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Entre el pago y el mérito : admisión estudiantil e inclusión social en las universidades Chilenas

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Summary

The problem of social justice for those going on to higher education is the result of several different phenomena. The predominance of the service sector in the economy and its focus on relevant knowledge means that more specialists are needed. Secondary education has become more universal and the population eligible for higher education has increased. The state has withdrawn from social security and the working class has become less politicised, with them placing all their hopes on their children going on to higher education. The market's ubiquity as a solution for social dilemmas has generated the possibility of paying privately for education, as well as increasing the offer available and costs per student. All this makes the traditional distinction between general education and specialist higher education even more blurred. The latter is increasingly considered an unavoidable necessity for many sectors of society and a new kind of tension between merit and equality has become more relevant.

In this context, during the last few years, the debate on access to and social inclusion in higher education has been intense, with university selection and admission standing out as particularly relevant topics. Admissions criteria and admissions in themselves are considered 'technical-political devices' or 'social-technical tools' and, as such, are increasingly interesting for research purposes. The historical tendency observed in the twentieth century is from an admissions system focused on merit to the diversification of criteria, consideration of social identities and use of affirmative action by groups that lack representation.

In this regard, Chile is a country that, as early as the twentieth century, used a certain rationality to resolve the topic of university admission based both on meritocracy and – in practice – the results of entrance exams. Thus, in the context of an expansive and intense diversification of higher education since 1980, students have been selected by sitting a national test. Said test, combined with secondary school grades, means students can be ranked in terms of their academic potential for university studies in a supposedly fair way. However, the unregulated expansion and diversification of Chilean higher education has created private universities whose admissions requirements are low or non-existent and whose quality is questionable. The strategy of these for-profit institutions is to maximise volume. In this way, students of a lower socioeconomic status, where family income is basically controlled by their ability to pay, are won over. In addition, the sector that most commonly supports what is called the Single Admissions System is becoming less selective, but more heterogeneous in terms of the degrees offered and institutions and geographical zones available. Within this selective sector and despite the objectivity of the admissions criteria used, it is accepted that

student selection and admissions policies form a barrier that favour those of a higher socioeconomic status. At the same time, the level of prestige of the institution is positively correlated with the social gradient. In short, quality university education is reserved for the richest.

This research aims to study university selection and admissions policies in Chile. At the same time, it also aims to describe the role they play in socioeconomic access inequality in detail. As a result, it provides a comprehensive theoretical approach that helps align said policies with the aim of providing greater social inclusion in higher education. In this investigation, the social composition of university registration that emerges as a result of student selection methods and processes will be analysed, with the aim of understanding the role of these in the access inequalities present in higher education. The socioeconomic distribution of students is looked into in detail in the context of a system that is currently expanding, diversifying and being privatised. The challenge then will be to understand how university selection influences the pattern of inequality observed in the context of the expansion and diversification of higher education, particularly regarding the structure of a student population that is distributed among institutions and degrees according to their socioeconomic status. Rather than studying absolute exclusion, the focus will be on inequality mechanisms as expressed through the newly included groups (inclusion with inequality).

In methodological terms, the aims proposed require detailed empiric data to be gathered to account for the social composition of the Chilean student university population. The challenge has been to provide the widest possible empiric record of Chilean university students with the social, economic and demographic variables that allow for their classification on a social gradient. Students were classified socioeconomically and these characteristics matched up to those of their universities and degrees, with the aim of evaluating changes in the social composition of enrolment caused by the expansion of higher education between 2001 and 2014. Therefore, quantitative, correlated and linear studies are used empirically: quantitative because the population variables are treated statically to characterise individuals socioeconomically, correlational because the relationship between the students' socioeconomic characteristics and those of the higher education system are analysed and linear because the continuity of and changes to the study's aim are analysed over a period of time

The triangulation of data from diverse sources dealing with student records is unprecedented and allows for the characterisation of the student body in Chilean university higher education. This data was broken down to a university and degree level so that the socioeconomic distribution of enrolment, recent changes to it and its relationship with the admissions process could be looked at in detail.

An interpretative focus also had to be used. The starting point was the educational inequality that previously existed in the Chilean school system. This is related to the continuity of a market education system that was originally imposed during Pinochet's dictatorship. For this reason, it is inevitable that higher education and access to it aims to remedy these injustices. Therefore, the main concept that served as a starting point for analysis was that of *social justice* in access to higher education. As a result, this research aims to overcome the techno-instrumental breach that has historically dominated the debate on the admissions process in Chile and tries to embrace a comprehensive view that not only sheds lights on reality but also guides developments in the search for greater collective wellbeing and justice. To this end, Amartya Sen's capability approach is used as the relevant framework of thought, since it allows for the opposite poles of social reproductionism and functionality - the basis of a number of the ways of thinking about this problem – to be overcome.

To consider the problem of university admission from a social justice perspective and from a capability approach has two important consequences. The first is that the focus moves away from the vision in which admissions mechanisms are seen as autonomous objects towards seeing them as instruments that are aligned with a wider school to university education transition process. At the same time, said process is subject to the regulatory demands of social justice. As a result, university admission turns into one more requisite in the series of strategically-designed regulations for social inclusion in higher education. In the transition from school to university, all kinds of factors influence and interact to affect students' success, such as previously existing economic, social and educational inequalities. Said inequalities permit university admissions mechanisms to become reasonable regulations that serve justice in said process and are not just something naturalised and autonomous.

The second consequence of abandoning the concept of social justice is that it necessarily forces discussion of the idea of meritocracy. This idea is usually a traditional notion on which the distribution of the most valuable educational opportunities is based. The previously described inequalities provide a moral justification for incorporating different elements of academic merit into the information considered. It is not about disregarding the criteria of merit but rather applying it in regulatory and cultural terms. Even in contexts in which there are mechanisms to compensate for inequalities, individual merit tends to ignore the analysis of social and institutional conditions that model reality and thus places both achievements and the absence of them solely in the individual field. In this other approach, there is room for both the incorporation of affirmative action and for *academic merit* to be enriched as a result of the concept of

university preparation, thus changing the focus of the information used to decide student admission.

This book is organised into an introduction and five chapters. The first chapter deals with a revision of contemporary theoretical literature on access to higher education. In it, the dilemmas that emerge regarding expansion, diversification and privatisation are touched upon. The analysis continues by focusing on what is one of the core ideas of this research's main argument. Having delved into the problem of social inclusion in higher education and its relationship with selection methodology, this idea concerns the distribution of something scarce and which is even more necessary for self-fulfilment. Therefore, a theoretical approach regarding the concept of justice is decisive when recognising its worth and defining what action to take to pursue increasing social inclusion in higher education. Having accepted this point, which is crucial to Amartya Sen's capability approach, the failure of transcendental Rawlsian institutionalism in providing a practical foundation is highlighted, as well as its failure to explain how injustice can be reduced, the approach to justice in society fulfilled or definite improvements assessed.

The second chapter is a historical revision of the investigation's main aim. In it, the course that Chilean society has followed when discussing and defining access to university studies is traced. At its core is the historical nature of student admissions and selection, involving social agenda tendencies on how fair admissions are. In this chapter, the continuity of rational university admissions mechanisms from the nineteenth century onwards can be appreciated. The existence during almost half a century of a Single Admissions System, in which the main Chilean universities participated, is revised. This research shows that the distribution criteria of this admissions system, created in another time and under different circumstances, go against that of a free market in which admission is influenced by ability to pay. Thus, the old system has become a way of protecting against the hierarchal environment that theoretical literature highlights as inevitable in an education where offers from the private sector prevail. On the other hand, the Chilean university selection system has gone from using diverse and flexible admissions criteria to using criteria that are less diverse and stricter.

The third chapter refers to educational inequality in Chile in general. School education in the country is highly-segmented between social classes and has significant differences in quality. As a result, opportunities are notably unequal when it comes to university higher education. In this same chapter, Chilean higher education is characterised, mainly concerning how enrolment and institutional diversification are tackled, with the access inequalities seen within the tertiary system then analysed.

The fourth chapter is crucial, since it contains an exhaustive analysis of the Chilean higher education admissions system. It includes a revision of the literature that has discussed its character and a valuation based on the evidence provided by its results in equity matters. The empiric analysis provided allows for more complex conclusions to be drawn about the socioeconomic distribution phenomenon, since it does not reveal the accurate alignment expected between the institutions' prestige and the socioeconomic hierarchy of the families involved. This highlights one of the main achievements of the empiric investigation - showing the fundamental role of several regional universities in improving opportunities for the poorest. It also shows the centralist bias that has affected the debate on social inclusion, with the problem being presented as a national one when, in fact, it appears to affect the capital more. This chapter ends by tackling the recent debate on changes to selection criteria as a way of achieving greater social inclusion in university education, showing that this way of approaching justice in the distribution of opportunities has had no or, in the best case scenario, only a minor effect.

Finally, the conclusions of this research into university selection and social inclusion are provided, with the empiric findings described along with the rest of the historic and theoretical elements investigated, in order to respond to the proposed questions and aims. The conceptual framework that was conceived is applied in order to consider the coordination of a national admissions system with a greater capacity for inclusion, based on the idea that it would help reduce the dependence of access to a quality higher education almost exclusively on payment ability and/or previous academic merit.

The empiric research carried out means it can be concluded that the distribution of Chilean university students is less socioeconomically segmented than is commonly assumed, but that there is polarisation. At one end of the scale, a few universities have a large concentration of students from upper class families and, at the other, there are several universities whose credentials are practically non-existent, who do not select on merit and have lower-class students. In the middle are a heterogeneous number of institutions that make up the majority, with very diverse socioeconomic enrolment controlled by the range of degrees offered or by their area of knowledge.

As a result and as opposed to the school system, there is no meticulous social segmentation or alignment between the hierarchy of prestigious institutions and the social hierarchy of students and their families. Chilean reality includes quality universities that, socially-speaking, house a diverse student population. A notable finding is that, as such, there is a clear difference between regional universities and

those located in Santiago. The former are mainly exceptionally inclusive from a socioeconomic point of view, compared to similar ones in the capital.

Nevertheless, there is a clear social difference between students that get into universities through the Single Admissions System and those that use the alternative circuit. The latter involves institutions that are less selective and offer more places, accepting students of a lower socioeconomic status. The creation of a financing system offering loans led to a reduction in the number of students from the lowest socioeconomic quintiles enrolling at universities that participate in the 'Single Admissions System', with these migrating towards alternatives.

Another important finding is that, by centralising the offer of places, the Single Admissions System is less dependent on the results of cultural capital differentials and minimises or even eliminates the strategic considerations of the institutions involved. In effect, this actually implies that universities refuse to select their students, only doing so indirectly through general selection criteria. This aspect has been ignored by literature, which has focused more on the results of entrance exams and how these affect procedure and less on the results of selection itself. Called 'deferred bilateral assignation', this methodology is relevant because it emerges in a context in which price as a spontaneous convergence mechanism between supply and demand is excluded. In Chilean higher education, the fees and institutional self-financing that emerged in the 1980s assume, on one hand, that payment ability is an exogenous selection criterion for the institutionalised admissions process and, on the other, that they are an incentive to lower academic requisites and use strategic behaviour when competing for students. The fact that centralisation continues to influence the offer of university places is one of the reasons why, in a context that is highly privatised, the university market is not as socially segmented as it could be

The historical analysis of the Single Admissions System - used by the country's main universities - shows that the criteria available for assessing prospective new students have become more and more strict and one-dimensional. This has been provoked by the overlap with market logic, which has become one of the driving forces when competing for students and using strategic behaviour. However, in the eventual case of partial or universal free education and a greater balance between state financing and supply and demand, there is an opportunity for selection to comply with the genuine academic aims for which it was created.

A historical look at the Single Admissions System shows that a centralised administrative system can manage multiple options of selection criteria for different institutions' specific admissions policies. In effect, in the past, the criteria whose aim was to measure academic merit coexisted with those which allowed universities to focus

their selection mainly on certain groups, with options such as the number of places available, discounts offered and sociodemographic considerations taken into account. In this respect, it can be seen that institutions have moved from a flexible system towards a more restrictive one, in which innovation applies *topdown* logic.

In general, within the paradigm of academic merit in the last decade, the measurements that use non-comparable determining factors to identify those with the most potential have been assessed. In this research, it was possible to prove that said measures do not significantly alter the socioeconomic composition of those chosen for Chile's most selective degrees. The mere notion of merit as a basis for admissions will always be associated with an overlap of the inequalities that affect educational results. This happens even when merit is measured in such a way as to connect less directly with the non-comparable factors that determine it.

Finally, the empiric and theoretical results of this investigation mean a projection of the possible changes in the selection and admission mechanisms of university students can be provided. The search for social justice - that is to say, the capacity for self-fulfillment within the widest social spectrum - should be one of the main aims of an admissions system. By extrapolation, each university's contribution to this aim could be evaluated as a result of how their enrollment is made up socioeconomically. The system's general regulatory structure (criteria used, how places are offered, the number of places available, discounts, etc.) should allow institutions to outline the characteristics they look for in students beyond academic merit.

A university admissions system based exclusively on merit will always tend to reveal prior inequalities and, therefore, favour those who have had access to a better education. Equity principles then impose criteria that favour the incorporation of the disadvantaged, reflecting the fact that society should make an effort to overcome inequalities in education.

Affirmative action should also form part of this system's criteria as it has done in the past, instead of allowing fragmented, marginal, low-impact subsystems to proliferate. It seems appropriate nowadays to consider a just arrangement, so as not to repeat what has happened in other countries, where those who could actually pay for a quality school education have access to free or subsidised prestigious higher education as an effect of academic selection. In this sense, the incorporation of sociodemographic factors into university selection is a mechanism that means that the universities that wish to do so can diversify their enrollment. This could become reality if a set number of places were established for groups that have been identified using these factors or who take an entrance exam that represents a combination of academic merit and sociodemographic factors.