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Experiences and meanings attributed by students and teachers to the use of artificial intelligence in educational processes

Experiencias y significados atribuidos por estudiantes y docentes al uso de inteligencia artificial en procesos educativos

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Oscar Hugo Manzano Sairitupa
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8553-7418
omanzano@ucvvirtual.edu.pe
Universidad César Vallejo. Lima, Peru

Maritza Socorro Florez Valdez
https://orcid.org/0009-0002-5744-9215
fvmarso@gmail.com
Universidad Nacional San Agustín de Arequipa. Peru

Norma Huamán Canales
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6460-2826
norma.huaman@unh.edu.pe
Universidad Nacional de Huancavelica. Peru

Rosalino Janampa Mendoza
https://orcid.org/0009-0000-5741-7577
Janampa.mendoza2@gmail.com
Universidad Nacional de Huancavelica. Peru

Carmen Patricia Peralta Gonzales
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3869-0284
carmen.peralta@unh.edu.pe
Universidad Nacional de Huancavelica. Peru

Abstract

This study sought to understand the experiences of higher education faculty and students regarding the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in educational contexts. A qualitative approach with a phenomenological design was employed; data were collected through semi-structured interviews with ten participants selected by purposive sampling. The analysis revealed four main categories: academic support, transformation of practices, educational risks, and ethical use. The results indicate that AI can contribute to reducing certain gaps in the teaching-learning process; however, it also generates tensions related to technological dependence and a possible weakening of critical thinking. It is concluded that its integration into higher education in the region requires pedagogical and ethical criteria that guide reflective and responsible use.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, higher education, intellectual autonomy.

Resumen

El presente estudio buscó comprender las experiencias de docentes y estudiantes de educación superior respecto al uso de la inteligencia artificial (IA) en contextos educativos. Para ello, se empleó un enfoque cualitativo con diseño fenomenológico; los datos se recopilaron mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas aplicadas a diez participantes seleccionados por muestreo intencional. El análisis reveló cuatro categorías principales: apoyo académico, transformación de prácticas, riesgos formativos y uso ético. Los resultados indican que la IA puede

contribuir a reducir ciertas brechas en el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje; sin embargo, también genera tensiones vinculadas a la dependencia tecnológica y a un posible debilitamiento del pensamiento crítico. Se concluye que su integración en la educación superior de la región exige criterios pedagógicos y éticos que orienten un uso reflexivo y responsable.

Palabras clave: inteligencia artificial, educación superior, autonomía intelectual.

Introduction

Over recent years, artificial intelligence (AI) has gradually permeated educational processes, emerging as a central element in teaching dynamics and the renewal of learning practices. Its implementation has accelerated across diverse contexts, compelling both faculty and students to adapt to new forms of academic interaction, often without clear institutional guidance.

Conceptually, artificial intelligence can be defined as machine-based systems that operate with varying degrees of autonomy, process input data, and produce outputs (predictions, recommendations, content, or decisions) that may influence physical and virtual environments. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2024), these systems infer from received data which responses to generate in pursuit of explicit or implicit objectives. In education, this carries concrete implications: AI already participates in everyday routines, from information retrieval and paper drafting to faculty decisions regarding lesson planning.

Pedagogically, certain studies report improvements in educational outcomes: students learning more autonomously and classes organized differently. Lin et al. (2023) contend that AI can tailor learning to individual students, opening pathways to quality education where previously unattainable, while providing faculty with reliable data on student progress, not merely grades but also motivation and engagement.

In higher education, faculty and students perceive AI as a resource for organizing semesters, locating sources, and optimizing time use. Almasri (2024), reviewing empirical studies, found that students acquire knowledge more effectively, demonstrate greater motivation, and participate more actively in their classes. Within the Latin American context, Salas-Pilco and Yang (2022) reviewed how AI, through machine learning, predictive analytics, and natural language processing, enables early identification of students at risk of dropout and data-driven instructional adjustments; these are not merely experimental projects but ongoing implementations across the region. Such tools help address key educational system challenges, including early detection of vulnerable students and quality improvement in previously underserved contexts. Consequently, AI may be positioned as a strategic resource for transforming higher education in Latin America.

Additional recent research reveals that students employ AI for organization, writing, and improved grades. Qualitative studies centered on academic writing experiences, such as the one by Yan (2023), indicate that this technology enhances textual production efficiency and holds considerable pedagogical potential. In higher education, tools like ChatGPT have reshaped study and teaching practices, with or without institutional endorsement, reconfiguring academic behaviors in short order. Rojas and Chiappe (2024) concur that genuine opportunities exist: more personalized learning, more accessible and current knowledge, and greater resource availability.

Nonetheless, AI integration into education is not merely a catalog of benefits. Significant obstacles persist in many parts of the world that prevent full exploitation of AI's potential, including uneven infrastructure and insufficient faculty training. Thus, its incorporation raises pedagogical, ethical, and institutional challenges related to faculty development, academic regulation, and critical use of these tools. While some students employ AI for organization, writing, and grade improvement, faculty reactions vary: some incorporate it seamlessly, others remain distrustful, and still others impose course-specific restrictions. Daluz Veras and Hernández Bentancur (2025) perceive something deeper than a mere tool change, what is shifting, they argue, is the very purpose of learning.

Lin and Chen (2024), drawing on in-depth interviews with students and faculty, identified ambivalent effects pointing to both positive aspects and risks. Among the latter, classroom AI use introduces significant concerns: systems learn from student-provided data, and many institutions are unaware of how that information is stored or protected. Algorithms may reproduce biases embedded in training data. If students over-delegate to these tools, the autonomy they ostensibly promote may ultimately deteriorate. Kamalov et al. (2023) note that none of these issues resolve through technology access alone; both students and faculty must develop critical digital literacy. In higher education, AI use generates considerable friction, as generated information is not always reliable, may foster

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dependency, and leaves unresolved questions about academic authorship (Muñoz-Araneda & Vera-Sagredo, 2025). Rojas and Chiappe (2024) caution about difficulties verifying whether students have genuinely and consciously learned, alongside emerging academic integrity problems. Consequently, AI emerges as a phenomenon impacting not only academic performance but also emotional experiences and the meanings individuals attach to their educational process.

The central problem is that many cited advantages require extensive data volumes to operate effectively, generating difficulties around privacy and information protection, in addition to risks of algorithmic bias reproduction. Lin et al. (2023) underscore this point: the capacity to personalize and diagnose depends on extensive data, and complications begin there. Simultaneously, Almasri (2024) acknowledges that in certain realities, accuracy falters and ethical dilemmas remain unresolved. Therefore, incorporating AI demands norms and pedagogical-ethical criteria guiding reflective, responsible use.

Although global progress in studying AI applied to education is evident, a significant research gap persists in the Peruvian context. This void is particularly notable in the Ayacucho region, where qualitative studies exploring AI use through faculty and student experiences in concrete sociocultural settings are scarce. Most research has oriented toward quantitative approaches or highly digitalized contexts, limiting deep understanding of meanings, perceptions, and tensions emerging in specific sociocultural scenarios.

Within this framework, the present study poses the following question: What are the experiences and meanings of artificial intelligence use in educational processes from the perspective of students and faculty in Ayacucho? Accordingly, the study objective is to achieve an in-depth understanding of these experiences and the meanings educational actors attribute to AI, employing a phenomenological approach.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was selected for this research, as the purpose was to comprehend the meanings faculty and students attribute to artificial intelligence use, rather than measuring usage frequency or intensity. As Creswell and Poth (2018) and Isik (2025) note, this approach does not seek generalization but rather reconstructs the meanings participants elaborate from their own experience.

A phenomenological design was chosen for its appropriateness in examining the significance subjects assign to AI in their education; the aim was not to quantify use but to describe and understand the ways people confer meaning upon their lived experiences, beyond ascertaining observable facts (Hossain et al., 2024).

The sample comprised ten participants: four faculty members and six students from a pedagogical higher education institution, selected through criterion-based purposive sampling. Participant number determination was grounded in and justified by theoretical saturation, understood as the point at which sample members cease contributing codes, meanings, or information relevant to understanding the phenomenon. This sample size aligns with the selected approach's principles, where relevance resides in the depth and informational richness of experiences rather than participant quantity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Saunders et al. (2018), saturation in qualitative research does not consist of accumulating extensive data but of having sufficient data to identify patterns and confirm that no new findings emerge. This was verified in the present study, where experiences and perceptions regarding AI recurred to the point of repetitiveness.

To safeguard confidentiality, each participant was assigned a code: D1–D4 for faculty and E1–E6 for students. Inclusion criteria required participants to be higher education faculty or students with genuine, recent experience using AI tools in their academic work, belonging to the educational context under study, and willing to participate voluntarily; this ensured interlocutors capable of offering concrete, experience-based accounts. Excluded were those who had not used AI in academic activities, those who declined participation, and those offering responses so vague or incomplete as to preclude analytical exploitation.

Data collection employed in-depth interviews, a technique well-suited for capturing perceptions, emotions, and meanings that quantitative methods fail to register. The instrument was a semi-structured interview guide comprising questions organized around thematic axes (how participants use AI, perceived benefits and risks, changes in teaching and learning, among others). Questions were formulated openly and flexibly to permit authentic expression of experiences.

Some participants declined audio recording for privacy or comfort reasons; in those cases, interviews were recorded through written notes during their development and subsequently transcribed for analysis, always prioritizing informant comfort and consent. Rutakumwa et al. (2020) indicate that qualitative interviews may proceed

with or without recording provided the procedure ensures trust, ethical rigor, and fidelity in documentation, conditions sought in each instance.

Subsequently, obtained data were organized and reviewed through deep, repeated readings aimed at identifying meaning units related to experiences, perceptions, and meanings attributed to AI use in educational processes. Open coding was performed, grouping emergent codes into subcategories and ultimately into thematic categories. Analysis followed an inductive, interpretive logic consistent with the phenomenological approach, oriented toward understanding the essence of lived experiences of students and faculty. To strengthen interpretive coherence and credibility, findings were contrasted with reviewed theoretical references.

The research was conducted in observance of ethical principles applicable to research involving human subjects. Following the criteria of Emanuel et al. (2000), the study's social value, scientific validity of methods, fair participant selection, and a reasonable risk-benefit balance were ensured. Before interviews, each participant was informed about the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their collaboration, and the exclusively academic use of information, with explicit consent formalized. Confidentiality was assured from the design stage: codes D1–D4 and E1–E6 were employed without recording data that could identify participants.

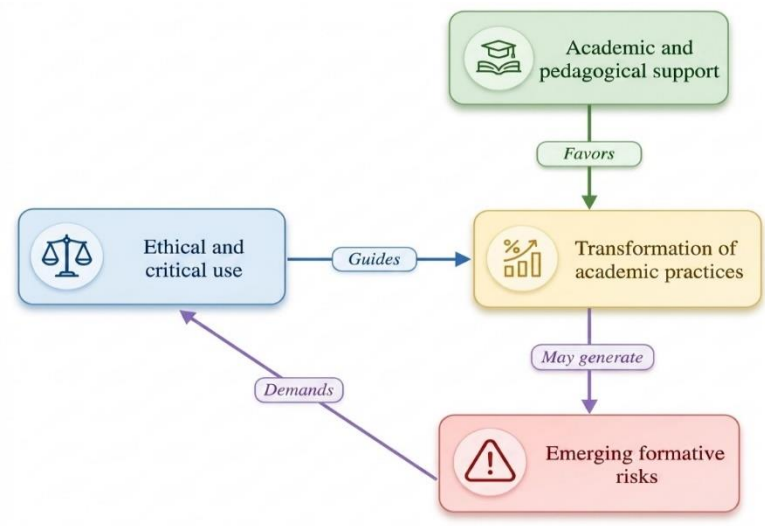
To guarantee scientific rigor within the qualitative framework, the trustworthiness criteria proposed by Ahmed (2024) were considered: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was addressed through repeated response reviews until interpretive clarity was achieved. Transferability was supported by detailed contextual description enabling other researchers to assess findings' applicability. Dependability and confirmability were sustained through an orderly, documented procedure in data collection, coding, and analysis. Finally, confirmability was pursued by maintaining consistency between participant responses, emergent categories, and researcher interpretation, avoiding imposition of personal judgments extraneous to gathered information.

Results

The results presented derive from interview analysis, from which four thematic categories emerged that encapsulate the experiences and meanings faculty and students attribute to artificial intelligence use in their educational processes. These categories illuminate both perceived contributions (e.g., academic support, personalization, and administrative efficiency) and tensions and risks noted (technological dependency, authorship uncertainties, and pedagogical-ethical challenges), offering an interpretive framework for understanding how AI configures practices, relationships, and meanings in higher education.

Figure 1

Semantic map of qualitative analysis



Note. Authors' own elaboration

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Academic-pedagogical support

Faculty interviewees employ AI for class preparation, idea organization, example seeking, and topic structuring. D1 described it thus: "*I use it to organize ideas, prepare classes, and look for examples.*" D3 expressed something similar: "*I use it to support some ideas and better prepare certain topics.*" Both participant responses are nearly identical: AI is incorporated primarily into preparatory and support activities, rather than direct pedagogical interaction, in the quiet preparation students never see. Not in explanation, not in connection, but in preliminary work.

Similarly, faculty emphasize that AI should be understood as a complementary resource. D1 stated: "*For me, it's like support, not something that replaces the teacher,*" and D4 affirmed: "*As a teacher, I believe we should see it as a support tool.*" This suggests that AI is valued as assistance, but the faculty member retains a central role in orientation, contextualization, and learning accompaniment.

Students, for their part, do not speak of AI as an advantage but as a support resource for specific moments. E1: "*It helps me when I don't understand a topic well.*" E3: "*It helps me when I have doubts or don't know how to start an assignment.*" E4: "*I use it to clarify doubts, find examples, or improve some task.*" The pattern is consistent: student AI use relates to situations involving academic difficulty, particularly when clarifying topic doubts, initiating tasks, or comprehending content, the explanation that never came, the instruction that was unclear, the moment the student was left alone with an academic activity. This says less about the technology and more about certain gaps it comes to address in updated and innovative ways.

Within this category, study participants, both faculty and students, concur that AI is a useful technological resource when a genuine academic need arises. Faculty employ it in class preparation, while students use it in moments when they are left without answers. This constitutes neither positive nor negative evaluation but rather the manner in which AI has insinuated itself into teaching-learning processes. AI appears to be filling certain gaps that existed before its arrival. The question this category leaves open is whether that suffices, or whether it is worth examining the persistent gaps that remain behind those apparent solutions. To what extent do perceived improvements address actual educational process needs, and what risks or deficiencies continue unaddressed?

Transformation of academic practices

The change faculty describe is not one of substance but of speed. D2 stated: "*Now I can get ideas faster and organize topics better.*" D3 noted: "*Now I can compare ideas faster and prepare clearer examples.*" Both use the same word: speed; they do not claim their classes are now better or that they understand their students more deeply. They indicate that certain tasks require less time. While this may be valuable, it also invites analysis of how that time reduction affects preparatory tasks. Examining this aspect is relevant because it enables distinction between instrumental appropriation of AI and genuine pedagogical transformation, a distinction educational institution must consider when guiding integration.

D4 summarizes this idea coherently: "*Before I searched several pages, now AI gives me a quicker idea.*" D1 points in a similar direction: "*AI has helped me save time in material preparation.*" Thus, what they describe is a displacement in the entry point to the process, they did not begin using AI from scratch but from a prior synthesis. This accelerates the investigative trajectory and shortens stages of the journey. Previously, searching multiple sources was slower and often led to unexpected discoveries; now the route is more efficient but restricts those serendipitous searches that can open new questions.

E2 and E5 express the same in different words: AI enables finding information faster. To that point, the pattern coincides with faculty. However, E3 introduces a difference: "*It helps me organize my ideas and better understand what I need to do.*" This speaks not of speed but of orientation. That type of benefit may lead to another form of dependency. Learning to search faster while maintaining critical thinking is one thing; it is less clear what happens when the tool also decides where to begin.

This category reveals something more concrete than mere educational transformation: it demonstrates that AI modifies previously required effort. Faculty and students perform tasks similar to before, but with less friction in the process. That has value, but also a cost that may not yet be evident, since friction is sometimes part of learning itself.

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Emergent educational risks

Findings indicate that the most recurring concern among faculty is not abstract but centers on an old practice: copy-paste. D1 stated: "*I worry that some students just copy and paste.*" D2 noted: "*Some students may submit work they didn't do themselves.*" Notably, none asserts this is occurring massively; they speak of an anticipated threat rather than a documented problem. This distinction matters because it conditions institutional response; caution appears to predominate over alarm.

Additionally, D3 raises another concern: "*I worry that students may lose the habit of reading or understanding for themselves.*" This concern relates less to academic dishonesty than to a silent erosion of basic skills. D4 expresses it directly: "*Some students may stop making an effort.*" Both point to the same underlying risk: that AI, beyond substituting specific tasks, over time reduces the disposition toward intellectual effort. This effect is not always detectable in a single submission; it is usually observed months later, when the student cannot begin without assistance.

From the student perspective, the risk is also recognized. E1 affirmed: "*The risk is getting too accustomed and no longer thinking for oneself.*" Similarly, E3 added: "*One can become dependent and no longer want to research on one's own,*" and E5 expressed: "*I worry that some students just copy and no longer learn.*" These testimonies show that students themselves identify dependency and copying as threats to their education.

In sum, this category demonstrates that AI can generate tensions when used without clear pedagogical criteria. The documented risk is concrete, not that AI is inherently negative, but that it becomes a convenient option encouraging copying rather than effortful learning through process. Faculty and students name this possibility; none presents it as inevitable.

Ethical and critical use

None of the faculty interviewees propose prohibiting AI use. What they suggest is more complex: developing in students the competencies for responsible use. In this regard, D1 noted: "*It should not be prohibited, but its use should be guided.*" D2 added: "*Students should know that AI is a help, not a solution for everything.*" The consensus is clear; what is missing in responses is concretion, they do not explain what guiding means in practice, who should do it, at what point in the class, or with what criteria. The intention exists; the method does not yet.

D4 underscores a priority: "*Teachers first need to understand well how it works.*" The tool must be thoroughly understood before teaching its use, before regulating it, before forming opinions about it. This is an implicit admission that many faculty are navigating AI without sufficient comprehension. Against this backdrop, D2 adds another institutional dimension: "*It would be good if institutions provided clear guidance on its use.*" This does not assert such guidance exists, but that it would be desirable. Together, two recurring absences emerge: faculty training and institutional policies. That both are lacking simultaneously is not coincidental.

Notably, students not only request guidelines but also the specificity with which they do so. E1 requests "*teaching how to use it well,*" a general demand. E6 goes further: "*It would be good if they taught us when to use it, how to verify information, and how to avoid copying everything.*" This testimony is not a passive complaint; it articulates a proposal connecting temporal, epistemological, and ethical criteria. E3 emphasizes it is not about prohibition but about "*explaining its advantages and risks.*" Students do not expect someone to decide for them; they request tools to decide with judgment, contradicting the simplistic image of the student seeking shortcuts.

Overall, this category reveals not fundamental disagreement but a shared expectation. Faculty and students concur that AI requires guidance, rules, and training; no one wants it prohibited. However, no one clearly describes who would do this work, when, or with what institutional backing. Thus, the gap between intention and method repeats: faculty await institutional training; students await faculty guidance; and institutions, for now, remain absent from testimonies.

Discussion

Almasri (2024) documents that AI improves motivation and participation, while Sánchez Chero et al. (2024) contend it transforms pedagogical roles. The present study contributes more specific evidence: faculty and students describe a displacement not so much of persons as of functions. According to their accounts, AI has assumed search and synthesis tasks; faculty retain what AI cannot yet do, in their view: guide, read context, and determine relevance. Nevertheless, things are not as they once were; naming this change is important because it alters how educational practices are understood.

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Relatedly, Yan (2023), for example, shows that ChatGPT efficiently improves textual production in academic contexts. Rojas and Chiappe (2024) go further, arguing that AI can personalize learning and expand knowledge access. Both propositions are pertinent. The problem is that efficiency and learning do not always coincide. Searching multiple sources is slower, but within that slowness pedagogically valuable occurrences take place, unexpected findings, doubts requiring rereading, errors that teach. When AI reduces that path, it not only saves time but eliminates frictions with formative function. The real challenge is not simply using AI but deciding which institutional processes should not be accelerated, as contexts are heterogeneous and not all can absorb the same velocity.

On the other hand, Muñoz Araneda and Vera Sagredo (2025) and Rojas and Chiappe (2024) identify risks that this study confirms: dependency, authorship problems, unverified information, and compromised academic integrity. An additional contribution of this work is shifting the question in another direction: how much of these problems is attributable to AI and how much derives from how tasks were originally designed? An evaluation system centered on final product already exhibited these vulnerabilities before ChatGPT's arrival; AI did not invent them but made them more visible and easier to exploit. This should orient discussion not only toward tool control but also toward reconsidering the type of tasks that retain formative meaning when any student can obtain instant answers.

In line with Lin and Chen (2024), the evidence points to an ambivalent tension, AI may foster engagement and creativity while simultaneously limiting independent thought and depersonalizing interaction. This study's data confirm that dual face; faculty and students value the tool and fear it simultaneously, sometimes within the same utterance. This suggests that AI is neither inherently good nor bad; its effects depend on pedagogical context, the rules and criteria applied, and institutional backing, which the study identifies as particularly weak.

Finally, the need for ethical and critical use aligns with Kamalov et al. (2023) and Lin et al. (2023), who caution that AI demands digital competencies, regulation, and ethical reflection, particularly regarding privacy risks, biases, and dependency. The present study corroborates these observations from a situated perspective, not from theory, but from faculty and student words. The conclusion is coherent and pragmatic: no one advocates prohibition; all seek guidance to move with judgment. That is precisely critical digital literacy, not merely technical competence but the ability to understand and manage AI's effects on autonomy, thinking, and academic production.

Conclusions

The study reveals that higher education faculty and students attribute a complex meaning to artificial intelligence, converging both instrumental and pedagogical dimensions, that is, they conceive it as a technological support tool for teaching and learning, as well as for organizing ideas and resolving academic doubts.

AI has notably transformed participants' academic practices, particularly in information retrieval, more up-to-date, and material preparation, writing improvement, and assignment completion; it also optimizes time use, an aspect valued by both faculty and students. These findings indicate that its use has already become part of daily dynamics in the educational contexts studied.

Nonetheless, despite benefits, participants recognize formative risks associated with inappropriate AI use: academic copying, technological dependency, loss of intellectual autonomy, and weakening of critical thinking. These concerns suggest that the tool, if employed without criteria, can erode essential formative processes.

In this context, AI integration into educational processes requires, according to informants, faculty guidance, clear rules, and ethical training. No one proposes prohibition; rather, they request responsible use that allows leveraging advantages without replacing personal effort or pedagogical mediation.

From a phenomenological perspective, AI configures itself as an ambivalent educational phenomenon, facilitating and enhancing certain academic practices while also generating ethical and formative tensions demanding critical reflection from faculty, students, and institutions.

In synthesis, these results invite moving from general concern to situated action: promoting institutional policies that articulate faculty training, task design privileging formative processes, and ethical protocols regarding data and authorship; fostering critical digital literacy among students so they distinguish between assistance and substitution; and encouraging local research evaluating how proposed interventions function in concrete contexts. Only thus may AI's formative potential be harnessed without sacrificing intellectual autonomy or pedagogical practices that sustain deep learning.

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AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION:

1. Conceptualization: Oscar Hugo Manzano Sairitupa
2. Data curation: Maritza Socorro Florez Valdez
3. Formal analysis: Norma Huamán Canales
4. Funding acquisition: Rosalino Janampa Mendoza
5. Research: Maritza Socorro Florez Valdez
6. Methodology: Norma Huamán Canales
7. Project administration: Oscar Hugo Manzano Sairitupa
8. Resources: Rosalino Janampa Mendoza
9. Software: Carmen Patricia Peralta Gonzales
10. Supervision: Rosalino Janampa Mendoza
11. Validation: Norma Huamán Canales
12. Visualization: Carmen Patricia Peralta Gonzales
13. Writing – original draft: Maritza Socorro Florez Valdez
14. Writing – proofreading and editing: Oscar Hugo Manzano Sairitupa