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Functional Differentiation and University Expansion in Chile

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Functional Differentiation and University Expansion in Chile

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Abstract

Over the last few decades, education has acquired a fairly robust social identity worldwide and participation in higher education has also become increasingly common. Building upon Luhmann's theory of society, we analyze in this paper the expansion of higher education in Chile, specifically looking at the transformations of this system and the interactions between this system and its social environment. We include statistics to clarify the extent of the changes and the costs of increasing inclusion. We also focus on historical changes in the ways the expansion (or contraction) of higher education in Chile is legitimized. Altogether, our analysis show not just how the Chilean system of higher education adapts to its social environment, but also how both individuals and other function systems currently adapt to this system and how it is organized. We end with a brief reflection on the ways in which education may or may not constitute an important social difference and a discussion of the relevance of our findings for analyses of the evolution of other countries' education systems.

Keywords: higher education, social systems theory, university expansion

Diferenciación Funcional y Expansión Universitaria en Chile

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Resumen

A la largo de las últimas décadas, la educación ha adquirido una importancia central en distintas regiones del globo, extendiéndose la participación en la educación superior. Basándonos en la teoría de la sociedad de Niklas Luhmann, en este artículo analizamos la expansión de la educación superior en Chile, concentrándonos en las transformaciones que el sistema chileno de la educación superior ha experimentado y las interacciones entre este sistema y su entorno social. Incluimos estadísticas de modo de clarificar el alcance de los cambios de recibir más estudiantes y los costos asociados a este proceso. Nos enfocamos también en las cambiantes racionalidades involucradas en la expansión (o contracción) de la educación superior en Chile. Nuestro análisis muestra no solo cómo el sistema chileno de la educación superior se adapta a su entorno social, sino también cómo individuos y otros sistemas funcionales se adaptan también a este sistema y cómo éste está organizado. El artículo finaliza con una breve reflexión sobre los modos en los cuales la educación puede o no hacer una diferencia a la sociedad y una discusión sobre si nuestros hallazgos arrojan luz sobre la evolución de los sistemas de educación en otros países.

Palabras clave: educación superior, teoría de sistemas sociales, expansión de la universidad

In his analysis of modern society, the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann emphasized the importance of functional differentiation. In his opinion, modern society is made up of a variety of function systems. In an early version of his theory of society, he identified ten function systems: politics, law, the military, the economy, science, education, the family (and intimate relations), art, medicine, and religion (Luhmann, 1975/2017, p. 793-798). This list was not intended to be exhaustive and certain modifications were made in later publications (see Luhmann, 1996). However, the majority of the work that Luhmann carried out in the late twentieth century focused on the conditions and consequences of functional differentiation.

Along these lines, Luhmann also published analyses of the history of education. Compared to other function systems, he argued, the formation of a system for education took place at a relatively late moment in history (see Luhmann & Schorr, 1988; Luhmann, 2002). Only after the differentiation of function systems for politics, economics, religion, and, in part, also for science, the prospects for education began to change. The differentiation of the education system built upon and complemented other processes of functional differentiation. With his characteristic irony, Luhmann added: “As with the completion of a puzzle, the pieces that have already been differentiated (from the others) have a suggestive influence on what can possibly and must necessarily be connected to them. But, unlike with a puzzle, it is not certain from the outset that a complete picture will be produced or that it will be understandable as a whole” (Luhmann & Schorr, 1988, p. 24). Moreover, it should be added that what occurred in education in the eighteenth and nineteenth century did not determine its more recent development and that the expansion of the education system in the twentieth and early twenty-first century possibly also changed the prospects for other function systems.

Luhmann’s approach has distinctive characteristics. While classic sociological approaches pay attention to the increasing specialization of ‘functional’ roles and organizations (for example, teacher roles and school organizations), Luhmann emphasizes the elaboration and institutionalization of complementary public roles. He connects differentiation processes with the inclusion of large parts of the population via public or lay roles (for example, through universal suffrage). In the case of education, the inclusion imperatives characteristic of the early nation-state regimes seems to have determined their differentiation processes. After the introduction of compulsory schooling,

everybody had to be educated. The imperative of ‘full inclusion’ led to the elaboration of a new concept of the ‘public’, more suited to the expanding system. By incorporating and articulating notions, such as merit, talent or IQ, for example, the education system was gradually able to develop its own ways of observing and treating its public (see [Luhmann, 2002, p. 111-141](#)). In this sense, Luhmann argued that inclusion mechanisms allowed function systems to become autonomous and position themselves within society as a whole. Historical changes in inclusion mechanisms therefore also allow us to analyze the changing relationship between the education system and its social environment. They point to several of the challenges arising from functional differentiation in modern society.

Over the last few decades, education has acquired a fairly robust social identity worldwide and participation in higher education has also become increasingly common. Building upon Luhmann’s theory of society, we will analyze in this paper the expansion of higher education in Chile, specifically looking at the transformations of this system and the interactions between this system and its social environment. We will include statistics to clarify the extent of the changes and costs of increasing inclusion in higher education. We will also focus on historical changes in the ways the expansion (or contraction) of higher education in Chile is legitimized. Altogether, our analysis shows not just how the Chilean system of higher education adapts to its social environment, but also how both individuals and other function systems currently adapt to this system and how it is organized.

We will start our analysis with a brief overview of the history of university education in Chile, from the foundation of the colonial Royal University of San Felipe, when Chile was part of the Spanish Empire, to the founding of the first national universities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Afterwards, we will discuss the transitions that took place in the latter part of the twentieth century and the early twenty-first century in more detail, all characterized by a clear focus on producing human capital in higher education. We will end with a brief reflection on the ways in which education may or may not constitute an important difference within society. While it is clear that education systems are characterized by distinctive national traditions, we will also discuss whether our findings may shed light on the evolution of other countries’ education systems.

The Initial Mission of Chilean Universities: Forming the National Elite

After Chile gained political Independence from Spain in 1810 – and inspired by philosophical ideas from the Enlightenment – the role of educational institutions in processes of nation-building attracted considerable attention. In this country – as well as in the rest of Latin America – educational activities came to be understood as part of a wider system, which included concerns about the construction of a new common identity, free from Spanish dominance and adhering more to the ideals of freedom, equality, fraternity, national sovereignty and philosophical rationalism (Serrano, 1994; Austin, 2003; Ruiz Schneider, 2010).

An examination of Chilean legislation, which was passed during the nineteenth century, confirms that education was expected to play a central role in the creation of a progressive, nation-oriented system. The first constitutional text drafted in 1811 established that the state should assume complete responsibility for providing and developing education and for forming citizens' physical and moral character. Subsequent legal regulations continued to emphasize the national importance of education. Both the provisional Constitution of 1818 and the Constitution of 1822 stated that the Senate would promote and oversee public education. The Constitution of 1823 then declared that public, industrial and scientific education would be a key responsibility of the state. Finally, the Constitution of 1833 – in force from 1833 to 1925 – established the centrality of the principle of the 'teaching state' and provided the government with an important mandate to promote and oversee the education system (Bulmer-Thomas, Coatsworth, & Cortes-Conde, 2006).

Chilean pedagogical thought developed along these lines while assuming that individuals' needs were determined by their social origin. This differentiation in educational expectations – on the basis of rank or class – was legitimized by the then dominant ideology of a natural order, defended by both the Catholic Church and the political elite (Gutiérrez, 2011). Unlike other Latin American countries, where republicanism was conceived as being intrinsically at odds with religious influence, most Chilean scholars suggested that modern ideas had to be consistent with the Catholic beliefs of a country's population, since otherwise they could not be used to ensure political stability in a newly independent nation. As a result, the differences that existed

between social classes were not questioned in educational thinking, but rather were accepted as a fact that was almost impossible to change and even actually necessary for society to function (Ruiz Schneider, 2010).

The influence of this ‘naturalized’ understanding of the world in debates about inclusion can be seen in the description of the educational mission of the first national university – the University of Chile – founded on September 17, 1843 after the Royal University of San Felipe was shut down because of its close links with the Spanish colonizers. Building on a combination of republican and religious values, this institution was conceived as a way of helping the country become more modern, while acknowledging the need to conserve the existing differences between social classes. As explained by its first rector, the Venezuelan-Chilean humanist and educator Andres Bello (1781–1865), education was neither to be understood as a tool for social mobility nor as an agent for changing society into a democracy, but instead as a means through which individuals could learn how to better adapt to their respective social positions as prescribed by the natural world order. As Bello himself argued in “On the Aims of Education and the Means of Promoting It”, the purpose of education was to prepare human beings “to play in the theater of the world the role that Fate holds in store for them”, and therefore it sufficed to teach them only knowledge pertinent to their social origin and destiny (1836/1997, p. 109).

The University of Chile’s second rector, Ignacio Domeyko (1802–1889), shared Bello’s ideas about the university’s proper function. According to Domeyko (1841, p. 477, quoted in Ruiz Schneider, 2010, p. 23), Chilean society was divided into two social classes: the lower class, destined for manual work and without the time or skills needed for government and the upper class, whose members were educated to govern the nation from childhood onwards. Accordingly, he suggested that public instruction should be differentiated and separated into two parts: primary education for the lower class and secondary and university education for the upper class.

Even the intellectuals who disagreed with Andrés Bello’s and Ignacio Domeyko’s emphasis on secondary and higher education over primary education – such as Bello’s intellectual heirs and historians Miguel Luis (1828–1888) and Gregorio Victor Amunátegui (1830–1899) – shared the idea that the university’s role was to educate the upper class. According to their analysis, knowledge of reading, writing and arithmetic – which was taught in

primary schools – was the best way of avoiding revolution and of ensuring Latin America's political and moral stability and future prosperity (Amunátegui & Amunátegui, 1856, p. 12). In contrast, university education was not appropriate for the lower class, since it could lead its members to rebel against their place in the natural order of Chilean society. As the Amunátegui brothers pointed out, the government should not be spending its scarce time and resources attempting to “form lawyers, men of letters, or educated people” from individuals “clearly not born for these positions” (Amunátegui & Amunátegui, 1856, p. 132-133).

The idea that Chilean education should be organized on the basis of differences between social classes started to lose credibility at the beginning of the twentieth century. Educational reflection changed accordingly: it was no longer understood that universities should focus solely on educating the upper class, but rather that students from all classes were welcome, since academic merit did not depend on social origin. Building upon this, higher education graduates were now viewed as part of a new, merit-based cultural elite, acknowledged by Chilean intellectuals who highlighted the university mission of creating an “aristocracy of culture” (Letelier, 1895; Galdames, 1932; Molina, 1912, 1914, 1945). As Luis Galdames – historian and co-author of the Constitution of 1925 – pointed out, “the citizen of the democratic elite must leave university with a spirit of broad national and human solidarity and possessing a wealth of knowledge that enables him to be a person aware of the social and political problems that are debated around him and of the duties that his own culture imposes on him, whatever the profession or business to which he later dedicates part of his life” (1932, p. 28).

Nevertheless, according to the opinions prevailing during this period, the fact that admission to higher education institutions had to be based on merit rather than on social class did not mean that universities were expected to open their doors to all. Enrique Molina, a philosopher and founder of the private University of Concepción, acknowledged that “democracy does not mean suppression of a ruling class but the renewal and reinforcement of it through all the bodies endowed with the imagination, intelligence and character that emerge from the different social classes” (1914, p. 198). The understanding of Chilean universities as highly selective institutions devoted to training cultural elites did not change substantially after the foundation of the first private higher education institutions, nor after the decline of the Catholic

Church's influence in national politics. The new private universities were not created as a response to a perceived public sector failure but as an institutional means of expressing the ideas of religious and industrial groups, which had lost their influence due to the increasing secularization of Chilean society. Hence, their institutional aims were not opposed to that of the University of Chile and, as time progressed, state and private educational establishments would become extremely similar in terms of partisan orientation, field and job-market orientation, clientele and their students' social origins, as Levy (1986) has shown in detail.

In fact, the number of students enrolled in universities corresponded with the idea that their role was to train cultural elites. Until 1950, gross enrollment in higher education involved less than 2% of the population aged between 19 and 25. However, although access to higher education was mostly restricted to students coming from upper-class families (Brunner, 1986), more and more resources were allocated to higher education. These ended up representing more than 10% of the total educational budget in 1950 (Table 1) and almost 10 and four times the expenditure per pupil in primary and secondary education respectively.

Table 1

Chilean higher education coverage and expenditure (1860 – 1950).

Year	Higher education coverage (pupils/population by corresponding age group)	Expenditure on higher education/expenditure in education
1860	0.13	3.52
1870	0.16	2.49
1880	0.25	1.26
1890	0.36	8.74
1900	0.31	6.54
1910	0.41	5.92
1920	1.03	5.90
1930	0.87	13.95
1940	1.11	9.15
1950	1.46	10.56

Source: Data from Braun et al. (2000, pp. 238-240).

Laws passed during these years reflected this new view of the role of Chilean universities. All higher education institutions were conceived as partnering to fulfil the education function. Thus, although university legislation defined that private institutions could only award degrees under the supervision of the University of Chile ([Decree with the Force of Law N° 7500, 1927](#); [Decree N° 4807, 1929](#)), the activities of both private and state universities were funded by the Chilean State. Decree N° 02347 on August 4, 1923 established that the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile (founded in 1888) and the private University of Concepción (1919) would receive government subsidies equivalent to 50% of their total budget ([Hax & Ugarte, 2014, p. 126](#)). The other private universities – the Pontifical Catholic University of Valparaíso (1928) and the Federico Santa María Technical University (1931) – were also dependent on financial input from the state, as defined in Decrees N° 5879 ([1929](#)) and N° 996 ([1926](#)) respectively.

The Expansion of Chilean Higher Education: Legitimizing Full Inclusion

In line with global trends focused on expansion and described as the massification of higher education ([Trow, 1973](#)), Chilean universities underwent important transformations between 1950 and 1973. Under the influence of modernization ideologies espoused by international organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Chilean administrations started viewing education during these years as a key factor to economic progress ([Prebisch, 1962](#)).

These ideas shaped university legislation. Law N° 11575 ([1954](#)) earmarked 0.5% of all revenue from fiscal taxes plus duties and customs for a fund to build research facilities at all Chilean universities. This law established that these resources could not be used by these institutions for “salaries, travel expenses or travels”, but exclusively had to be used for expenses related to “construction costs, installation, experiences, terrain acquisition, machinery, appliances, industrial vehicles and animals” (as translated by [Pineda, 2015, p. 41](#)).

Similarly, student movements during the period emphasized universities' important role in promoting political change, highlighting the social commitment that was both needed and expected from their graduates (Brunner, 1986). The Latin American model of the 'politically committed university' was expressed in the university reform implemented at the Pontifical Catholic University of Valparaíso, with its influence later spreading both nationally and internationally. As a result, Chilean universities began to incorporate the social function into their mission statement, providing places for students who did not come from the upper class (Table 2).

Table 2

Chilean higher education coverage and expenditure (1960 – 1974).

Year	Higher education coverage (pupils/population by corresponding age group)	Expenditure on higher education/expenditure in education
1960	2.95	22.46
1962	3.1	28.00
1964	3.44	27.59
1966	4.7	30.79
1968	5.86	28.82
1970	6.98	26.08
1972	10.78	35.83
1974	11.63	47.87

Source: Data from Braun et al. (2000, pp. 235-237).

Despite increasing enrollment at Chilean universities, public statements about the role of these institutions remained focused on the universities' elite nature. As then-president Eduardo Frei Montalva (1964–1970) explained, selective systems “such as those established by universities for student admission do not mean we can say that higher education constitutes a privilege”, since the very existence of these admission criteria was an “imperative of modern science and technologies”, without which universities could not fulfill their expected mission (Frei Montalva, 1968, as quoted in Ruiz Schneider, 2010, p. 94). Accordingly, his 1965 reform divided secondary

education into two different streams: (a) one preparing for short-term work-related education in vocational, non-university institutions and (b) one for scientific-humanistic studies leading to university (Núñez, 1980).

Similarly, despite the revolutionary goals of Allende's socialist administration (1970–1973), this government did not challenge the assumption that universities had to remain highly selective in order to fulfill their mission. On the contrary, one of Allende's main policies addressing higher education created alternatives to universities (the so-called 'Technological Institutes'), in order to slow down the growth anticipated in university enrollment (Puryear, 1994, p. 12).

Allende's government was overthrown on September 11, 1973 by a military coup, which would remain in power until March 11, 1990. As was the case in Chilean society in general, how universities were organized was greatly affected. The participation of academics, administrative staff and students in university governance was immediately abolished, as was both their autonomy and their freedom to teach and carry out research (Brunner, 1981).

The politicization of universities and their expansion were, from the very beginning, perceived by those involved in Pinochet's dictatorship as the main threat to Chilean universities and the new political regime. Academics, students, and administrative personnel who had been active or were suspected of being involved in leftist politics were removed and many of them were killed, exiled or tortured. Entire academic departments – such as sociology, anthropology, and political science – were wiped out due to their perceived leftist orientation. Principles essential to university organization – such as autonomy, freedom of speech and pluralism – disappeared under military surveillance. As Chilean philosopher Jorge Millas (1976/2012) said, universities became “monitored institutions”, with their activities subject to permanent military vigilance (also see Brunner, 1981).

Laws passed during this period adhered to these ideas and attempted to increase state control. Decree N° 50 issued on October 2, 1973 established that higher education was the responsibility of the authorities chosen by the regime. The new rectors were military-delegated ones (*rectores designados*) and assumed the governance functions previously distributed between different university officials. These *rectores designados* had almost unlimited powers to deal with university affairs, including creating, modifying or

suppressing academic units, departments or programs at their discretion. Similarly, Decree with the Force of Law N° 1 issued on January 7, 1980 prohibited student and administrative personnel from participating in university governance, specifically rescinding their right to participate in administrative and academic bodies, something they had been granted as a result of the 1968 student movement (Bernasconi & Rojas, 2004).

Philosophical reflection on the universities' mission shared the regime's assumption that these institutions were key to accomplishing national aims through their training of professional and cultural elites (Jaksic, 1989, p. 155-184). The leading Chilean philosopher of the time, Jorge Millas (1917–1982), argued that the spirit of Chilean universities was threatened by two things: the emergence of a mass technological society and increasing partisan political pressures. For these institutions to avoid becoming instruments for external demands, they had to focus on what he described as their intrinsic functions: the “transmission of higher knowledge” and the “education of society through the dissemination of higher learning” (Jaksic, 1989; Millas, 1976/2012). Only in this way, Millas noted, could these establishments become “intellectual and spiritual powers” instead of the political tools they had allegedly been during the Allende and Pinochet administrations.

Between 1981 and 1990, political criticism of the expansion and politicization of Chilean universities continued to be important. However, the solution to these problems did not lie in either increased state planning or increased state control of their activities, but rather in introducing market mechanisms into the higher education system. Under the influence of economists from the University of Chicago and the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile, the military government started to argue that higher education was a benefit exclusively for the individuals who participated in it and that there was no justification for publicly subsidizing these private ventures. Pinochet's policies were based on the human capital theories propagated by the so-called Chicago Boys, although these were not used to encourage the growth of higher education.

These ideas were formulated in philosophical terms by the Chilean military regime's most influential ideologue during those years, Jaime Guzmán (1964–1991). A lawyer and founder of the right-wing trade union movement, Guzmán played a major role in drawing up the new educational policies in Pinochet's dictatorship. According to Guzmán, Chilean universities had

become too highly oriented towards the “application of technical knowledge” and the “solution of specific problems” and had therefore abandoned their mission to educate students about intellectual issues and help disseminate culture throughout society (Guzmán, 1982). To solve this problem, Guzmán (1979) declared that fostering academic competition would result in universities regaining their role as intellectual centers, making it difficult for them to be used as political spaces, as had occurred during the 1967 reform.

During this period, the government implemented a series of reforms in the sector, aimed at introducing Guzman’s ideas about the importance of financial competition between universities. First, Decree with the Force of Law N° 3541 issued on December 13, 1980 gave then-President of the Republic, Augusto Pinochet, the power to create a new legal framework for higher education, which he used to divide the University of Chile and the State Technical University into 12 smaller public universities. Next, Decree with the Force of Law N° 1 (1981) defined the purpose of Chilean higher education institutions as well as their funding and regulation over the following decades. It also encouraged private competition for funding.

More specifically, Decree with the Force of Law N° 1 (1981) divided government funding into three components: direct and indirect public support and a university loan system. Direct support was provided based on historical criteria: only the eight oldest universities and the higher education institutions that were a result of their restructuring received these funds. For its part, indirect public support was awarded to universities based on the number of students they had with highest marks in the annual national standardized exam. Finally, the newly created university loan system was created to be accessible exclusively to those students, enrolled in universities created before 1981, who fulfilled certain economic and academic requisites.

Initially, these actions did not result in a significant increase in the number of university enrollments. During the Pinochet regime (between 1981 and 1987), five private universities were created (Bernasconi & Rojas, 2004). The relative participation in higher education sector decreased from 14.20% in 1975 to 12.67% in 1980, while experiencing a small period of growth in the following years. In 1988, 18.41% of the relevant age group was enrolled in higher education (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2019).

On January 13, 1990, after a closely-run plebiscite, Pinochet’s military dictatorship was replaced by a democratic government under the center-left

Coalition of Parties for Democracy (*Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia*). At the end of Pinochet’s regime, however, the creation of several new universities was approved. Between 1988 and 1989, 17 universities were authorized by the regime while, between January and March 1990, another 18 universities were approved (Bernasconi & Rojas, 2004) (Table 3).

Table 3

Higher education coverage and number of Chilean universities (1980 – 1990).

Year	Higher education coverage (pupils/population by corresponding age group)	Number of state universities	Number of private universities created before 1981	Number of private universities created after 1981
1980	12.67	2	6	0
1982	13.33	8	6	5
1984	15.43	9	6	5
1986	17.03	11	6	5
1988	18.41	12	6	5
1990	-	14	6	40

Source: Data for higher education coverage obtained from UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2019) and for the evolution of the number of state and private universities from Bernasconi & Rojas (2004).

In 1990, the Chilean higher education system consisted of 14 state universities, six private universities created before 1981 and 40 new private universities. Considering the institutional disorder that was a result of the rapid expansion of the higher education system, one of the first decisions concerning education taken by the newly-elected officials was the creation of an expert commission that had to advise the government and propose guidelines that would shape the evolution of higher education public policies over the next decade. This was the origin of the Commission for the Study of Higher Education. As set out in Decree 529 (1990), the commission’s aim was to contribute to the creation of a new legal framework for higher education. The first official attempt to reform Chilean higher education after Pinochet’s

regime was based on the ideas put forward in this proposal. Relying on recommendations in the report drawn up by the members of the commission, Bill N° 392-324 (1992) suggested establishing stricter criteria for creating and recognizing new universities. Although attempts to pass this legislation failed, the Commission's recommendations continued to influence the guidelines for drawing up higher education policies in the following years (Brunner, 2008; Fernández, 2015; Salazar, 2013).

For example, the higher education policies implemented during the nineties point in this direction. Most of the resources allocated to the sector during this time were exclusively devoted to the institutional development of universities created before 1981. In contrast, during this same period, new private universities were almost exclusively funded by student fees (Bernasconi & Rojas, 2004).

From the end of the nineties onwards, the organization of the higher education sector changed due to the emergence of a new way of reflecting on the role of Chilean universities (Salazar & Leihy, 2013). On the one hand, international organizations became more involved in formulating public policies, providing ideological advice and funding institutional projects related to their ideas (Geoffroy, 2013). They pushed forward the idea that universities were essential to promoting economic progress in undeveloped countries (World Bank, 1994; OECD, 2009). On the other hand, Chilean governments started to emphasize the importance of higher education to creating opportunities for social mobility (Gárate, 2012). As a result, the expansion of Chilean universities ceased to be seen as a deviation from their specific purpose and was now considered as something positive in terms of democratization (Ministerio de Educación, 1997).

After an accreditation system and a provision to allow student loans to be guaranteed by the state were established through Laws N° 20027 and N° 20129 respectively, the elements that were central to the traditional cultural understanding of universities as institutions responsible for shaping national elites became less relevant in the debates about access or inclusion. Scholarships, student loans and institutional funding were made available – almost without exception – to all universities, regardless of when they were created, which resulted in an explosive increase in the number of university students (Table 4). The number of private universities created before 1981 increased to nine in 1991, while three new private universities were created

from the regional campuses of the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile (the Catholic University of the Most Holy Conception, the Temuco Catholic University and the Maule Catholic University). The number of private universities created after 1981 decreased during the period studied here, although their regional presence grew exponentially. In 2000, private universities had 47 campuses countrywide, increasing to 147 in 2010 but with a small drop to 138 in 2015 (SIES, 2019).

Table 4

Higher education coverage and number of Chilean universities (1995 – 2015).

Year	Higher education coverage (pupils / population by corresponding age group)	Number of state universities	Number of private universities created before 1981	Number of private universities created after 1981
1995	27.91	16	9	45
2000	36.22	16	9	39
2005	48.72	16	9	36
2010	68.79	16	9	35
2015	88.35	16	9	35

Source: Data for higher education coverage obtained from UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2019) and for the evolution of state and private universities from SIES (2019).

As a result, the importance of the universities created before 1981 in Chile decreased considerably. In 1985, 95.8% of university students attended these institutions but, by 2000, this number had decreased to 67.5%. 2010 was the first year in which enrollment at private universities exceeded that of state institutions (50.9% vs. 49.1%). Although recent reforms have been aimed at ensuring cost-free university education (González & Espinoza, 2016), enrollment distribution has not undergone significant changes. According to the latest available statistics, 51.18% of students now attend private universities and 48.82% attend state universities (SIES, 2018).

Discussion

If we look back at the history of the Chilean higher education system, a restrictive orientation or vision regarding inclusion appears to have been central for a relatively long period of time. We have pointed to the long-standing prominence of the idea that universities are elite institutions and that the education of national elites is their main activity. Higher education institutions were expected to be selective in order to fulfill specific goals regarding reproducing and legitimizing the social elite in Chile. This orientation was key to shaping how access to or inclusion in higher education was conceived by different Chilean thinkers during the majority of the period examined here and reflects how slowly the idea of universal inclusion actually has come to shape the cultural understanding of the role of these institutions. Even twentieth-century political regimes as different as the socialist government of Salvador Allende and the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet surprisingly agree on this point, with both evaluating the increase in enrollment at the university level in negative terms, as an unwelcome pressure on their real mission.

Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that the way in which the restrictive nature of university studies was justified experienced significant changes in the course of the twentieth century. At least discursively, access to Chilean universities was no longer based on unchangeable differences, such as the rank or class into which each individual was born, but on academic merit which by principle could be found in all social classes, and in many individuals regardless of their family origins. Building upon this shifting discourse, the selection mechanisms could be socially legitimized in line with the normative expectations which underpin a functionally differentiated society: that is, as a means to form the “citizens of the democratic elite” responsible for realizing national progress (Galdames, 1932, p. 8).

It is only recently that the traditionally elitist nature of Chilean universities has been more systematically rejected, being labeled and criticized as ‘social exclusion’. The increase in the number of students enrolled in higher education is now considered a condition of individual and national development and not as a threat to their intrinsic ethos. Chilean universities’ mission has been reconceptualized according to a new ideology, which abandons assumptions related to the ‘natural’ elitist character of these institutions and instead adopts the idea of ‘university education for all’ as its guiding philosophy. Somewhat paradoxically, this transition began during

Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship. The new legal and financial regime for higher education, established in 1981, was based on the human capital theories propagated by the Chicago Boys, although this theory had not yet been used to stimulate the expansion of higher education. For political reasons, Pinochet was opposed to investment in the 'critical' humanities and social sciences. After Pinochet, however, the ideas that emerged during this regime were used to further the expansion and privatization of higher education from the mid-1990s onwards.

For the Chilean case, more specifically, higher education expectations underwent an important reformulation with the incorporation of human capital theory ideas. After this ideology was adopted, the natural elitist character of universities was rejected. This was made possible because Chilean reflections on the role and mission of university education no longer had much impact, allowing for the rapid dissemination and translation of the ideas advanced by international organizations into a national intellectual tradition (Jaksic, 1989). Important, too, is the fact that the ideas of these economists were accepted by military commanders as the basis for creating public policy. This was especially important in the eighties, when they were linked to the regime's aim of creating a new political system in the country and to universities, ensuring their permanent depoliticization by creating a system based on institutional competition for private resources (Brunner, 1981).

Initially, the center-left coalition governments attempted to maintain the elitist university model, although pressure to preserve a rather fragile political consensus prevented the introduction of new regulations in this respect (Gárate, 2012; Allard, 2014). However, by the mid-1990s, the creation of private universities had already led to the expansion of these institutions, generating the greater inclusion of population parts, which, despite the twentieth-century focus on the importance of individual merit, had been historically excluded from the higher education system. This fact, together with the participation of former representatives of the coalition governments in the management of private universities (Mönckeberg, 2011, 2013), resulted in political acceptance of the higher education system reforms imposed during the military regime. As a result, the idea that universities were institutions dedicated to creating human capital was accepted. In Luhmann's terms, the fit or connection between the different "pieces of the puzzle" of a contemporary,

functionally differentiated type of world society was legitimized by the idea of human capital.

Since the end of the 1990s, this understanding of universities has been more firmly linked to concepts such as the ‘knowledge society’, a concept promoted by international organizations such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank (see also [Vanderstraeten, 2000](#)). As a result, the traditional idea that Chilean universities’ main function is to create cultural and professional elites has now been replaced in educational thinking by a novel description that emphasizes their economic function, viz. boosting international competitiveness, and their political role and thus promoting social equality through the creation of more highly skilled human capital. The principle of universal inclusion is thus expressed here through an economic language which at the same time allows to conceive the admission of more students as a positive achievement and to criticize exclusion from the higher education system as a threat to social mobility and national economic development. Functional differentiation and the institutionalization of complementary expectations vis-à-vis the public advance a historically new expectation for universal inclusion that encourages the emergence and development of a new semantics on the universities and their role, a process that, as we have examined for the Chilean university system, is related to transformations in the political field.

Conclusion

As we have seen, examining the ways in which Chilean universities’ mission has been ‘officially’ presented suggests that ‘naturalized’ ideas of social rank and elite status have lost their legitimacy and that the relevance of ideas about full inclusion and individual merit has increased. This trajectory aligns with Luhmann’s analysis of the rise of functional differentiation as the primary form of differentiation in modern society ([Luhmann, 2004, 2013](#)). Concepts based on one’s nature or descent lose their former validity and are replaced by notions that are open to the future. For education, this means that the idea of the individual’s social origins loses its relevance. Instead it has become common to depart from the notion of career, whose only relevant variable is individual performance. However, the lasting relevance of the ‘naturalized’ understanding of universities’ mission is well illustrated in Chile, from the

mid-nineteenth-century ideas of the rector of the first Chilean university, Andrés Bello, to universities' purpose being to create professional and cultural elites according to philosopher Enrique Molina at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The changes to which Luhmann's thinking draws attention not only affect the education system. They are also indicative of – and contribute to – increasing functional differentiation (see also [Vanderstraeten, 2014](#)). In contemporary society, individuals need education to enable them to make a career. The accumulative structure of a career provokes and enhances the relevance of the beginning of one's career. Current choices and decisions are increasingly evaluated from the point of view of their future consequences, especially in one's earlier (school) years. This situation clearly stimulates individuals to invest in their education. Grades and certificates make a difference, although an educational career certainly does not neatly link up with, for example, an economic career. The social structure stimulates individuals to 'go for it' – even when they are faced with counterfactual indications (such as diploma inflation or credentialism).

Modern society remains a functionally differentiated system. According to Luhmann, the relationship of individuals to function systems is regulated differently in every function system through the inclusion of individuals into these systems. Individuals enter these systems as a 'microdiverse' population with different skills and expertise ([Luhmann, 2013](#)). Ultimately, the expectations addressed to individuals by modern society are articulated as expectations regarding the ability of individuals to act effectively. While this evolution awards education increasing relevance within modern society, it also puts increasing pressure on individuals, who are now expected to be successful in higher education. The idea of human capital seems to be a way to legitimize the growing importance of (higher) education within modern society, as the Chilean case has clearly shown.

It is not easy to assess the consequences of this evolution. The education system itself does not and cannot slow down expectations about individuals. According to its recent ideals (including human capital ones), its ends can only be enforced arbitrarily. Specific educational expansion patterns, of course, depend on specific conditions, such as the school system structure, higher education legislation and scholarships, for example. Political intervention and national traditions also make a difference. However, caution must be

exercised. A societal system in which individual expectations have been built up to a high level, but which also leaves it to individuals to deal with setbacks and disappointment, involves taking risks. There are plenty of symptoms in this regard – such as the high number of drop-outs, the development of subcultures which favour alternative assessments of personal qualities, the increase in legal actions against individual teachers or school administrations, the growing phenomena of credentialism and over-qualification and perhaps even the problem of violence in schools and universities. These signs of dissatisfaction may also increase, especially in nations where education has continuously been presented as the key to social development. The issues of inclusion and exclusion are here crucial, both for function systems and individuals. It may also be that these issues cannot be settled within the education system itself, but must be dealt with (at great costs) in the political system.

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