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What's Spanish for development? Chilean higher education at an impasse

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Abstract

This paper contemplates the expansion of Chilean university education, particularly in terms of the country's current lack of confidence and certainty. It introduces and applies *calliopemetric* analysis, measuring the passage of a sense of epic through time. A range of graphs and accompanying commentary track, from various angles, changing notions of higher education's promise on the part of Chileans and system oversight, and the funding of the enterprise.

Keywords: funding, statistical analysis, *gratuidad*, middle outcome trap

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Introduction

The point of this working paper is not to convince readers that we know more about Chilean higher education than them, although we probably do and are insecure enough to enjoy showing as much. Rather, the point is to help readers appreciate Chile and Chileans' earnest pursuit of development through wider educational opportunity, perhaps recognising parallels in their own experiences of what is the ultimately noble venture of higher education. While the main focus of the piece is Chile, we make some reference to the United Kingdom, given that the working paper is hosted from there.

Chileans of Europe?

The English of South America is a soubriquet that some Chileans have long used for themselves. This self-effacing exceptionalism-cum-deference originally had something to do with newly independent but class-ridden nineteenth-century Chile's precocious freeing-up of seafaring trade (having been a backwater within the Spanish empire), as escorted by an unusually competent navy established on the British model by globetrotting Scottish admiral Thomas Cochrane. Such development flowered in conjunction with a strange but splendid isolation bestowed by natural barriers from typically even more tumultuous neighbouring states.

At this juncture, perhaps it is time for the English and their Celtic fringe to reciprocate; there could be less accurate descriptions of Brexit Britons than *the Chileans of Europe*. These are places that seem to be struggling to get their stories straight, when they used to be so good at that. This holds, in some sense, for higher education. Towards the end of last century and into this one, both the United

Kingdom and Chile would aggressively pursue synergies between market-boosted higher education and the millennial ‘knowledge society’ phase of policy bluster. Both have entered the 2020s with mixed assessments of where that has placed them —with the quality of social and political cohesion and of believable sagas especially worrisome.

In designating the British (or at least the English, lest anyone else leave) as Chileans of Europe, we particularly think of the great anglophile Claudio Véliz, born in Viña del Mar in 1930. The subtlety of Véliz’s affectionate and in some ways valedictory critiques of ‘the Anglosphere’ —with which some Chileans somehow like to think of themselves as especially conversant, *by Latin American standards*—have often met with misconstrual by fashionable reactionaries of mutant ecumenicalism. Which is a fancy way of saying that an anglophile loves the anglo for its faults, and that anglophilia is above all a sense of humour. Moreover, Véliz has achieved rarely matched heights in writing intelligently and without condescension in English about Chile and his wider Hispanic and Amerindian heritage, to be eventually dismissed in some Chilean circles as a crackpot and traitor to enterprising peripherality. We dedicate this working paper to him.

Thus, it has been nice to share in English the now delicately poised state of Chilean higher education and society as it and so many others of the world’s systems face reckoning. At this point, this record is aimed deep into the future —it may prove an inaccurate assessment of how things stand, but it attempts an honest and ranging one.

*

After so many protests, repression and pain, the Chilean people begins a new way. They have giving [sic] *a clear signal about their overwhelming rejection of savage neoliberalism, through the popular vote. Congratulations for this great historic step. Long live Chile!*

—Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro tweets, 16 May 2021

We held off on redacting this write-up until after the election of candidates to draft a new constitution on the weekend of 15-16 May. Chile does need to make its way forward, and a constitution other than the 1980 centrepiece of Augusto Pinochet's long military rule will be, if nothing else, a symbolic distancing from that past. The two-fifths of the Chilean electoral roll that bothered to vote largely overlooked those candidates openly associating with the older political parties. It would be alarmist and defeatist to gainsay the impasse-breaking potential of the diverse elected constitutional working bee, each representative with a modicum of local appeal within a state that remains as marked by centralised traditions as by the invidious 'neoliberal' foregrounding of supply and demand. But given Maduro's idea of a popular vote, his is not really a welcome endorsement of a clear way ahead.

Maduro of course echoes the *Chilean way to socialism* —Salvador Allende's slogan for the thousand days of brinkmanship in the early 1970s that would plunge the county's experimental democracy[1] into sixteen and a half years of military rule. Allende's slogan is perhaps the most famous of all the 'national ways to socialism' to

[1] Chile's first convincingly one-adult/one-vote presidential election had been held in 1964.

which Josef Stalin gave blessing during his last years.[2] If Chile's 'social splintering' (*estallido social*) from October 2019 that obliged politicians to set a new constitution in train had any echo of Allende's well-meaning dream of socialism, let us hope it has nothing to do with what Maduro reigns over.

*

The United Kingdom's December 2019 general election over the Conservative government's desire to gain enough mandate to *get Brexit done* pitted improvisational Prime Minister Boris Johnson against Citizen Smith-style Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn (incidentally, on record for past praise of Maduro's predecessor Hugo Chavez's early fleeting success in running petroleum-financed bread and circuses). A most remarkable gesture came in London at the close of the Labour campaign's rousing election eve rally. Here, Corbyn told his version of the story of Chilean folk-pop singer, theatre professor and Communist Party figure Víctor Jara's gruesome torture and murder by soldiers that began in front of thousands of fellow detainees in a Santiago basketball stadium following the famous military coup that deposed Allende's ailing left-leaning coalition on 11 September 1973. Corbyn's assigned opponent may have been the bumbling fop Johnson, but in his mind he was a socialist martyr headed to a showdown with the jackboots of evil (the panegyric starts at 1:14:40).

[2] *Britain's road to socialism*, for example, is a pamphlet originally produced in 1951 and finds itself again the official positioning piece of the small Communist Party of Great Britain. It was possibly so worded to evoke George Orwell's less sanguine *The road to Wigan Pier* (1937) and to avoid confusion with 1942 civics text *Britain's way and purpose*.

On calliopemetrics

Calliopemetrics is the measurement of epic; a social science of story arc. It is a technique of quantitative interpretation purpose-built for the big-picture, broad-strokes study of higher education, whose meaning changes over time as its influence mostly flows and sometimes ebbs. Just as the identity of each higher education institution or any other 'formal place' resides in sharing and believing in an 'organizational saga' (Clark, 1970), a higher education system (including the credentials and other repositories of belief that it circulates) partakes in an overall sense of epic capable of overriding any precise fact. Such mythos offers respite to humanity and communities from the actuarial assumptions of rational choice and whatever surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019) should seek only to exploit all-too-human nature.

Now, for all the faultiness of their education system, Chileans' collective narrative is rarely as silly or vicarious as Corbyn's —of dreamers crushed under cruel authoritarianism. Chile's mainstream story is generally about its people and the fitness of its institutions (Jocelyn-Holt, 1996), and the problems of opening up opportunity and inducing enterprise. There is certainly despair that Chile's, like Brexit Britain's, is a hopelessly divided society, most stereotypically between those who believe that market forces are in themselves freely entered fairness and 'merit', and those who think that state regulation should be aimed at assessing the 'social' and imparting 'dignity' and other long-sullied and intensely religious ideals. In the meantime, with the right methodology it is possible to tune in to a more common conversation and some inkling of can-do —to measure a society's sense of self, its epic, with particular regard to the reception history of the tale.

The atavistic entertainment of epic song has always been inherently political in its engagement with ideologies of authority —first through performance, and then with the advanced technologies of record, inscribing and encoding. For that reason, since it works so well in explaining the evolution of those Latin American states that keep close enough logs, we immodestly call our approach to statistics and storytelling *calliopemetrics* —Calliope being the Greek muse of epic poetry. In Chilean academia —influenced as it was mid last century by academic training in the United States' Midwest— one historical technique to take hold has been *cliometrics* (measuring *history*, Clio being its muse). Chilean academic economists, including 'Chicago boy' Rolf Lüders, have sought to use historical statistics (requiring judicious scrubbing and pinches of salt) to reevaluate cliometrically how the country has fared over time (Díaz, Lüders and Wagner, 2015). As instead calliopemetrics we seek to go further (as demonstrated in the use of graphs in this study) and try to trace the historical self-talk and more and less officially sanctioned discourses of society as have run through their times.

Since Chileans negotiated the peaceful end of the most recent and —touch wood— final military government in 1990, public-facing records have invested in a particular historiographical mode that has become known as *memory* (appositely, the Greek muses are the daughters of Mnemosyne, goddess of memory). Chile is no trailblazer there; the approach was lifted from Argentina, which in turn has followed the disconsolate memorialisation by what would remain of European Jewry after the

Second World War.[3] Calliopemetrics is not incompatible with cliometrics and mindful that memory has become an important part of our contemporary sensibility, but calliopemetrics is especially sensitive to how stories and wisdoms evolve over time. By the same token, it is important in looking at historical data, and the changing ways that memories of the past are conserved, to remain aware of how thinking and values contemporary to those events have their own validity, rather than picking historical sides through a perverse and indulgent hindsight. This includes not being too taken in through uncritical acceptance of often guilt-driven hagiography and hatchet jobs.

The calliopemetric approach also differs from Robert Shiller's elaboration (2020) of information's 'going viral' as driving *narrative economics*, producing spreading financial and social effects according to how events are understood. Calliopemetrics takes a more leisurely compass than the information-as-viruses, and actual viruses, that mark our particular times. Shiller casts society as itself the embedded vehicle of narrative (so, a passive kind of activity); calliopemetrics is all for enjoyment and even common delight and affirmation in the narrative (an active kind of passivity) — accentuating the ability to step back and find ourselves inheriting some sort of story. To be sure, 'development' as applied to societies can be understood as a kind of slow-motion but no less virulent meme that has long degraded to the point that it is no longer teleological, and instead a knotty burr. As such, development is not so

[3] Argentina's approach to truth and reconciliation after the profoundly traumatic National Reorganisation Process (1976-1984) was anchored in a 1985 report headed by writer Ernesto Sábato and titled with the Holocaust memorialisation motto *Nunca más* ('Never again'). This in turn has served as a model followed in Chile and elsewhere in Latin America. Recent Chilean protests have seen this slogan morph into the potentially sinister *Nunca más sin nosotras* ('Never again without us women'). *Nunca más* con *nostras* ('Never again *with* us women') would probably be a more sensitive and coherent wording if the original context were better understood.

much an instance of narrative economics as a kind of pet topic entrenched in places such as Chile.

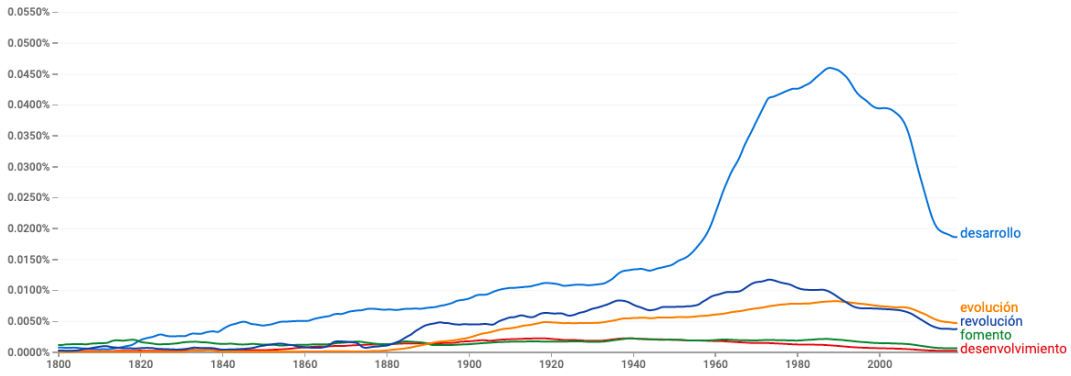
History matters (and in the Chilean case, history certainly did not end with the 1980s); inevitable elements of updating and revision in any historical standpoint often reveal much about futile anxieties over control of a narrative. Calliopemetrics accepts as much, but allows a focus on changing priorities over time, and the need for belief. And when belief is in short supply, well, then, the suspension of disbelief.

A calliopemetric presentation of Chilean higher education's development

We will now rehash the namesake webinar's presentations in an intercalated way. It is easy enough to detect various tropes —development, credentialism, 'neoliberalism'— and even decree their exhaustion, but it is also important to put effort into trying to get into any given moment. *In medias res*, as the Roman critics viewed the genius of Greek epic and as Bruno Latour (2005) deems the proper sense of 'the social'. We are grateful to webinar discussant Elisabeth Simbürger, whose suggestion that a *paradigm shift* (Kuhn, 1962) is afoot gives hope of Chile's current turmoil sympathetically resolving into morphological order. In the references here, we also list the works mentioned in the webinar (Salazar and Rifo, 2020; Delisle and Bernasconi, 2018; Lipschutz, 1937; Lomnitz, 1977; Clark, 1983).

The study of Chilean higher education is a convoluted, multi-layered affair, and one that most external assessments fail to grasp in its complexity. This calliopemetric analysis addresses the university sector, excluding technical and vocational tertiary

education, except where noted. This allows a picture of the sector that is easier to compare with other national systems of higher education. University and vocational education in Chile are fairly independent of one another, anyway —credit recognition for transferring from vocational to undergraduate courses remains rare nationwide. Still, comparison with universities elsewhere is not seamlessly like-for-like; as we shall see, of course, much Chilean undergraduate education operates at the level of secondary studies in less callow systems.

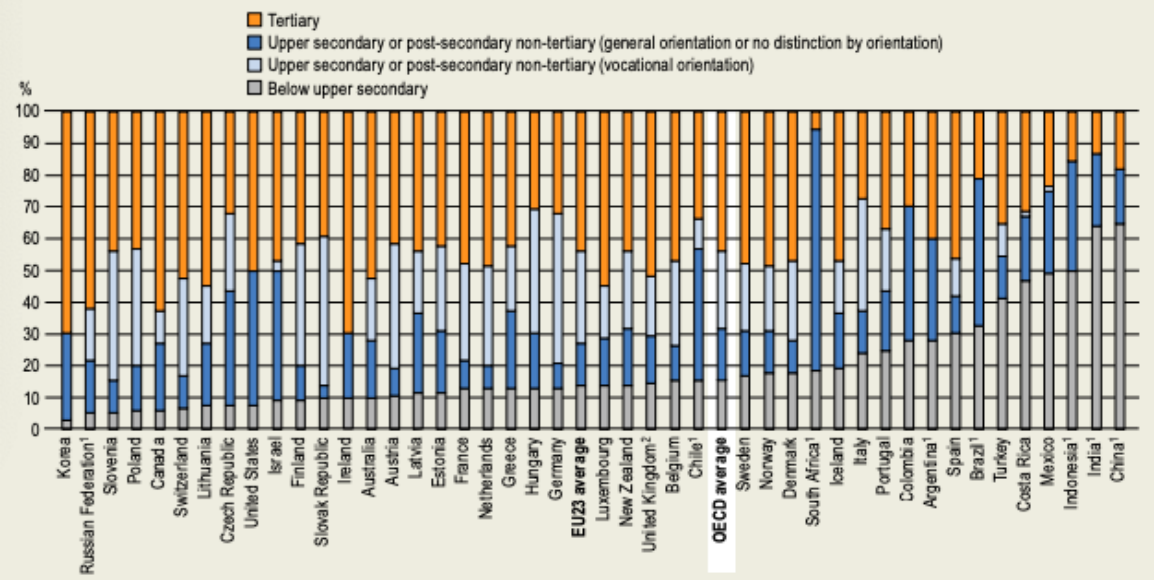


Source: Google N-gram Viewer

Figure 1. Frequency of selected approximations of 'development' in Spanish-language books

So what is Spanish for development? The Google N-gram above considers other sometime contenders, but the short answer is *desarrollo*, which calques to *unroll* or *rollout*. This is standard usage when discussing modernisation, galvanised by the Spanish for the 'Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development' (*Organización para Cooperación y Desarrollo Económico)* established in 1960; among the founding members was Francisco Franco's Spain, then in a reforming phase, if only by its own inimitable standards, including plans to establish new universities by decade's end. In Latin America, there prevailed for a time the

contemporaneous creed of *desarrollismo* —'developmentism'— , forthrightly pursued especially in Argentina following the removal of the singular populist statesman Juan Domingo Perón.[4] For its part, Chile has tried various forms of development, with OECD and World Bank advisory especially important since the 1990s. After a long and dutiful apprenticeship, Chile became a full member of the OECD over a decade ago, which has since acted as if a hex on its ability to hit all the metrics of what elevates the *developed* above the *developing*. In any case, Chile does collect data at the OECD's behest, allowing a kind of freestyle analysis around the country's epic of development.

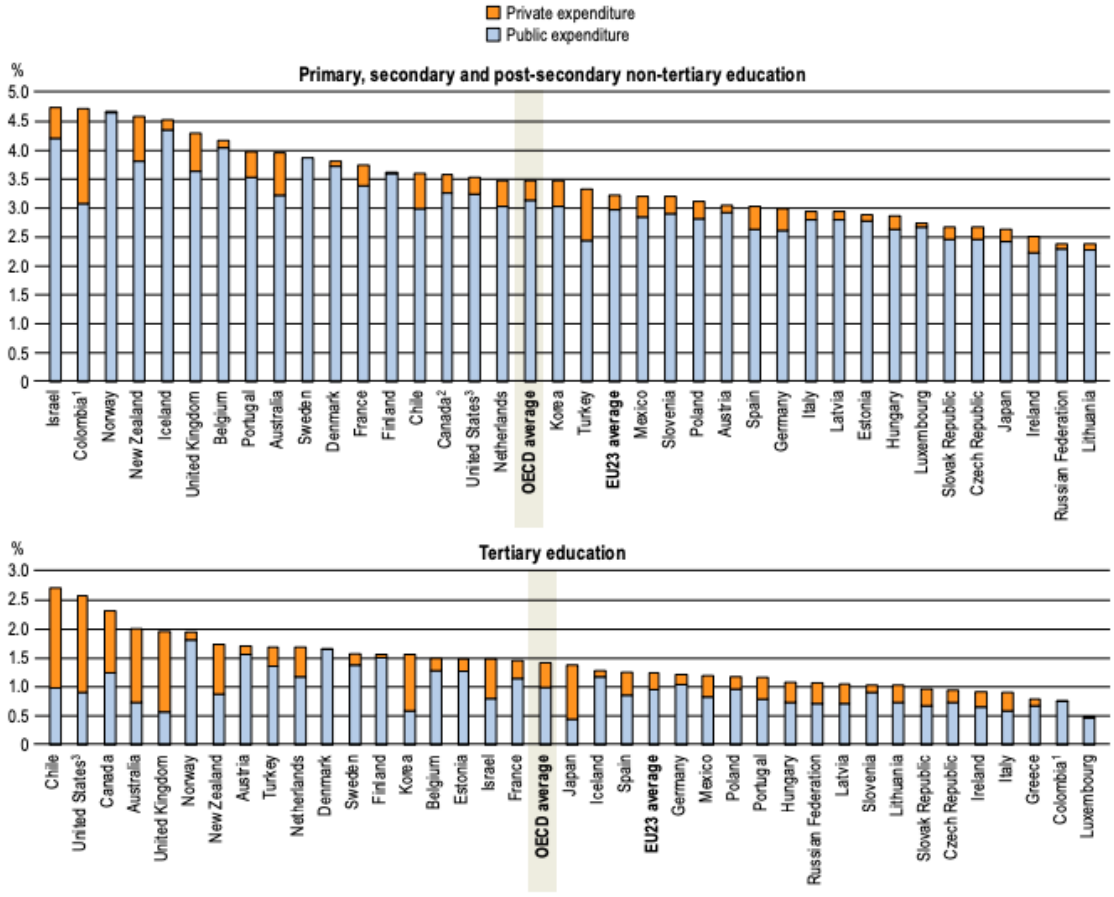


Source: Education at a Glance, 2020

Figure 2. Participation in higher education

[4] Intriguingly, in various texts by Perón, he prefers what in Spanish is the very rare term *desenvolvimiento* —literally, 'unenfolding' or 'unwrapping'—, which happens to be identical to the standard Portuguese rendering of development. Whether the preference reflected Perón's disdain at North Atlantic economists' mid-century talk about *desarrollo* or a fraternal gesture towards Brazil is unclear, but *desarrollismo* was certainly billed as the economic follow-up of the political *desperonización* which began with his ousting from the presidency by fellow generals in 1955.

Drawing from *Education at a Glance 2020*, the participation level in Chilean higher education is close to OECD average. In fact, it seems in a better shape than most upper-middle-income nations. All other things being equal —and obviously they are not— this would reflect a country in which higher education is achieving the kind of transformation that is associated with a strengthening of modern institutions and the overall social fabric.

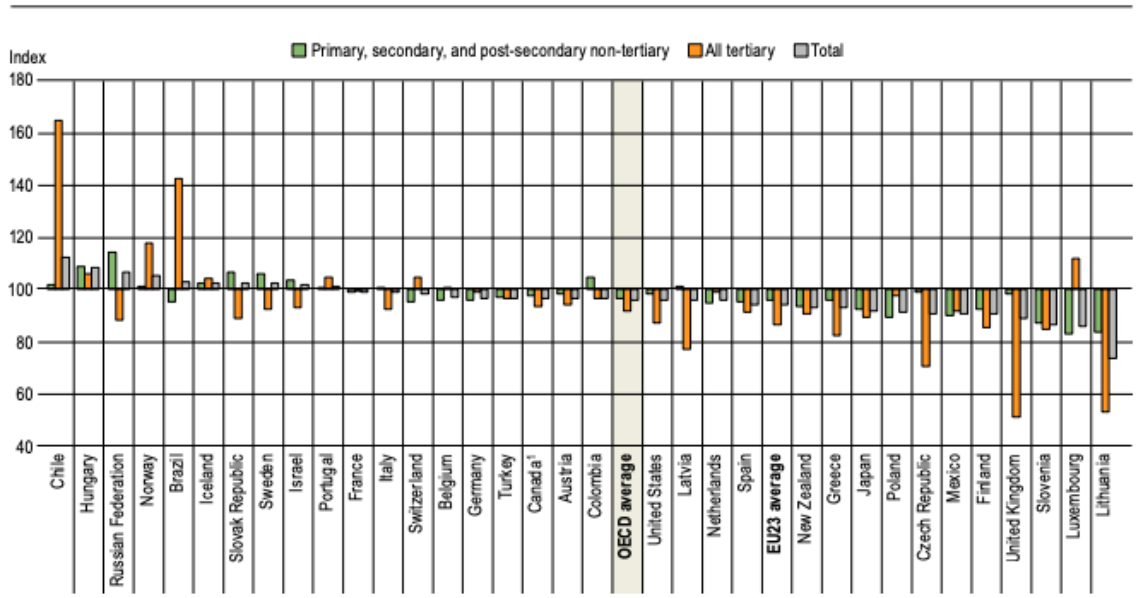


Source: Education at a Glance, 2020

Figure 3. Expenditure on education as percentage of GDP

Yet the devil is in further detail. The upper part of Figure 3 indicates that Chile invests a significant percentage of its gross domestic product in education, while, in the lower part, Chile appears as the OECD's single largest spender on higher

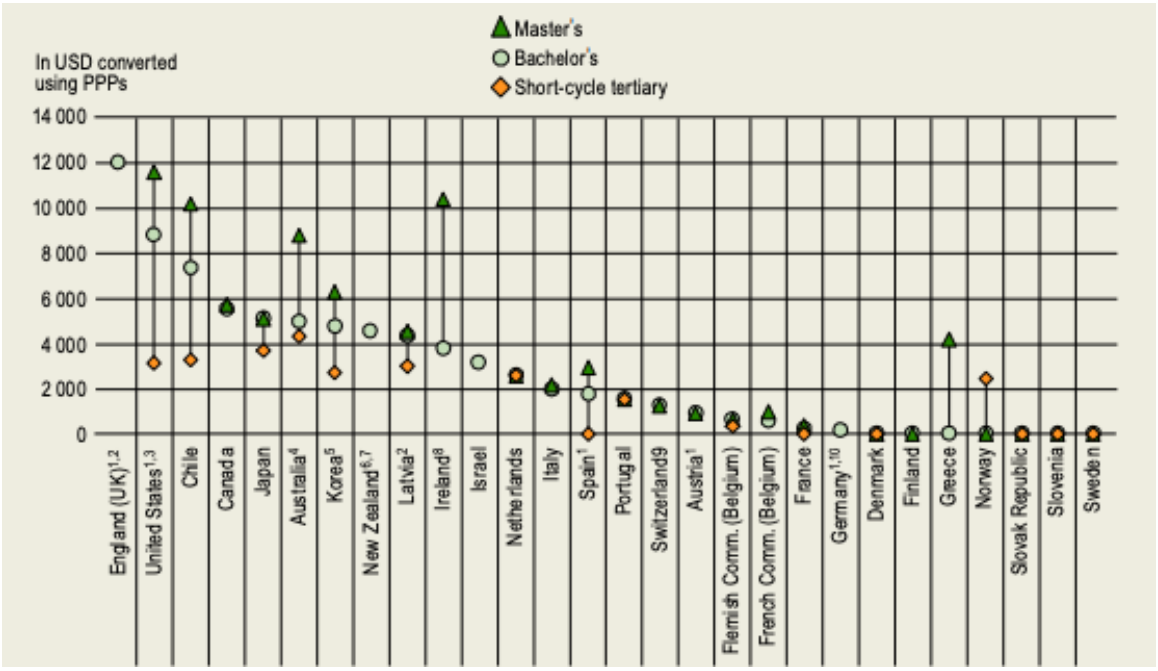
education relative to its means. Most resources —1.7% of GDP— come from families (and according to a quirk of Chile's 1980 constitution, a single-person household is legally defined as a 'one-person family').



Source: Education at a Glance, 2020 (reference year 2012=100)

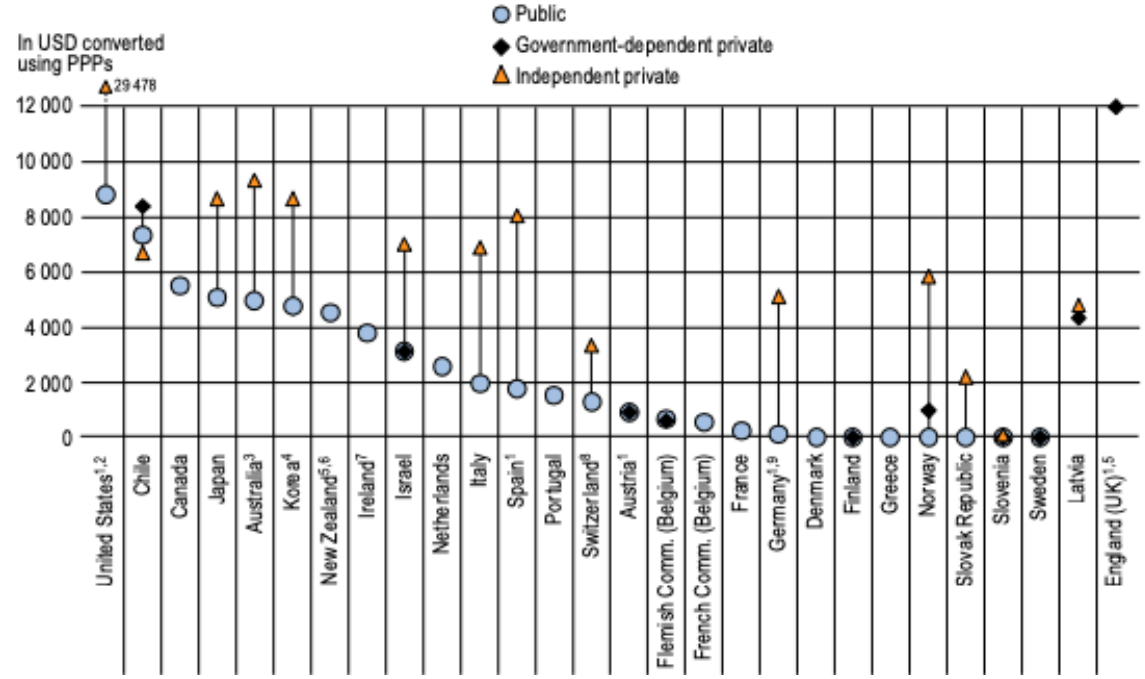
Figure 4. Change in public expenditure as proportion of GDP (2012 and 2017)

As Figure 4 demonstrates, public investment in higher education would expand significantly between 2012 and 2017. Of all participating countries, higher education has weighed heaviest on Chile's public purse —only Brazil (whose full OECD membership is due any day) is close. Therefore, it is fair to say that investing in HE seems worthwhile in the current Chilean mindset, and that such investment has been very much an economic consideration.



Source: Education at a Glance, 2020

Figure 5. Tuition fees in public institutions (2017/18)

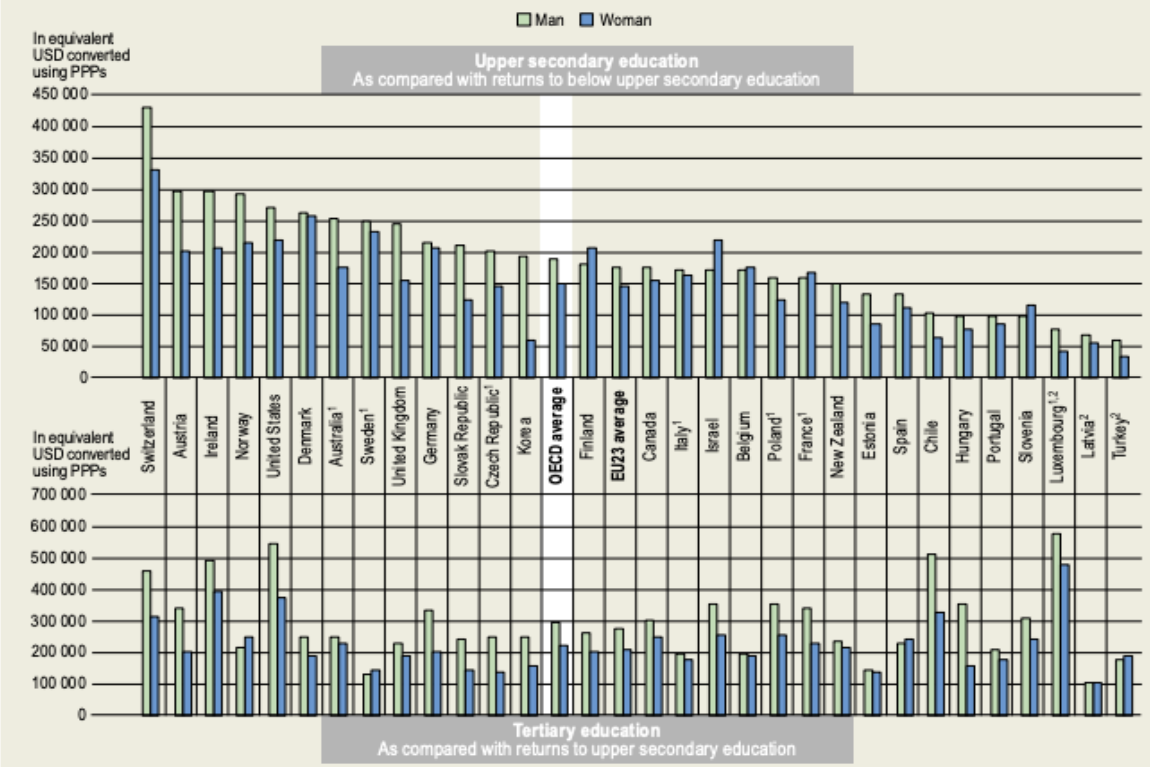


Source: Education at a Glance, 2020

Figure 6. Tuition fees for bachelor degrees in different institutional types (2017/18)

This truth may be analytic, but higher education in Chile costs a lot because institutions charge a lot, and enough people have felt they needed it to pay (or

borrow) for it anyway. Means-tested fee-free access —as '*gratuidad*' would come to mean in Chile over the 2010s[5]— claims higher education as a right, while not yet denying that it ought to be good enough for those who can to want to pay for. Compared in terms of purchasing power parity, tuition fees in Chilean universities are only below those in the United States and United Kingdom (Figures 5 and 6). And this applies to all type of university as the figure on the left illustrates: state, state-subsidised, and privately operated universities show only small differences in fees.



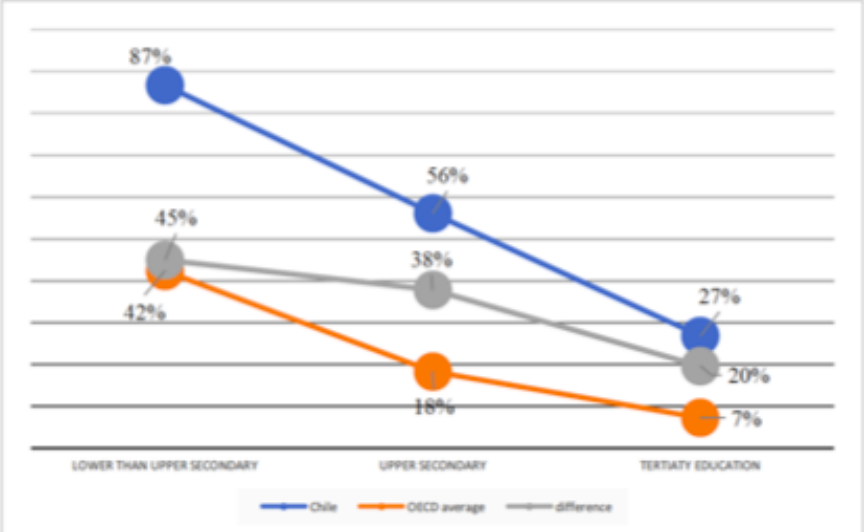
Source: Education at a Glance, 2020

Figure 7. Private returns for tertiary education compared to upper secondary attainment

Are Chileans, and the Chilean treasury, just fools? Figure 7 suggests that the net private returns for primary and secondary education are fairly low in Chile (in PPP

[5] The term is sometimes rather charmingly translated from Spanish into English as 'gratuity', which of course in countable form is a North American genteelism for a tip, a usage that hums with Max Weber's Protestant ethic and spirit of capitalism.

dollars). The same chart does, however, indicate that upped earnings following higher education are only larger (markedly for men) in the US and Luxembourg. Is simply a picture of striving for valuable credentials?

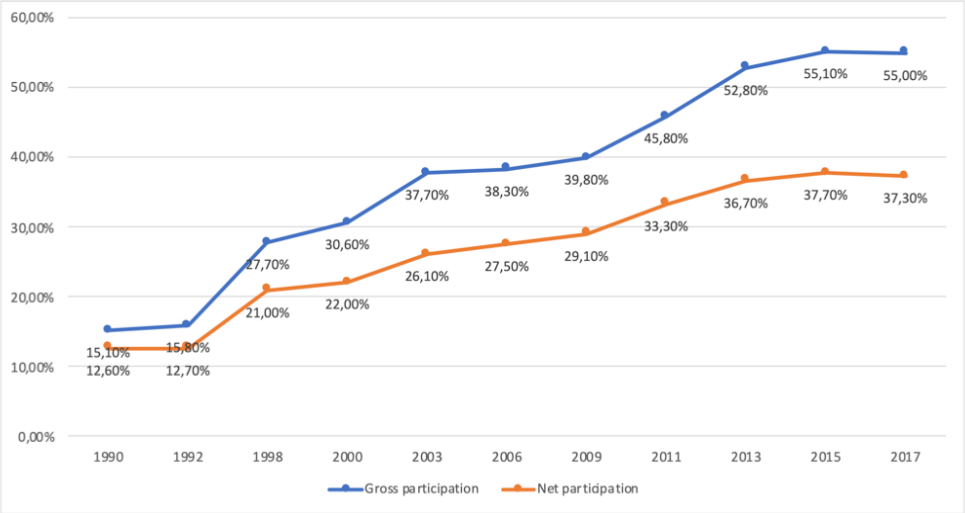


Source: González (2019), based on 2015 PIACC results

Figure 8. Functional illiteracy

Figure 8 suggests that there is, at a very rudimentary level, some lasting skill content in the different levels of Chilean education. In 2015, the percentage of Chilean adults that reached Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies level 2 (this is functional literacy: the ability to read and understand short, straightforward pieces of text) increases greatly having had postsecondary education. This level of literacy is still extremely low, but we see a shortening of the skill gap with the OECD average to just 20% (compared to the 45% and 38% gaps exhibited for those who only had primary and secondary education). As in the United Kingdom, there is mounting evidence that overall higher-order literacy has fallen since peaking in the 1960s. In any case, are Chile's readers reaching higher studies, or do they tend to boost their basic literacy when they get there? At aggregate level,

and given the remedial nature of general studies elements within undergraduate courses, it is possible to infer that these are both factors and that tertiary studies are adding something.

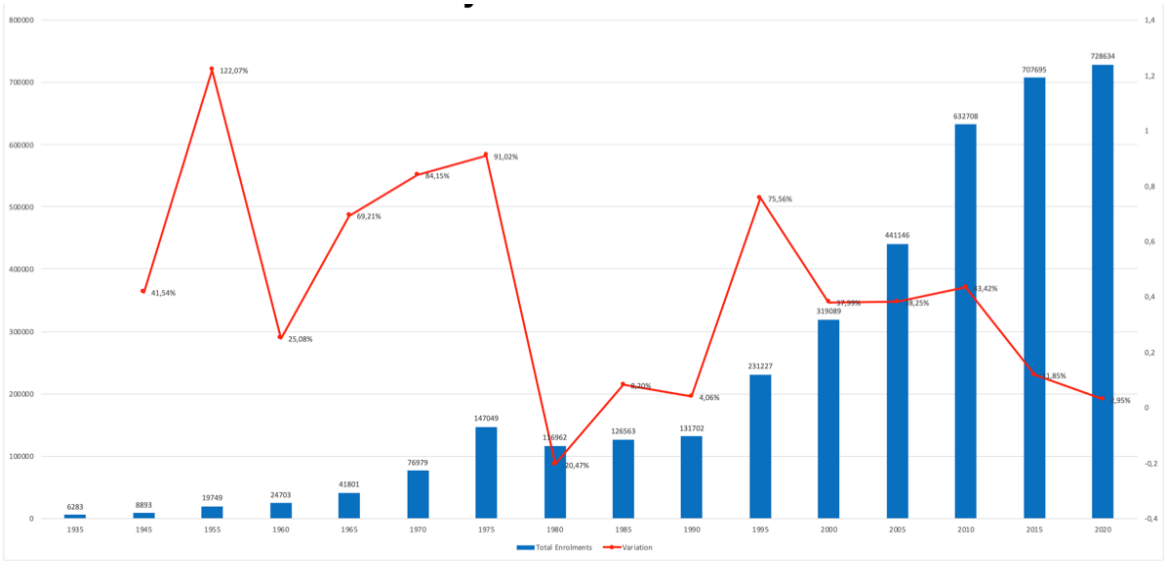


Source: Ministerio de Desarrollo Social (CASEN), 2018

Figure 9. Higher education participation growth: driven by working adults?

Participation has grown steadily over the last 30 years, as Figure 9 shows. Gross participation is currently at 55%. Certainly net — that is, *school-leaver*— participation has increased slower than gross participation during the period —the school-leaver intake expanding three times compared to an almost four times expansion of gross participation— suggesting that much of the expansion has been fuelled by working adults seeking higher education salary premiums and credentials for careers they are already in. The current level of participation, compounded by an ongoing economic crisis and evidently wide-ranging changes in the nature of employment itself, indicate that there is little room for further expansion among working adults (recent immigrant waves may seek credentialing, though). This story, of degree attainment's conferring a desirable 'professional' status, may be reaching exhaustion point.

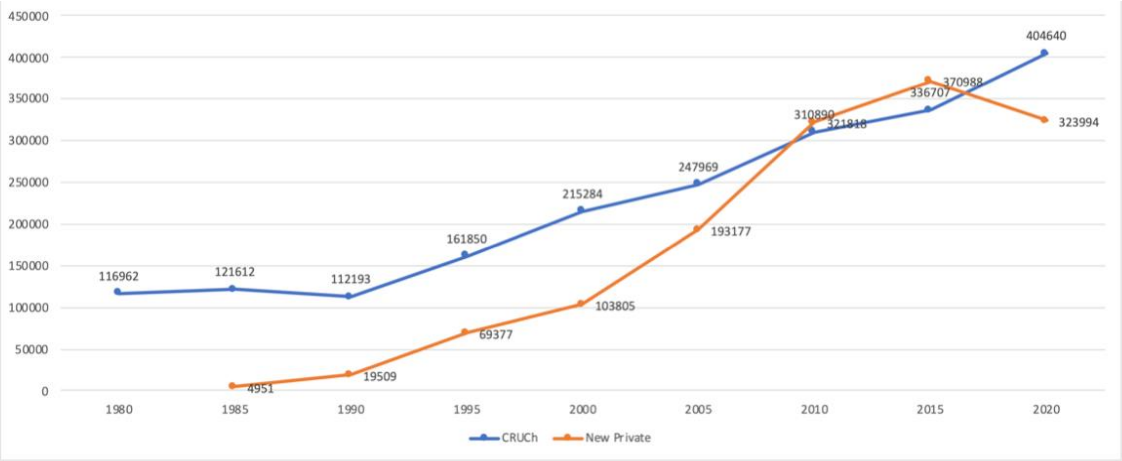
A key to understanding the Chilean massification is the intensity of economic values in first structuring markets, and then mass resentment at unmet expectations and financial burdens. This goes beyond the slow decline of welfare states such as the United Kingdom's; Chile's never having reached full development and associated safety nets means that educational disappointment is felt even more intensely. Culturally, Chile finds itself in a middle *outcome* trap —formally educated enough to sense entitlement, but not well-educated enough support the creativity and dynamism of spontaneous and mutual self-determination (for example, through the satisfactory and proactive renovation of institutions). Ooi Kee Beng (2014) described Malaysian politics as a *middle outcome trap*, where government and opposition tend to entrench positions designed to hold on to complementary halves of the population. Chile, where for over two decades near-parity between right and centre-left representation —the 'binominal' system— had been engineered as part of handover to elected rule in 1990, now has more than two political sides. Therefore, Chile's middle outcome trap may be understood in the notion of educational capacities as outcomes, which in Chile seem stuck between threshold functionality and something more like critical thinking by the very dominance of credentialism in patterning the political economy of higher education. While the country's economy enjoyed unprecedented improvement from the late 1980s, its inability to think and talk its way towards 'social' components of development ironically betrays a lessened democratic capacity in the context of far more extensive formal education.



Sources: Levy (1986), SIES statistical series

Figure 10. University enrolments, 1935-2020

Falling back to a very long perspective (Figure 10), enrolments have expanded but not in an incremental fashion —the red line simply instils the rate of growth between five-yearly enrolment counts. If fact, the chart depicts two expansive waves: between 1965 and 1975 and from 1995 to 2020. In between, enrolments actually contracted between 1975 and 1990, despite considerable growth in the school-leaver demographic. And the recent wave of expansion seems to be reaching its end. The rate of growth has been decreasing sharply since 2010. Although not shown in the chart, the last figure represents a decrease of about 20,000 university students between 2019 and 2020, with social unrest and the coming of coronavirus.

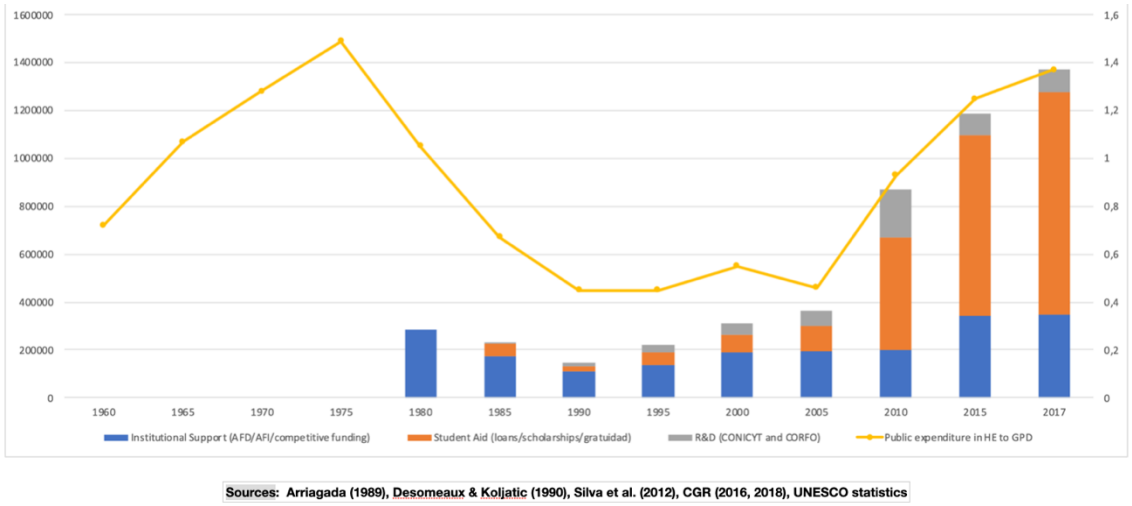


Sources: Silva et al. (2012), SIES statistical series

Figure 11. Total enrolment by university type, 1980-2020

Most of the enrolment's expansion has been channelled through demand-absorbing private provision. In just one decade —from 1995 to 2005— this new private sector grew ten times, to double again in the next five years, as Figure 11 illustrates. Its prominence, however, has been declining in recent times as the traditional sector keeps growing, including now allowing newer universities that comply with club norms into the Council of Rectors (CRUCH) over which the Chilean education minister formally presides; three have joined already, which affects the figures in itself. Today there are 59 universities in Chile, 30 in the Council of Rectors and another 29 private institutions. It is interesting to note that since 1997 no private university has been successfully created (a highly regulated process since the 1990s). Understanding the qualitative realities of these institutions —pursued often valiantly by Chile's accreditation scheme— is a large (and largely unsung) part of understanding system development. The idea that norms bestowed from the 'traditional' Council of Rectors system will yield isomorphic tendencies underplays the heterogeneous nature of governance between institutions founded by different social groups and sometimes even as family fiefdoms. Whereas in public-dominated

systems, the diversity of institutions has been pursued (some places better than others) under the noble lie of parity of esteem in the face of clear stratification, in Chile the demand-absorbing private sector draws even more heavily on the one hand from aggressive advertising and recruiting models for which the state is increasingly picking up the tab, and on the other on wilful social segregation through institutions whose clienteles do not need state subsidies and may not want to study and network alongside those who do.



Sources: Arriagada (1989), Desomeaux & Koljatic (1990), Silva et al. (2012), CGR (2016, 2018), UNESCO statistics

Figure 12. Public contribution to higher education, 1960-2017

Figure 12 demonstrates how funding has also varied considerably over time. Regardless of its massive expansion, the public contribution to higher education has not reached the levels of the 1970s (when the state covered tuition costs), as measured as a percentage of GDP. Yet since 2005 there has been a continuous and substantial increase in overall state funding for the sector. A decidedly larger share is now allocated to student support. Because policy has enshrined a mixed public-private provision principle (justified between the lines of the constitution of 1980 as

subsidiarity, drawn from Catholic canon law's encounters with modernity), these monies have gone to traditional and private universities in similar proportions, even though some of the latter are de facto for-profit. In contrast, most block grants and research funding are allocated to traditional institutions, which exhibit greater scientific productivity overall.

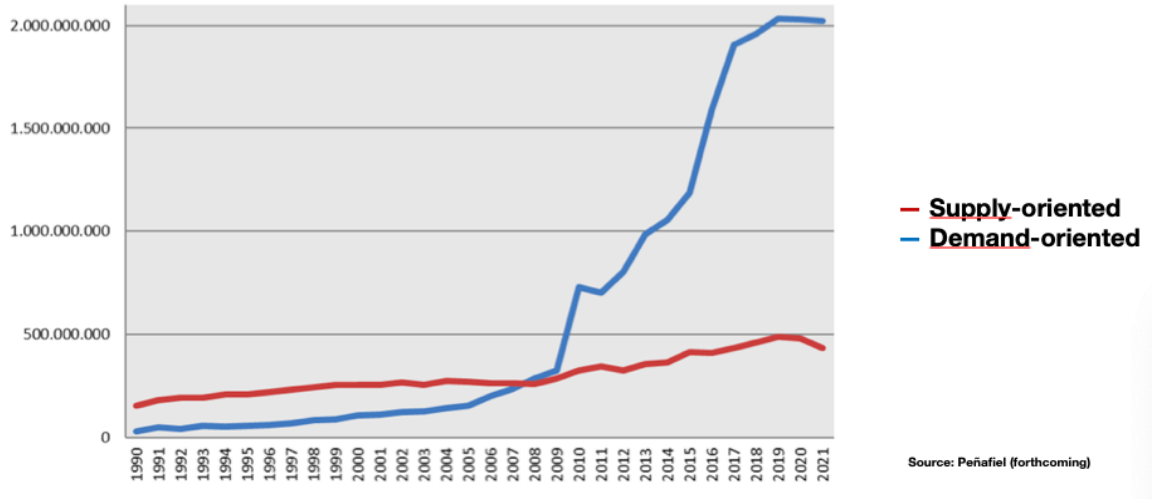


Figure 13. Public funding to higher education, 1990-2021 (thousands of Chilean pesos)

Figure 13 shows the concerning trend of the salient concentration of demand-side state support; wherever students appear (in those institutions signed up to the publicly-funded *gratuidad* programme), the state pays out. Repeat access to the vast majority of state funding depends on maintaining or expanding enrolment levels. With this sales tent or even gig economy approach, it is hard to plan for long-term development. Since enrolments have been decreasing in recent years, universities have started to feel the pain. Efficiency problems —such as high dropout rates and time-to-degree languor— are also popping up, yet many institutions lack the resources to address them. Given that the various government bodies have programmes devoted to *advanced human capital*, the often less than

advanced standards of university study might correspondingly make this a case of *human inflation*.

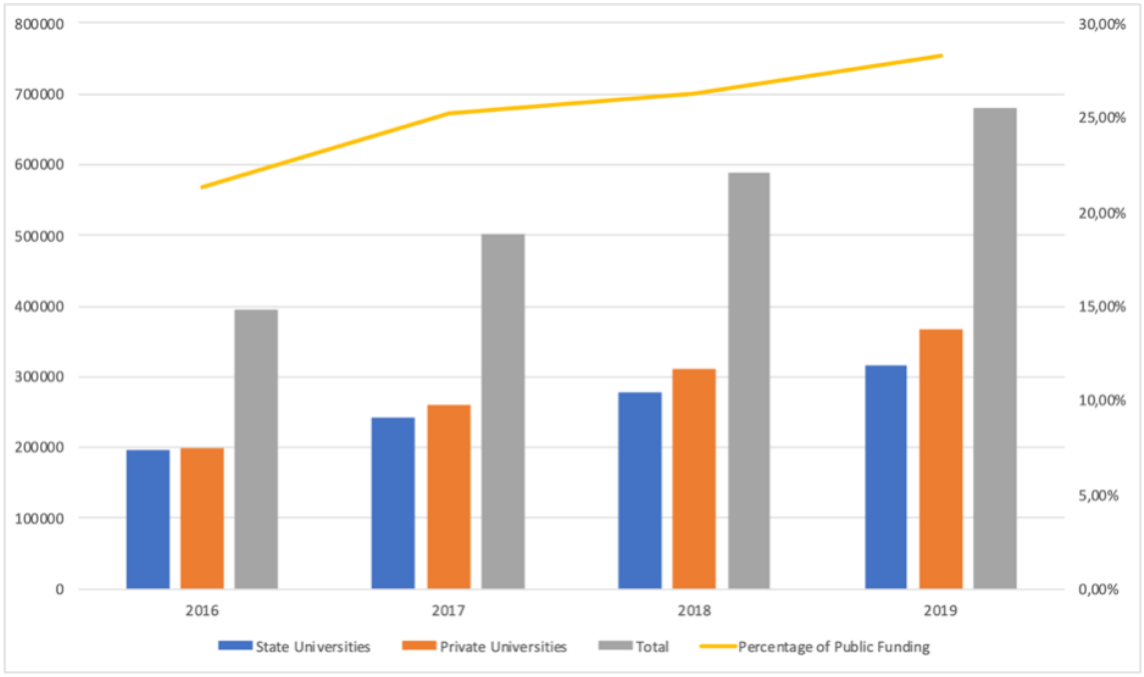


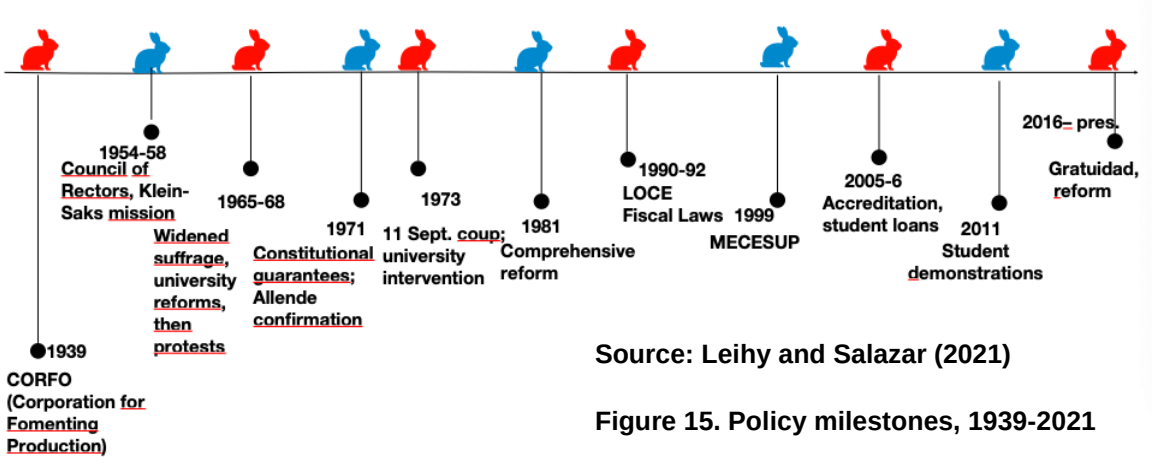
Figure 14. Funding *gratuidad*, 2016-2019

The so-far means-tested free higher education regime, or *gratuidad* (literally, a 'state of grace', a giftedness), is the new kid on the block. Launched in 2016 and directed towards the poorer majority of students, it is complicated and difficult to implement (Figure 14 shows early growth, but the level of coverage is now behind the original schedule in ratcheting up the deciles). It currently constitutes close to 30% of all state support for higher education (this figure does not account for *gratuidad* at the vocational tertiary sector, which is also massive). Furthermore, 26 universities are not yet included in this funding scheme, with some of these aspiring to meet the criteria to access the funds.

If the levying of fees for something that had not been billed to the recipient, as recommenced in Chile from 1981, sees a ‘commercialisation effect’ (Hirsch 1976) that changes the nature of the enterprise, we might say that the closer liaison with government induced by *gratuidad* brings about a ‘commensalisation effect’ — convening more of the sector around the same table.

In any case, the current situation raises many questions. Is *gratuidad* sustainable? Is a mere substitution of private funding that would have come in anyway, without the impecunious state having to find it? Has it caused deficits in certain institutions? Is it targeting the right students? While recognised as a lapse in supple and competent public policy, *gratuidad* is highly popular, of course, and even considered an acceptable approximation of the ‘social rights’ many believe that the state should furnish in various areas of life. There is little political appetite for backtracking on treasury largesse at the moment.

And so, the epic of Chile’s development passes through a tense passage. The evolution of higher education policy and practices are crucial background in understanding the bind.



Source: Leihy and Salazar (2021)

Figure 15. Policy milestones, 1939-2021

The story of the expansion of Chilean higher education has seen an interplay between economic rationales and ideas of educational opportunity as the expression and arming of democratisation. The development of institutions and institutionality offers only a partial story with regard to a wider society that has only been gradually welcomed into the universities. It is important to bear in mind that the story itself has developed in a country that has often seemed well-poised to delivery greater fulfilment to its people, only to collapse into disappointing disarray on the self-conscious fringes of human civilisation.

There are various important milestones in the Chilean development approach, and changes to education were never far from these. Following a crippling earthquake in January 1939 but also reading export opportunities into the war in China and the tensions in Europe, Pedro Aguirre's education-championing government would establish the innovative Corporation for Fomenting Production (CORFO) —generally glossed as Chile's 'development agency' and largely focused throughout its history on building capacity towards efficiency rather than the import substitution that larger economies would attempt in earnest. Early among post-Second World War developing countries, Chile saw the opening of 'neoliberal' economic channels (and simply expansion of the 'formal' economy, more often expanding rather than withdrawing state oversight), particularly through a mission of US experts following the crashing of the Korean War commodities boom in the mid-1950s, at a similar time in which the Chile's universities were formally convened into a Council of Rectors for strategic planning purposes. It was conservative president (from 1958 to 1964) Jorge Alessandri who —against prospects for his own electability— extended the franchise universally to all citizens, with the 1964 and 1970 elections hotly

contested between centrists and leftists. Over the same period, higher education expanded from a low base, with Salvador Allende's minority government confirmed contingent on not interfering ideologically in education, which gave it little influence on radical politics among expanding student bodies. Then the military crackdown in 1973.

In 1981, halfway through military rule, with the economy surging, there was a major higher education reform introducing student fees and the conversion of many state university satellite campuses into closely supervised universities in their own right and the approval of new private universities. Coincidentally, the economy almost immediately collapsed, rebounding from mid-decade. The 'laboratory of neoliberalism' trope linking Pinochet's Chile to market reforms in many advanced economies of the time is unlikely to work its way out of the historiographical lymph nodes, but the imposed nature of reforms at that time itself bespeaks their limitations. Neoliberalism would only truly be at large much later, after the return of elected rule in the 1990s. With inflation brought under control, poverty reduced, and secondary school attendance becoming universally available and required, the conditions for a secular boom fell into place at millennium's end. In higher education, the MECESUP programme for improvement of quality and equity strengthened traditional universities in particular (and perhaps set a tone for newer universities' approaches), while 2005 saw universal state-backed undergraduate loans and a renovated accreditation system. By 2011, there were big student protests and there have been protests periodically since; now the logic of *gratuidad* has subsumed much of previously targeted equity and access funding lines. Since then, as the

policy has brought in more students, it remains a huge unfunded liability for the annual government budget to find a way to meet.

Chilean development has alternated between different kinds of freedom and different kinds of regulation —what is more, such notionally opposed categories are in the end simply different conceptions of control. Are we to understand recent stanzas of the epic one of opening up opportunity, or of modernising inequality? Those able to see one and not the other at any given time have achieved the suspension of disbelief that the story deserves. Any democratisation, with touches of populism, has occurred in creative tension with economic, market-based thinking. All of these have caused unexpected effects on policy priorities, such as the corruption of accreditation, and the growing state support for for-profit providers. Of course, economic development and democratisation are not incompatible but for reasons that are endogenous to the Chilean culture they tend to collide in universities —a populism focused on rights places at risk the sheltered structuring of enterprise and choice that credentialist higher education had advanced.

The higher education sector lacks a clear and shared sense of direction to foster coordination and cooperation. A new narrative is urgently needed. To invert an old chestnut, in the current Chilean scenario, *What's* education *about higher education*? Chile is not the only country under pressure to find out, and remedial learning for what secondary schooling has not achieved is not a wholly satisfying answer. That public monies could be taken from higher education and assigned instead to schooling with a good chance of improving both in the process is a fringe theory still. Such positive-sum heresy is 90s, neoliberal and technocratic, impolite and impolitic.

At the same time, Chilean higher education is often the only one Chileans know, and a brokerage of belief. What do they know of Chile who only Chile know? And not for want of trying to measure up through comparative exercises, whose calibrations are often lost in translation. As massed credentials in Chile leak credibility, and yet we still get by on better-integrated technology. What does it mean to be human in such circumstances? A dénouement awaits.

English of South America?

Having first suggested that the British might be in danger of being the Chileans of Europe (which simply must sound provocative, regardless how much one knows about Chile), it is apt to end by revisiting the Chilean self-proclamation as the English of South America. Particularly with reference to higher education. As we approach two decades of routine international rankings that began by conferring a premium on English-medium publication (and with a rise and then moderation in universities in English-speaking countries' sense that this must be the right way to measure themselves), Chilean institutions have also been steered to hit above their weight by world-class criteria and *by Latin American standards*. It is to be wondered whether there are parts of Chile's essence neglected in this world-class hustle, while local essences remain more prized elsewhere in the region. And the same of course holds for the United Kingdom and its impressive neighbours. Both Chilean and English collective exceptionalism betray antinomian streaks that are equal parts arrogance and low self-esteem. Chilean higher education's problems with quality and conviction largely revolve around Chileans' struggle to move beyond iconoclasm and to work out what they want —which at this stage is a held back by a shortage of articulateness. We listen with bated breath.

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