they receive (Jackson, 2001).

It is worth highlighting the result published by Strivens (2007), which, after interviewing 71 different institutions, 66 of which were from the United Kingdom, only 6 of them did not plan to implement the PDP in their institutions. Some universities, concerned about the teaching-learning system, promote the use of the PDP as an individual tool for monitoring personal development and reflecting on personal proposals for improvement and planning how to achieve the proposed goals (Gough et al., 2003).

Youth Loneliness, Depression, Anxiety, Self-Harm or Suicide Processes

Loneliness and social relationships are related to human well-being and have been and continue to be the focus of intellectuals and scientists as well as popular culture and social science. Recently, the relationship between loneliness and health has become an important aspect of scientific research and public policy. Public awareness of loneliness is higher for older people, and much of the scientific research on loneliness and health focuses on people over the age of 55. However, it has been found that when all age groups are interviewed, younger people (16-24 years) are found to

be at high risk. Thus, this period of life is the period of greatest risk for the onset of mental health problems, and one in which loneliness can be most stigmatizing given the social pressures to be connected with others (Pitman et al., 2018).

Loneliness has been studied from different perspectives including psychological (loneliness is an unpleasant experience lacking, real or perceived, satisfactory social relationships), social anthropological (analyzing the manifestations of loneliness in various artistic activities) and philosophical (loneliness is an inescapable condition in the search for self-awareness). De Jong-Gierveld (1987) proposed a 'loneliness scale' that considers the level of loneliness and the discrepancy between individual's social relations and those desired as proportional (Jong-Gierveld & Van Tilburg, 1999; De Jong-Gierveld, 1987).

In recent years, the mental health of university students has shown a concerning deterioration, with a high prevalence of symptoms of depression and anxiety. A recent systematic review and meta-analysis estimated a global prevalence of 33.6% for depressive symptoms and 39.0% for anxiety symptoms among university students, with even higher figures reported in studies conducted after the COVID-19 pandemic (Li et al., 2022).

In the same vein, recent studies in university populations have confirmed a high burden of psychopathology and have shown that loneliness is significantly associated with poorer mental health outcomes, including increased depressive and anxiety symptoms (Kohls et al., 2023; Weber et al., 2022).

Moreover, evidence indicates that loneliness not only co-occurs with psychological distress, but is also associated with a higher risk of suicidal ideation and other suicidal behaviors among university students (Hamdan-Mansour et al., 2024; Nuñez Fadda et al., 2024). In fact, longitudinal analyses in U.S. universities have shown an increase in suicidal ideation and suicide attempts over the past decade, particularly since 2018, highlighting the need for targeted preventive and support strategies in the university context (Barclay et al., 2023).

In this context, it is important to consider the broader mental health landscape affecting young people. Suicide has become one of the leading causes of death among adolescents and young adults worldwide, highlighting the severity of current mental health challenges in this population (Organization et al., 2022).

In the work carried out by Cañón Buitrago and Carmona Parra (2018), the authors tried to identify suicidal behaviors and the factors associated with these behaviors in adolescents and young university students. They concluded that suicide attempts are more frequent in young women than in men and, in addition, potentially increase when depression and alcohol or psychoactive substance use are present. In the case of university students in Spain, it was found that those most prone to suicidal behaviour are young people who are less optimistic, have fewer social skills and perceive less social support (Cañón Buitrago & Carmona Parra, 2018; Martínez-Rives et al., 2025). This contextual evidence reinforces the importance of examining psychosocial distress in university populations, particularly during the transition to higher education.

From this perspective, the present study does not aim to assess suicide or suicidal behavior directly, but rather to explore the presence of narrative indicators of psychosocial distress that are theoretically and empirically linked to broader mental health outcomes.

One of the objectives of this work is to explore the potential of narrative and reflective tools, such as the lifeline and the PDP, as resources to support students' self-awareness and the early identification of psychosocial difficulties. Although no studies have been found that directly relate the development and use of the lifeline and PDP as a direct means of prevention or improvement of those situations, it can be deduced from the characteristics described below that this is the case (Wodika et al., 2024). Moreover, a life project can reduce the discomfort and suffering of the individual through planned objectives to improve the difficulties and problems of life (Suárez-Barros et al., 2018).

As young people acquire adult responsibilities, they become more self-confident and empowered, which translates into a greater commitment to their own personal development and choices about their future. The lack of such a project decreases the well-being of young people and may even lead to problems in their adult life (Bintani, 2019).

Materials and Methods

Study Design

This study made use of a mixed-methods design based on a biographical-narrative approach, using the lifeline technique as the primary instrument for reconstructing meaningful life events and psychosocial milestones. This methodological strategy combined qualitative narrative and visual production, thematic categorization of significant personal experiences, and exploratory quantitative analyses derived from qualitative coding focused on indicators of psychological distress and well-being. The quantitative component was not conceived as an independent inferential approach, but as an exploratory strategy to describe patterns within the narrative data.

The mixed design enabled an integrated examination of personal narratives alongside prevalence patterns of loneliness, anxiety, sadness, and related experiences that affect students' quality of life during the transition to university.

Sample

A total of 233 first-year undergraduate students from the Faculty of Communication participated in the study. Students were enrolled in undergraduate degree programs in Fine Arts, Audiovisual Communication, Advertising, Videogame Creation and Narration (Videogames), Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE), and Humanities during the academic years 2020-2021 and 2021-2022.

Inclusion criteria required that participants were first-year students enrolled in the course in which the lifeline activity was implemented and had completed both the PDP and the lifeline task, as these constituted the primary sources of narrative data for the study. Exclusion criteria included incomplete or missing lifelines, as well as cases in which the narrative content was insufficient for qualitative analysis.

Although the total sample included students from PPE ($n = 6$) and Humanities ($n = 2$), these programs were excluded from inferential and between-group comparative analyses due to their insufficient sample size, in order to ensure the stability

Table 1 Distribution of the sample by gender, academic year, and degree program

Variable	Category	<i>n</i>	%
Gender	Female	129	57.3%
	Male	96	42.7%
Academic Year	2020–2021	146	64.9%
	2021–2022	79	35.1%
Degree	Advertising	87	38.7%
	Videogames	56	24.9%
	Audiovisual Comm.	54	24.0%
	Fine Arts	28	12.4%
Total Students		225	100%

of the estimates and the validity of the statistical comparisons. Consequently, the final sample size considered for the analyses was 225 students.

Table 1 shows the distribution of students by gender, academic year, and degree program.

Only submissions delivered within the established deadlines and uploaded to the institutional learning platform were included in the analysis. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and no identifiable information was collected. These measures were especially important given the personal and potentially sensitive content of the students' narratives.

Procedure

All participants had previously completed a PDP as part of a mandatory first-year course. After completing their project, they were asked to construct a lifeline representing significant past experiences and their perceived emotional relevance. The instructions were provided during a class session, where the activity was presented as an opportunity for guided self-reflection rather than a conventional academic task. Students were encouraged to approach the lifeline in a creative way, using narrative or visual strategies, including storytelling techniques commonly applied in advertising.

Students were given the option to narrate their experiences in either the first or third person, allowing them to adopt a reflective distance when addressing sensitive events or emotionally charged periods of their lives. To support self-representation and to facilitate personal expression, each student chose or created an avatar that he/she felt represented who he/she is. This additional element served to reduce emotional intensity, promote engagement, and offer a supplementary interpretive layer for understanding their narratives.

The lifeline activity was implemented within a broader educational framework aimed at supporting students' personal development. However, the present study does not aim to evaluate the effectiveness of this intervention, but rather to analyze the autobiographical narratives generated through it as a source of qualitative data.

Once completed, the lifelines were submitted through the institutional online learning platform within the established deadlines. Only submitted lifelines were included in the analysis.

Throughout the process, students retained full autonomy regarding the depth and specificity of the information they chose to disclose. The reflective nature of the

task was emphasized, and the academic component was intentionally designed not to require or reward the inclusion of personal or sensitive material. In this way, the exercise preserved its intrinsic and voluntary character, prioritizing student well-being while enabling the production of meaningful narrative data.

Instruments

The lifeline was used as the primary instrument for collecting narrative and psychosocial data. This tool requires participants to construct a chronological account of salient life events and the subjective meaning attributed to them. Students were invited to illustrate or narrate experiences across their developmental trajectory, emphasizing emotionally significant episodes, transitions, or turning points. This open format allowed respondents to describe both positive and challenging experiences in their own terms, supporting spontaneous disclosure of psychosocial difficulties.

Beyond its descriptive function, the lifeline operates as a structured tool for capturing cognitive-affective processes relevant to psychological functioning. The narrative material generated enabled the identification of theoretically relevant narrative indicators of psychosocial distress such as loneliness, sadness or depressive symptoms, low self-esteem, bullying, and other psychological difficulties that emerged naturally within students' autobiographical accounts. Because the instrument preserves the sequencing, context, and subjective interpretation of events, it facilitates the analysis of narrative coherence, self-awareness, and meaning-making processes.

The lifeline also allows for a systematic coding of indicators present in the narrative material (e.g., presence or absence of specific distress-related indicators), which facilitates an exploratory quantitative description complementary to the qualitative analysis. This quantification is not conceived as an independent measurement, but rather as an analytical strategy derived from the narrative content, aimed at organizing distribution patterns and supporting the integration of results.

Although the life-history or lifeline technique does not constitute a clinical diagnostic instrument, the literature in narrative psychology has shown that autobiographical narratives allow the identification of indicators of psychological distress through the meanings individuals attribute to their life experiences. In particular, personal narratives reflect cognitive-affective processes such as perceived loneliness, grief, experiences of victimization, or feelings of low self-esteem, which have been widely studied as indicators of psychological vulnerability.

From the perspective of narrative identity, individuals organize their life experiences into stories that integrate emotionally significant events, allowing for the analysis of how these events are interpreted and what impact they have on psychological well-being (McAdams & McLean, 2013). These narratives not only reflect biographical facts, but also the emotional and cognitive meanings that individuals assign to those experiences. In this sense, personal narratives constitute a relevant pathway for understanding how individuals interpret life experiences associated with loneliness, loss, interpersonal conflict, or psychological difficulties, elements that have been linked to psychological well-being and personal adjustment (Adler et al., 2016).

Within qualitative research, various methodologies based on life histories and timelines have demonstrated their usefulness for identifying significant life events

and the subjective impact these have on individuals' personal trajectories. Lifeline interviews, for example, allow for the chronological reconstruction of relevant experiences and the exploration of the emotional meaning individuals attribute to them (Adriansen (2012). Similarly, life-history approaches have been used to examine how specific biographical events relate to coping processes, resilience, or psychological vulnerability (Gramling & Carr, 2004).

In this context, the lifeline is not used as a diagnostic tool, but rather as a narrative device that facilitates the spontaneous emergence of subjective experiences relevant to psychological well-being. The identified indicators are not interpreted as clinical diagnoses, but as narrative signals of psychosocial vulnerability present in autobiographical accounts. Qualitative research has shown that this type of methodology allows the identification of experiences associated with emotional distress, such as social isolation, bullying experiences, significant losses, or family conflict, which are often difficult to capture through standardized questionnaires (Adriansen, 2012; Gramling & Carr, 2004). For this reason, in the present study, indicators of distress were identified only when they appeared explicitly in participants' autobiographical narratives and were subsequently categorized through a systematic process of thematic coding.

Indicators of distress were operationally defined as the explicit mention in the narratives of experiences or subjective states associated with emotional or psychosocial difficulties (e.g., feelings of loneliness, persistent sadness, experiences of bullying, or low self-esteem). Each indicator was coded as a dichotomous variable (presence/absence) depending on its explicit occurrence in the narrative.

Although the lifeline technique allows flexibility in participants' modes of expression, the analytical procedure was consistent, as all narratives were analyzed using the same system of categories and coding criteria. Given the narrative and voluntary nature of the reported information, some indicators may be underrepresented, particularly among participants who are less inclined to share personal experiences.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a mixed-methods strategy with a qualitatively dominant design (QUAL → quan), in which reflexive thematic analysis constituted the central axis of the study, and quantitative coding was used as a complementary tool to explore the distribution of certain indicators within the narrative corpus (Creswell, 2017; Miles et al., 2014; Palinkas et al., 2011). The overall analytic objective was to identify both the prevalence of specific indicators of emotional and mental distress and the psychological processes through which students constructed meaning around these experiences.

The narrative content of the lifelines was analyzed through a coding process aimed at identifying the aforementioned distress indicators. The indicators identified in this study do not constitute clinical or diagnostic measures, but rather narrative indicators of psychosocial distress derived from students' autobiographical accounts. Accordingly, the coding process focused on identifying explicit expressions of such experiences within the narratives. Based on prior literature and a review of the material, the five categories were defined. The coding process was conducted

independently before consensus meetings by three researchers with training in qualitative research and reflexive thematic analysis. Coding followed predefined criteria and was carried out through an iterative process of discussion and consensus, ensuring consistency in the identification of indicators across the dataset. Presence was recorded when the indicator appeared explicitly (e.g., “loneliness”, “depression”, “bullying”) or when there was an unequivocal description of the phenomenon (e.g., difficulties in social integration for loneliness, mockery or mistreatment for bullying, or references to self-harm or anxiety for other psychological difficulties). In contrast, general or ambiguous descriptions of distress (e.g., “difficult moments” or “problems in life”) were not coded as presence. Therefore, each indicator was coded only when explicitly and unambiguously described in the narrative.

The category “other psychological difficulties” included non-specific indicators of distress such as anxiety, self-harm, abuse, traumatic experiences, significant bereavement, mental health problems, or family situations with a relevant emotional impact. To ensure consistency in the process, coding was conducted following predefined criteria and applied systematically across the entire narrative corpus. Quantitatively, each lifeline was coded for the presence or absence of five indicators of emotional and mental distress: loneliness, sadness or depressive feelings, low self-esteem, bullying, and other psychological difficulties (e.g., anxiety, bereavement, abuse, family conflict). These variables were operationalized as dichotomous (0 = absence; 1 = presence) and stratified by academic year and degree program.

This procedure enabled the systematic quantification of narrative content and the implementation of comparative statistical analyses between groups, while preserving the interpretive richness of the qualitative material.

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the distribution of these indicators in the sample on an exploratory basis. Possible associations between degree program and indicators were examined using contingency tables. These comparisons were conducted with an exploratory purpose, aiming to identify potential patterns in the distribution of indicators across degree programs, rather than to test confirmatory hypotheses. The quantitative component of the study is fully derived from the qualitative coding process and is intended to support the interpretation of narrative patterns, rather than to constitute an independent quantitative analysis.

Given the unequal group sizes, association analyses were conducted on an exploratory basis, with the aim of identifying potential patterns between degree programs and indicators. These analyses were limited to programs with sufficient sample size (Fine Arts, Audiovisual Communication, Advertising, and Videogames), excluding PPE and Humanities. Prior to conducting the tests, expected frequencies in the contingency tables were examined. When the assumptions of the chi-square test were not met (e.g., expected frequencies below 5), exact procedures for RxC tables (Fisher-Freeman-Halton or Monte Carlo estimation) were used.

In cases where low frequencies persisted, the results were interpreted as exploratory. Effect sizes were estimated using Cramer’s V and interpreted with caution given the exploratory nature of the analysis.

Qualitatively, the narrative content of each lifeline was analyzed using the six-phase framework of reflexive thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This process involved: systematic familiarization with the narratives, initial

generation of semantic and latent codes, construction of preliminary themes, iterative theme review against the dataset, refinement and definition of the thematic structure, and the production of a final interpretive synthesis. Particular analytic attention was given to narrative coherence, self-awareness, and meaning-making processes, as these constructs are theoretically linked to subjective well-being, resilience, and overall quality of life.

The constructs of narrative coherence and self-awareness were approached as theoretically sensitized concepts derived from the narrative identity framework (McAdams & McLean, 2013), but operationalized inductively during the analysis. Narrative coherence was identified through elements such as the temporal organization of events, causal connections between experiences, and the ability to integrate events into a meaningful story. Self-awareness was identified through reflective expressions about the self, including the recognition of personal traits, emotions, lessons learned, or life directions.

To enhance transparency, examples of the coding process are provided below:

Narrative: “During high school I felt completely alone and had no one to talk to...”.

Code: experience of social isolation.

Theme: loneliness and relational disconnection.

Narrative: “Although it was a difficult period, I now understand that it helped me grow...”.

Code: re-signification of negative experience.

Theme: narrative integration / meaning-making.

Given the interpretive nature of reflexive thematic analysis, findings should not be interpreted in terms of causal relationships, but rather as patterns of meaning constructed from students’ narratives. The categories were derived through the qualitative coding of autobiographical narratives and therefore constitute descriptive indicators extracted from participants’ accounts, rather than clinically validated measures of symptoms (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Finally, a mixed-methods integration phase combined the quantitative results with qualitative thematic indicators, allowing for the interpretation of observed patterns without assuming causal relationships between variables, but rather identifying patterns of co-occurrence and convergence between indicators and narratives.

This integration made it possible to identify interpretive patterns of vulnerability and resilience in the programs with sufficient representation and to understand the cognitive-affective processes underlying the experiences of distress described in the narratives.

Through this integrative approach, the lifeline functioned both as a source of narrative material and as a basis for complementary analytical coding that informs the students’ perceived quality of life.

Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University (name anonymized) (Approval No. 27/2025). The research project was reviewed in terms of its methodological, ethical, and legal aspects during the committee session held on June 24, 2025, and received a favorable evaluation.

All participants provided informed consent prior to participation. Given the potentially sensitive nature of the autobiographical narratives, specific measures were implemented to minimize psychological risk. The activity was presented as a voluntary reflective exercise within an educational context, and students retained full autonomy regarding the content and depth of their narratives. They were explicitly informed that they were not required to disclose personal or sensitive information.

Anonymity was ensured, and no identifiable data were collected. The activity was conducted under the supervision of course instructors, who were available to provide support if needed.

Results

Given this study's focus on subjective well-being and the psychosocial determinants of quality of life among first-year university students, five indicators of emotional and mental distress were considered: loneliness, sadness or depressive symptoms, low self-esteem, bullying, and other psychological difficulties. These indicators reflect core dimensions of emotional vulnerability with well-established associations to life satisfaction, psychological functioning, academic adjustment, and perceived quality of life in emerging adulthood. Their presence and distribution are analyzed with the aim of describing patterns of distress and exploring potential differences across degree programs, without the intention of drawing definitive inferential conclusions.

Across the final sample ($n = 225$), indicators of emotional vulnerability were observed with varying frequencies. In 2020–2021 ($n = 146$), other psychological difficulties was the most frequent category (23.3%), followed by low self-esteem (15.1%) and loneliness (10.3%). Sadness (4.8%) and bullying (7.5%) appeared less frequently.

As shown in Table 2, the distribution of distress indicators varied across degree programs. The Videogames program showed the highest percentages of sadness (13.9%), low self-esteem (25.0%), bullying (16.7%), and other psychological difficulties (41.7%). Fine Arts showed elevated levels of loneliness (21.4%) and low self-esteem (17.9%), ranking above the other programs on these indicators. Audiovisual Communication stood out for a higher presence of complex difficulties (33.3%). In contrast, Advertising presented the lowest levels across most indicators, particularly in loneliness (5.5%), sadness (1.8%), and bullying (3.6%).

Given the unequal group sizes and the presence of low expected frequencies in some cells, the inferential analyses should be interpreted with caution and are considered exploratory in nature.

Chi-square tests of independence (Table 3) revealed statistically significant differences between degree programs and sadness ($\chi^2(3) = 9.04, p = .029, V = .249$), bullying ($\chi^2(3) = 8.12, p = .044, V = .236$), and other difficulties ($\chi^2(3) = 14.32$,

Table 2 Prevalence (%) of emotional and mental distress indicators by Degree Program (2020–2021)

Degree Program	Loneliness	Sadness	Low Self-esteem	Bullying	Others
Fine Arts (<i>n</i> = 28)	21.4	3.6	17.9	10.7	14.3
Audiovisual Comm. (<i>n</i> = 27)	11.1	0.0	3.7	0.0	33.3
Advertising (<i>n</i> = 55)	5.5	1.8	12.7	3.6	10.9
Videogames (<i>n</i> = 36)	8.3	13.9	25.0	16.7	41.7

Table 3 Chi-Square tests of independence between indicators and Degree Program (2020–2021)

Indicator	χ^2	df	<i>p</i>	Cramer's <i>V</i>
Loneliness	5.33	3	.149	.191
Sadness	9.04	3	.029	.249
Low self-esteem	5.91	3	.116	.201
Bullying	8.12	3	.044	.236
Others	14.32	3	.003	.313

$p = .003$, $V = .313$). Effect sizes ranged from small to moderate, with the indicator of other psychological difficulties showing the largest magnitude of association.

In 2021–2022 ($n = 79$), other psychological difficulties remained the most frequent indicator (29.1%). Bullying (8.9%) and sadness (6.3%) appeared less frequently, while loneliness was also observed at 6.3%. In contrast, low self-esteem was infrequent (2.5%). Compared to the previous cohort, a slight overall decrease in distress indicators was observed, particularly in loneliness and low self-esteem, while bullying remained at similar levels and other psychological difficulties continued to be the most frequent indicator.

Table 4 presents the percentage distribution for the 2021–2022 cohort. Following the exclusion of programs with insufficient sample sizes (PPE and Humanities), differences in the distribution of indicators were observed across degree programs.

The Videogames program showed the highest representation of bullying (25.0%), while Audiovisual Communication presented the highest values for loneliness (11.1%), sadness (11.1%), and other psychological difficulties (33.3%). In contrast, Advertising showed no cases of loneliness or sadness and moderate levels for bullying (6.3%) and other psychological difficulties (25.0%).

Chi-square analyses (Table 5) showed statistically significant differences, in exploratory terms, between degree programs only for bullying ($\chi^2(2) = 9.35$, $p = .009$, $V = .344$), with a moderate effect size. No statistically significant differences were found for loneliness, sadness, or other psychological difficulties.

Given that several cells presented expected frequencies below 5, the results should be interpreted with caution and are considered exploratory in nature.

The qualitative analysis of the lifelines provided descriptive accounts of the contexts in which these indicators appeared. Narratives associated with loneliness described experiences of social isolation and difficulties in establishing interpersonal relationships. Sadness was described in terms of discouragement, emotional exhaustion, and

Table 4 Percentage of emotional and mental distress indicators by Degree Program (2021–2022)

Degree Program	Loneliness	Sadness	Low self-esteem	Bullying	Others
Audiovisual Comm. (n = 27)	11.1	11.1	0.0	0.0	33.3
Advertising (n = 32)	0.0	0.0	0.0	6.3	25.0
Videogames (n = 20)	10.0	3.2	0.0	25.0	30.0

Table 5 Chi-Square tests of independence between indicators and Degree Program (2021–2022)

Indicator	χ^2	df	<i>p</i>	Cramer's <i>V</i>
Loneliness	3.66	2	.161	.215
Sadness	3.66	2	.161	.215
Bullying	9.35	2	.009	.344
Others	0.50	2	.778	.080

experiences of loss. Low self-esteem narratives included references to self-perception, comparison with peers, and feelings of inadequacy. Bullying narratives described experiences of mockery, exclusion, and aggression, including online contexts. The category of other psychological difficulties included references to anxiety, emotional overload, family conflict, bereavement, and health-related issues.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative analyses showed differences in the distribution and narrative expression of distress indicators across degree programs. The Videogames program presented higher frequencies of multiple indicators, while Audiovisual Communication narratives frequently included references to bereavement and anxiety. Fine Arts showed higher frequencies of loneliness and low self-esteem, whereas Advertising presented lower values across several indicators.

Discussion

The present study examined how first-year university students construct their narrative identities through the lifeline technique and how the themes emerging from these narratives vary across academic years and degree programs. The lifeline, rooted in biographical–narrative methodology (Ferrarotti, 2007; McAdams, 2001), enabled students to articulate formative experiences, emotional processes, and aspirations. This technique aligns with the emphasis on self-knowledge as an essential component of personal growth (Hardy, 2017; Rodríguez-Jiménez et al., 2022) and responds to current concerns regarding youth loneliness, depression, anxiety, and psychosocial distress (Cha et al., 2018; Ellard et al., 2023; Pitman et al., 2018).

Across the analyzed degree programs, differences emerged in distress indicators; however, these were not homogeneous across all variables or across both cohorts. In particular, quantitative analyses showed statistically significant differences in sadness, bullying, and other psychological difficulties in the 2020–2021 cohort, whereas in 2021–2022 these differences were reduced, remaining only for bullying.

These findings suggest that, although differential patterns of distress exist across degree programs, their stability across cohorts is limited, reinforcing the contextual and dynamic nature of psychological well-being during the transition to university.

Students in Videogame Creation and Narration consistently showed a higher relative presence of distress indicators (particularly bullying across both cohorts), along with elevated levels of sadness and low self-esteem in 2020–2021. Their lifelines frequently described experiences of accumulated adversity, including difficulties in social relationships, peer victimization, and situations of isolation, which is consistent with evidence that early relational and environmental stressors have long-term implications for psychological functioning and well-being (Cha et al., 2018). In contrast, students in Audiovisual Communication presented a high presence of complex psychological difficulties, particularly in 2020–2021, including experiences of loss, parental divorce, and anxiety, which appeared in their narratives as emotionally intense and reflective accounts. However, these differences did not reach statistical significance in the subsequent cohort, suggesting that these patterns may be influenced by specific contextual factors or by variations in the narrative expression of distress.

Fine Arts students showed relatively elevated loneliness and low self-esteem, consistent with introspective tendencies and heightened self-evaluative processes linked to personality functioning and self-awareness (Vazire & Carlson, 2010). In contrast, students in Advertising generally showed lower levels of distress across most indicators, although with the presence of more diffuse psychological difficulties. Overall, these patterns highlight that psychological distress among university students is multidimensional, non-uniform, and sensitive to both academic context and personal trajectories.

A transversal finding involved the relationship between narrative coherence, self-awareness, and meaning-making. Students whose lifelines were more coherent, organized, and reflective tended to display more adaptive ways of interpreting their experiences. This supports theoretical and empirical work indicating that narrative integration is positively associated with well-being, resilience, and life satisfaction (Hardy, 2017). Conversely, fragmented or externally focused narratives often coincided with heightened emotional distress, unresolved experiences, or maladaptive self-appraisals. The use of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was instrumental in identifying how students cognitively and affectively processed their life events, revealing intrapsychic and interpersonal mechanisms underlying the quantitative indicators of distress.

Comparisons between cohorts revealed variations in students' psychosocial profiles in the period after the COVID-19 pandemic. The 2020–2021 cohort-transitioning to university at a time of significant social disruption-exhibited more aspirational and resilience-oriented themes, consistent with adaptive self-regulatory patterns observed during collective crises (Campbell et al., 2022). In contrast, the 2021–2022 cohort showed higher levels of sadness, relational difficulties, and bullying, aligning with emerging evidence that post-pandemic reintegration has increased social anxiety, emotional overload, and relational uncertainty among young adults (Ellard et al., 2023). These cohort differences indicate that subjective well-being in emerging adulthood must be understood as contextually embedded and historically situated.

A key contribution of this study lies in demonstrating the methodological value of the lifeline as a mixed-methods instrument that simultaneously allows the identification of narrative indicators that can be descriptively quantified and rich

qualitative accounts. The lifeline enabled students to articulate experiences that are often difficult to capture through standardized surveys, such as trauma, bereavement, illness, emotional overload, and parental conflict (Wodika et al., 2024). In line with the qualitatively dominant design of the study, the quantitative findings should be interpreted as exploratory patterns derived from the narrative coding process, rather than as robust inferential or generalizable results.

Importantly, the results highlight the pedagogical and developmental potential of integrating the lifeline with the PDP. While the lifeline helps students understand “why they are the way they are” through the reconstruction of past experiences, the PDP guides them through four key reflective steps: (1) clarifying who they are, including their strengths, weaknesses, values, and personal history; (2) determining what they will do, identifying specific actions, resources, and areas for growth; (3) defining who they want to become, articulating future roles, goals, and identity aspirations; and (4) planning how they will achieve it, outlining concrete steps, anticipating obstacles, and aligning decisions with long-term meaning and purpose (Barbosa-Martínez et al., 2016; Jackson, 2001; Suárez-Barros et al., 2018). This recursive movement between past, present, and future may support autonomy, narrative coherence, and intentional decision-making-competencies strongly associated with subjective well-being and overall quality of life in emerging adulthood (Damon et al., 2019).

This bidirectional reflective cycle is illustrated in Fig. 1, which depicts how past experiences inform present understanding, how future vision shapes perception, and how continuous feedback enables adaptive adjustment. The model visually encapsulates the developmental logic underlying the Lifeline–PDP integration and reinforces

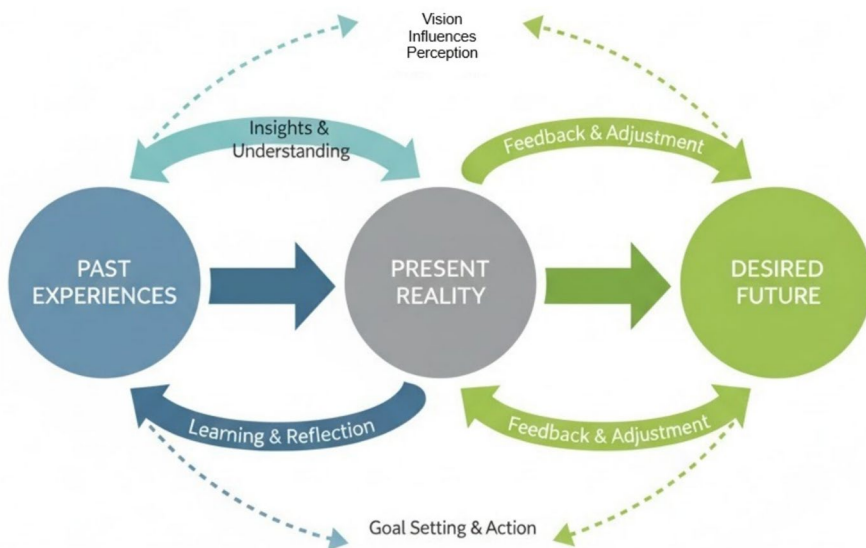


Fig. 1 Bidirectional reflective cycle followed by students: from past → to present → to desired future, and back again

the notion that meaning-making is a dynamic, iterative process (Beusaert et al., 2013; Clegg & Bradley, 2006; Sharma, 2022).

Finally, the findings carry meaningful practical implications. Programs such as Videogames and Audiovisual Communication may indicate areas where targeted mentoring or support strategies could be considered, given their higher concentration of psychological difficulties. Students reporting complex adverse life events-including trauma, bereavement, illness, or family instability may require individualized support or pathways for clinical referral, particularly considering the well-established links between such experiences and compromised life satisfaction (De Jong-Gierveld, 1987; Martínez-Rives et al., 2025). At the same time, structured reflective tools such as the Lifeline-PDP model can serve as early indicators of psychosocial needs, supporting educators in developing preventive strategies that enhance resilience, self-awareness, and personal agency.

Nevertheless, the study has limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the cross-sectional design of the study limits the ability to assess changes over time or to draw conclusions regarding the impact of the educational activities in which the lifeline was implemented. A further limitation concerns the unequal distribution of participants across degree programs, with very small subsamples in certain cases (e.g., Humanities and PPE). To ensure the stability of the analyses, these programs were excluded from comparative and inferential procedures. However, this decision limits the generalizability of the findings and restricts the interpretation of differences across academic contexts. In addition, the presence of unequal group sizes and low expected frequencies in some contingency tables reinforces the need to interpret the quantitative results with caution, as exploratory rather than confirmatory.

Conclusions

This study sought to examine how first-year university students construct their narrative identities and how indicators of emotional and psychological distress emerge across academic contexts. In relation to the first objective, the analysis successfully identified the presence and distribution of key indicators including loneliness, sadness or depressive symptoms, low self-esteem, bullying, and a range of other psychological difficulties within the 233 lifelines. These indicators revealed relevant patterns of vulnerability, although with variability across cohorts and uneven levels of statistical significance depending on the indicator analyzed.

The second objective was also met, as differences in distress indicators were observed across academic programs and student cohorts, although these were not consistent across all indicators or in both cohorts. Quantitative analyses suggested the existence of differentiated psychosocial profiles. In particular, differences were concentrated in specific indicators (sadness, bullying, and other psychological difficulties) in the 2020–2021 cohort, whereas in 2021–2022 these differences were reduced, remaining only for bullying.

The third objective, which focused on understanding the cognitive and affective interpretive processes present in students' autobiographical narratives, was addressed

through reflexive thematic analysis. The study showed that narrative coherence, self-awareness, and interpretive depth play an essential role in how students understand adversity. Higher coherence was consistently associated with more adaptive psychological functioning, supporting theoretical models that connect narrative integration with subjective quality of life.

The fourth objective, which sought to integrate quantitative and qualitative findings to generate psychosocial profiles, was addressed. By combining distribution patterns of the indicators with thematic analysis, the study identified program specific and cohort specific configurations of risk and resilience, offering a rich understanding of how past experiences, academic contexts, and broader social conditions influence students' well-being.

Finally, the fifth objective was accomplished by articulating a cohesive reflective model that integrates the lifeline with the PDP. The study demonstrated that the PDP's four reflective steps, which involve clarifying identity, determining actions, defining future goals, and planning pathways, interact productively with the autobiographical reflection prompted by the lifeline. Together, they create a dynamic reflective cycle that supports intentional identity development, personal agency, and psychological well-being. As a result, the combined lifeline and PDP model emerges as a valuable educational and mentoring tool for early identification of psychosocial needs and for supporting healthy developmental trajectories in higher education.

Although the findings point to practical implications for student support, limitations such as uneven program sample sizes and reliance on voluntary narrative disclosure should be acknowledged. Future research should employ longitudinal and intervention based designs to examine how narrative identity and well-being evolve over time and to evaluate the impact of lifeline and PDP based practices on student adjustment.

In sum, the study shows that understanding the well-being of university students requires attention not only to symptoms or contextual stressors but also to the personal narratives through which students interpret their past, understand their present, and envision their future. The combined use of lifelines and the PDP offers a theoretically grounded and empirically supported approach for facilitating this reflective work. Importantly, the findings also highlight the value of sustained educational accompaniment. When faculty mentors provide structured spaces for dialogue, reflection, and personalized guidance, students are better able to articulate their experiences, regulate emotional challenges, and develop coherent life projects. Such relational support strengthens their sense of belonging, autonomy, and purpose, which are essential components of psychological well-being and of a successful transition into university life.

Author Contributions Conceptualization, M.Q.-D.; data curation and coding, M.A.-P. and T.P.-S. and A.Q.-D. ; formal analysis, A.Q.-D. and M.Q.-D.; investigation, M.Q.-D., T.P.-S. and S.R.-A.; methodology, T.P.-S. and S.R.-A.; supervision, M.Q.-D. and A.Q.-D.; validation, M.A.-P. and M.Q.-D.; visualization, M.A.-P. and A.Q.-D.; writing original draft, M.Q.-D.; writing review & editing, M.Q.-D. and A.Q.-D. All authors have reviewed and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding Open Access funding provided thanks to the CRUE-CSIC agreement with Springer Nature. No funds, grants, or other support was received.

Data Availability The Ungdata surveys that support the findings of this study are available from authors, but restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under licence for the current study and so are not publicly available. The data are, however, available upon request and with the permission of the corresponding author.

Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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