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Cross Cultural -
Learning Styles

TOOLS AND RECOMMENDATIONS
The Colombian Perspective of Cultural influences in Teaching and
Learning within the Alfa Project
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Project Alfa

**“Cross cultural learning Styles: A Cross-cultural Comparison of Learning Styles of
Students in Higher Education from Europe and Latin American Countries”**

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1. COLOMBIA

1.1 COUNTRY OVERVIEW

Colombia is the only Andean country in South America with ports and coasts on both the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. (Fig. N. 1).



Fig. No. 1 Colombia location

Colombia is a privileged country. It has water reservoirs, several animal and resources, and important miner resources which constitute the primary economical source. Among these, the most relevant ones are Coffee, Petroleum, coal and the emeralds. The land is crossed by the Andes Mountain Chain from south to north. Colombia is a country with a set of beautiful and many diversified landscapes some of them within unexplored jungles.

Due to its location, very near to the Equatorial line, Colombia doesn't have seasons. However, because of the mountains and the diversity of latitudes, it has several different kinds of climates, with temperatures varying from 5 to 40

degrees (Celsius) approximately, creating a variety of environments very attractive for tourism activities.

The official language is Spanish, the main religion is Catholicism (90%¹), has a democratic government system with 4 years periods and the president is the maximum chief of the state. Other descriptive data from Colombia is shown in the next Table (Table No. 1)

<i>Official Name:</i>	Republic of Colombia
<i>Continental Area:</i>	1,141,748 Km ²
<i>Land Frontiers:</i>	Venezuela, Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Panamá
<i>Coast Lines:</i>	Atlantic Ocean, Pacific Ocean
<i>Population:</i>	42.7 Million inhabitants (77% urban, 33% rural)
<i>Population Density:</i>	36.12 people by Km ²
<i>Capital:</i>	Bogotá (7 Million inhabitants)
<i>Other Main Cities:</i>	Medellín, Cali, Barranquilla, Cartagena, Santa Marta, Manizales, Pereira, Armenia, Bucaramanga, Cúcuta.
<i>Climate:</i>	Tropical, modified by altitude
<i>Biodiversity:</i>	14-15% of world's biodiversity
<i>Time:</i>	5 hours behind GMT

¹ HOFSTEDE GEERT. Cultural dimensions, [en línea] Colombian business etiquet, article: How do Hofstede's Dimensions correlate with the World's Religions? Volume 2- Issue 1, Abril 2003. Available in: [http://: www.international-business-center.com/international_newsletter/april_03_web.htm#article]

<i>Official Language:</i>	Spanish
<i>Literacy Rate:</i>	94.2%
<i>Political Constitution:</i>	State ruled by law, organized as a unitary Republic
<i>System of Government:</i>	Presidential. (Head of State: Alvaro Uribe) Democratic elected Balance of powers between executive, legislative and judicial branches. Presidential and Congressional elections every 4 years Governors and Mayors elected every 3 years
<i>Official Currency:</i>	Peso (COP\$)
<i>Exchange Rate, 2007:</i>	1.882 COP\$/US\$
<i>Gross Domestic Product, GDP, 2006</i>	US\$ 141,2 Billion
<i>GDP per capita, 2006:</i>	US \$ 2,966
<i>Annual Inflation, 2006:</i>	4.48%
<i>Economic Activities, 2005 (% of GDP):</i>	Services 20% Financial 18% Manufacturing 15% Livestock, agriculture 14% Commerce, restaurants and hotels 11% Transportation, Communication 11% Other 31%

<i>Main Export Products,</i> <i>2005: Total: US\$</i> <i>21,2 Billion</i>	Oil (26%) Coal (12%) Agriculture and livestock (8%) Textiles and Apparel (7%)
<i>Main Import Products,</i> <i>2005: Total: US\$</i> <i>21,2 Billion</i>	Machinery and equipment (33%) Chemicals (17%) Agriculture and livestock (19%) Textiles and Apparel (5%)
<i>Politic Division of</i> <i>Colombia</i>	Colombia is divided into thirty-two departments and one capital district: Amazonas, Antioquia, Arauca, Atlántico, Bolívar, Boyacá, Caldas, Caquetá, Casanare, Cauca, Cesar, Chocó, Córdoba, Cundinamarca, Guainía, Guaviare Huila, La Guajira, Magdalena, Meta, Nariño, Norte de Santander, Putumayo, Quindío, Risaralda, San Andrés and Providencia, Santander, Sucre, Tolima, Valle del Cauca, Vaupés, Vichada, Bogotá* (Distrito Capital)
<i>Major political parties:</i>	The two major political parties are the Liberals and the Conservatives, but additionally there are the following parties: Polo Democrático, Movimiento Cristiano, Movimiento Nacional Progresista

	(MNP) and recently some small independent parties are emerging.
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Table No. 1 Statistical Data of Colombia. Source: DANE (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística)

1.2 RECENT POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Alvaro Uribe, head of State since 2002, focused its Political Campaign in 2002 in security, drug interdiction and economic reforms in the form of a National Development Plan which includes reforms to the political system, justice and public administration.

As Security was one of the most important issues of the Uribe's Campaign, he increased the forces in manpower and funds for the police and armed forces. His objective was to make an expansion of the state presence in far and forgotten places of Colombia, (every municipality in Colombia), he established units of "peasant soldiers", and the "Plan Patriota" strategy in order to undermine the strengths of violent groups as the FARC, ELN, or AUC.

Uribe also worked in the period of 2002 – 2006, in a project of Re – election, since in Colombia to be re-elected was not possible, the project was approved, before he finished his first government period. Afterwards he put himself

forward for President of Colombia once again, he was re-elected and at this moment he is the president during the period 2006 – 2010. It was the first time over hundred years that a sitting President had been able to be run for office for a second successive term.

1.3 ECONOMIC OVERVIEW

Colombia was one of the strongest economics in Latin America, showing a really consistent record of growth until 1997. Growth rates remain high by Latin American standards. Gross domestic product (GDP) had expanded every year for more than 25 years, and it did not default on any of its official debts during the “Lost Decade (1980’s)”, different to many other Latin American countries.

In 1990, in the Cesar Gaviria’s government, the country introduced a comprehensive Reform Program, which consisted in the “Opened Economy to the Foreign Trade Investment”. GDP growth averaged more than 4% annually until 1997. After this year the economy slowed down until 1999, when Colombia had its first recession in seventy years². However, since the government of Alvaro Uribe Velez in 2000, there has been an economical growth of 6% to 2006³.

² Departamento Nacional de Planeación (DNP). Statistics of the “Pacific Revolution”.

³ Departamento administrativo nacional de estadística (DANE). National accounts 1994.

1.4 CULTURAL ISSUES

The cultural diversity in Colombia is reflected in a variety of social behavior. However, studies like The GLOBE Project have shown some relevant characteristics. About Colombia, the Globe Project found the following (Fig. N.2) outstanding dimensions (measured within a 1 to 7 scale):

Dimensions	As Is
<i>Uncertainty avoidance: (UAI)</i>	3,57
<i>Individualism/collectivism: (IDV)</i>	5,73
<i>power distance: (PDI)</i>	5,56
<i>Gender Egalitarianism:</i>	3,67

Fig. N. 2 Results of the measure of Colombian Cultural Dimensions

Source: taken and adapted from Culture, Leadership and organizations⁴.

According to these scores, in spite of the high levels of uncertainty which Colombian people lives, the 3,57 score for *uncertainty avoidance* point out that Colombian people seem to be used to that situation and therefore doesn't worry too much in organizing its future.

⁴ House Robert, Hanges Paul, Javidan Mansour. Culture, Leadership and organizations. Thousand Oaks, California, Sage Publications. 2004, p. 365, 468, 539, 622,

For both *individualism/collectivism* and *power distance*, there are high scores for Colombia, showing that Colombian people are more collectivistic and that differences in social classes are strong and relevant. In Colombia the high score 5,56 for power distance could be explained because of the inequity in the income distribution.

For gender egalitarianism dimension, the 3,67 score reflects some kind of equilibrium among masculine and female roles in society..

1.5 GENERAL DO'S AND DON'TS

1.5.1 How to meet with people

In Colombia the greeting depends on the specific situation. In job environments handshakes are predominant. In more familiar situations, with relatives, friends or even close job partners, it is used a kiss in the cheek among man and woman and between women, but never among men. With kids and closer relatives it is very common to hug and kiss. Colombians are cheerful and friendly persons, they use to enjoy a lot themselves and show respect to foreign people.

1.5.2 Of names and titles

In Colombia the treatment among people vary according to the situation. While in informal environments it is used the pronoun *tú* in speaking, in formal situations you (*usted*) is preferred. The level of formality is determined by different conditions like social status, professional role or academic level.

Concerning professional titles it is used to name Engineer to professionals in engineering, Architect to architects and Doctor to lawyers and medical doctors. However, in the academic and in several job environments it is common to name "Doctor" to persons who are in a superior position, in spite of not having a Doctoral degree or not being a lawyer or medical doctor. This is perceived as an attitude of respect from persons in lower positions to persons in higher positions. And it is expected to be used especially by non professional workers like secretaries and general service persons.

By tradition is common to use the words Mr. (Sr.), Mrs (Sra.) and Miss (Stria) when the professional level or degree is not identified a priori and in casual situations (in the street, markets and in public places). For Colombians having a title is very important.

1.5.3 Dress codes

In dressing there is also variety of codes depending on the circumstances. In labor situations formal dressing is the general rule. Men use suits with neckties

and women suits. The suit color tends to be dark in cold climates and clearer in more warm cities. In academic environments are even more variety depending on the institution but mostly related to the profession. For example, art related careers are characterized with people dressing very informal and in a striking way, with bright colors and rare accessories. By the other side, teachers and students belonging to careers like business, finances and law use to dress more conservatively. The dressing code also varies across the cities depending mainly on two factors: the weather and the level of city development. In warmer and less developed cities, even in formal labor environments, people, especially women, tend to dress in a more coquettish manner, which in more cold and developed cities usually is not well seen.

1.5.4 Body language and nonverbal clues

Colombia is a multicultural country with several customs according to the geographical location. This characteristic makes difficult to summarize in just a pattern of behavior the whole population. In Bogotá, the main city of Colombia, people treatment is characterized by formal and educated manners, a little bit distant and in with some distrust to unknown persons. In small and warmer cities, people tend to be more open, trusting, happier and friendly.

1.5.5 The formal environment

Typically the Colombian person plans his activities but it isn't very organized controlling the time, although this aspect has been changing over time. Each time is more valued the time management.

In labor context, Colombian people are characterized for being hard worker, recursive and committed. Usually they have working days that largely exceed the legal limit of 8 hours per day, restricting in consequence the opportunities for studying or enjoying after work.

1.5.6 Social Occasions and Leisure Time

Colombians are in general home-loving and appreciate social life. The main meal is lunch. Dinner is more important for social celebrations. Free time is spent in activities like dancing, dinning, movies, theater o just spending time with friends. On Sundays and holidays they use to practice sports.

1.6 EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN COLOMBIA

Colombia is a participative democracy. Lays their foundations on the principle of the educational right that everyone has, learning freedom, research and teaching, and has the character of a public service. The Basic Education is governed by the General Law of Education, Law 115 of 1994, in which the Education is defined like a permanent formation process, personal, cultural and

social, which is based in an integral conception of the human being, their dignity, rights and duties.

High education is done after medium education and is offered both by state and private institutions. The normative context is given by the Politic Constitution and the Law 20 of 1992 of Higher Education⁵. Since the Politic Constitution of 1991 was established in Colombia that “education is a right for each person and a public service with a social function”; that “the State must guarantee the freedom for teaching, learning, and research”, that “corresponds to the State to regulate and exercise supreme vigilance of education” and that “it should be assured the university autonomy, by which the universities are ruled by themselves according to the law”⁶.

The structure of the education system in Colombia is shown in Fig. N.3. The different phases in the education process are presented from bottom to top; the first stages correspond to preschool education, followed by Basic education, next by middle education. After this stage begins High Education with undergraduate programmers and then post graduated programmers.

⁵ Yarce Jorge, Lopera Carlos, Pacheco Ivan. The High Education in Colombia, Edit. Santillana, 2002, p. 35,36

⁶ Ibid, p.35

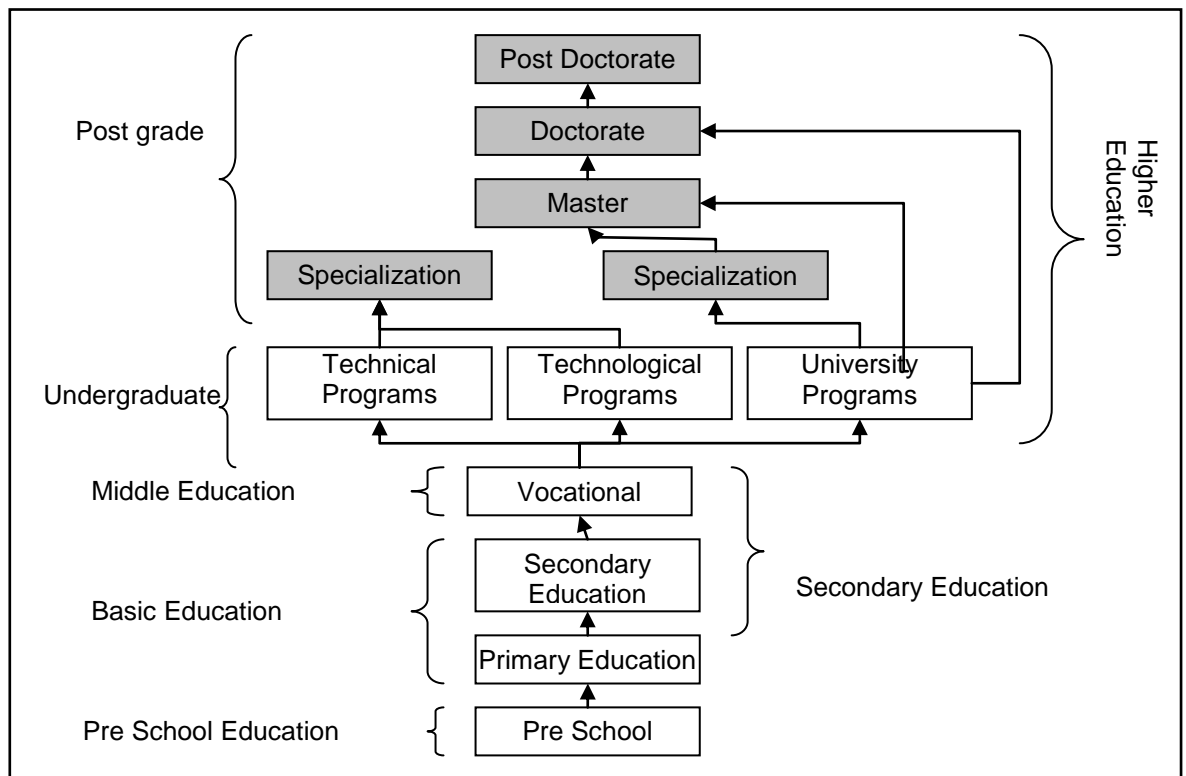


Fig N. 3 Structure of the Colombiana Educational System

Source: Yarce et al. (2002:36) The High Education in Colombia

1.6.1 Description of the educational system

The education system in Colombia has particular characteristics according to the phase in the education process. There are annual academic periods until middle education. After this stage academic periods are mostly half-yearly. A general overview is shown in Fig. N. 4

LEVEL		CHARACTERISITICS	OFFERED BY	DEGREES	AVERAG	TITLE GIVEN
PREESCHOOL		1. Three levels 2. Annual periods (February – November) 3. Main holidays in June	Kindergarten	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pre-kindergarten Kindergarten Transition 	3 to 5	Preschool
BASIC EDUCATION	SCHOOL	1. Five levels 2. Annual periods 3. Mode A (Feb–Nov) and Mode B (Aug–Jul)	Private and Public Schools	Degrees from 1 to 5	6 to 10	Junior Basic Education

	SECONDARY SCHOOL		1. Four levels 2. Annual periods 3. Mode A (Feb–Nov) and Mode B (Aug–Jul)	Private and Public Schools	Degrees from 6 to 9	11 to	Basic Education
MIDDLE EDUCATION	VOCATIONAL	HIGH SCHOOL	1. Two levels 2. Annual periods 3. Mode A (Feb–Nov) and Mode B (Aug–Jul)	Private and Public Schools	Degrees from 10 to 11	15 to	Graduate

GRADUATED	1. Four years 2. Half-year periods (Jan –May, Jul–Nov) 3. Schedule: From 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., and from 6 p.m to 9 p.m.	Private and Public universities		Since	Professional
POST GRADUATED	1. Specialization (1.5 years) 2. Magister (1 to 2 years) 3. Doctorate (4 to 5 years)	Private and Public universities		Since	Engineer, Architect, Doctor, MBA, etc.

Fig. N. 4 Education System in Colombia

Source: own elaboration

1.7 COLOMBIAN APPROACH TO LEARNING AND STUDYING

High Education in Colombia is defined by undergraduate and postgraduate levels (Fig. N.3). It is offered by public and private universities, being the last ones the vast majority. Post graduated programs include specializations, Magister and Doctorates.

The specializations and Magister are oriented to study in depth themes and develop skills (particular themes in the formers and more general in the later). The Doctorate encourages research and the generation of new knowledge. However, this last program is younger in Colombia, and just in recent times are the universities creating Doctoral programs.

Additionally, there are many executive and training programs oriented to update professional or train workers in specific activities.

1.7.1 Criticism/Respect

The status of University Teacher is not enough valuated. Among the reasons for this it is the instability which characterizes the contracting system by piecework. Full time engagement is not very common yet, only in public universities which are the minority.

This contracting modality forces the teachers to work in many different institutions, and in most cases is assumed as a complementary activity. Research isn't still a strong discipline although is more common each time. The teaching methods are not standardized; they vary according to the teacher profession and experience.

The students usually appreciate and respect the mix of experience, knowledge, methodology in teaching. They prefer teachers being more practical than academic, and strategies for dynamic learning. They also value learning directly related to the real context.

Reading skills are not very strong, but are used when objectives like the developing of critical participative attitude are pursued.

1.7.2 Professor as experts

The doctoral formation is in his adolescence, "in Colombia, just 2.5% of the university teachers have got a doctoral title, ... most of them 60% only have undergraduate degree"⁷. Fortunately this situation is improving, although the required resources for research and general preparation are still scarce. "The

⁷ Henao Pilles Myriam. El significado de la investigación científica en la formación del docente universitario. Colombia, Ciencia y tecnología Año 20 No. 4 COLCIENCIAS. 2.002

formal research in Colombian universities has been strange to high education processes”⁸.

Consequently, there are three general categories of teachers in Colombian universities: labor experienced teacher, academic teachers and academia teachers with labor experience. The last ones are the most preferred by students, particularly business students.

1.7.3 Exams

In Colombia, exams are considered as academic tests. The number and mode of them vary according to the policies of each University and Faculty. There are exams at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. There are middle and final exams. Usually it is not allowed to consider a unique evaluation. In some programs there are extra exams as an opportunity of repairing failures.

The student records are defined in scores from 1 to 5, which include tenths. Usually the minimum required to approve is 3.0, but in many cases is upper. Typically, the system is designed for evaluating the accomplishment of the program content and the students’ knowledge assimilation. Teachers are also evaluated, and the result influences their staying at the university.

⁸ idem

1.7.4 Professor's responsibility of student's success

In Colombia, academics have the general idea that the students' achievement depends on the teaching styles and techniques used by teachers. The most common are master classes, workshops, German seminar and students' presentation. In recent years collaborative methods, case study, occasional conference, business practices and team projects, are been in growing use.

When the blending of each of the preceding methods, jointly with the teacher creativity, are used the teaching effects is improved and more valued by students.

There are some issues outlined in the Focus Group developed with Externado de Colombia teachers⁹, related to the success in learning processes:

- 1- **Teacher Gloria Marlene Díaz:** the teaching techniques must be complemented with methodologies that contribute to encourage the student autonomy, knowledge application, research and team work. This allows to develop skills, obligate them to think, to create, to understand,

⁹ These were activities conducted by Iliana Páez Gabriunas, within the development of the Alfa Project at the Leadership Centre of the Externado de Colombia University, February – March 2007.

and most important of all, to argument their tasks in appropriate ways in real contexts. Similarly incentive the studying in students.

- 2- **Teacher Juan Carlos Segura:** Being aware the reading levels are low, we must use methodologies that encourage students to seek and have critical thinking. In this way, they learn to use tools with purpose and are more motivated to read and make decisions.
- 3- **Teacher Manuel Rojas:** methodologies must be adapted according to the group size. With small groups, students tend to be more participative, and then the most appropriate strategies are dialogue and critical discussion.
- 4- **Teacher José Antonio Meza:** It is important to know the students and try to involve their own previous experiences with the topics of the subject. The student must to identify the direct application of the knowledge in real things. The teacher is just a guide for the students, who help them to develop themselves.

1.7.5 Keeping of deadlines

Academic schedules are established by half-year periods, usually arranged to be of 64 hours at semester (16 weeks). Typically classes take two hours each session. The attendance is mandatory both in undergraduate and postgraduate programs.

Both partial and final exams are scheduled from the beginning of the period with few adjustments in some cases, usually agreed with students. Teachers must accomplish with the record reports on time, and the students must know their results before the period is finished.

1.8 ADDITIONAL GUIDELINES FOR STUDENTS

1.8.1 Student – professor relationship

In Colombia, the teacher-student relationship is an important factor in the academic training process. The cultural characteristic of family dependence causes some kind of paternalism which in spite of limiting autonomy, allow for the development of collaborative behavior, work in teams and close counseling. This happens in a natural environment without losing respect to the teacher neither to the student.

1.8.2 Learning approach

The learning approach is determined according to the needs (orientation) of each particular institution and the teaching strategies adopted by teachers. There is no a unique approach.

Although there has been recently notable efforts by teachers for encourage a more critical thinking and more applied learning in students, it is still a notorious focus on memorizing learning, in which research, analysis, discussion and reading skills are neglected. The students' learning styles are influenced by the teaching styles. When teachers use mixtures of teaching techniques, students became more motivated and show better knowledge absorption.

1.8.3 Time management

Time management in students is still a cultural problem in Colombia. Although it has been changing positively, students frequently arrive late to classes. One of the reasons that explain this trait (aside of the cultural issue) is related with poor tradition in planning activities. As a result, students often have troubles in delivering on time their homeworks. It also depends on the basic and graduate education they have received, and in the type of university in which they are studying. Public and the more important private universities are very strict concerning deadlines and commitments.

1.8.4 Gender and National diversity

Gender distribution in the education system varies upon the careers. Usually there are more women in business, arts and medicine, than in engineering except computers.

Colombian students are very enthusiast and are always trying to balance study with social life. They enjoy a lot free time with friends and open to foreign people.

The behavior of Colombian students also varies depending on their social economic condition. This happens due to the existing stratification of universities.

1.9 ADDITIONAL GUIDELINES FOR TEACHERS

1.9.1 The Ideal Professor

The ideal teacher must integrate at least the following three conditions: the first one is his (her) academic background. In order to be accepted by the institution and respected by students, a teacher must have and certify their academic titles and background. Moreover, nowadays universities are preferring teachers with doctoral titles. The minimum requirement for teachers is a specialization title. Each time the career itself is less important. The second condition is the

accredited experience in both academy and labor. The third condition is a visible vocation expressed in the teacher's competences like good communication, explaining, listening, investigate and work in team projects, as well as their ability to encourage active participation and learning in students.

1.9.2 Application of Content

The curriculum contents are defined according to internal directions. They are designed to accomplish the objectives pursued by each faculty. The teachers usually have the opportunity of propose changes, but are the faculty's directors who finally decide which adjustment are going to be implemented.

1.9.3 Multi Media

There has been an increasing use of audiovisual media by teachers in their classes. The most used are: video bind, computers, DVD, Internet, and simulation programs. These tools make easy the academic practice and keep the processes actualized concerning technological advances.

1.9.4 Gender Issues

Women visibility in academic environments (students, teachers and administrators) has been growing in last years up to the point to find equal or greater participation than men in institutions. Men and women share the same positions and obtain benefits and opportunities in egalitarian ways. In some careers there is an overarching presence of some gender (for example, in mechanical engineering are clearly more men than women; and the opposite is seen in nursery), but this situation is given more by individual preferences than for some cultural or social restriction.

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