

Equity and Diversity in Selective Universities: Experiences of Students Admitted to Health Majors via Equity Programs

Equidad y diversidad en universidades selectivas: la experiencia de estudiantes con ingresos especiales en las carreras de la salud

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Abstract

Equity and inclusion policies in higher education have emerged as initiatives to rectify the inequalities that have persisted in Chilean society over past decades. This article presents the results of an exploratory study to investigate the experiences of integration to university life of students who were admitted for the 2013 academic year to the University of Chile, School of Medicine via the System of Prioritized Admission for Educational Equity (SIPEE by its Spanish acronym). The data collection technique used was the focus group. The analysis revealed some tensions within the academic and social inclusion processes for these students during their first year of university life, suggesting that broadening access to historically exclusive sectors of higher education does not in itself guarantee equity within the system. Diversity policies seek to counteract inequality; however, the institutional focus that predominates the approach and implementation of these policies can generate new types of exclusion.

Keywords: equity, diversity, educational inclusiveness, higher education

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Resumen

Las políticas actuales de equidad e inclusión en educación superior surgen como una iniciativa que busca contrarrestar la desigualdad que se ha profundizado en las últimas décadas en la sociedad chilena. Este artículo presenta los resultados de un estudio exploratorio cuyo objetivo es indagar la experiencia de integración a la vida universitaria de los y las estudiantes que ingresaron en el año 2013 a la Facultad de Medicina de la Universidad de Chile, a través del Sistema de Ingreso Prioritario con Equidad Educativa (SIPEE). La técnica de recolección de la información utilizada fue el grupo focal. El análisis revela algunas tensiones presentes en los procesos de inclusión académica y social de estos estudiantes durante el primer año de vida universitaria, a partir de lo cual se evidencia que la ampliación del acceso a sectores históricamente excluidos de la educación superior no garantiza por sí misma una mayor equidad en el sistema. Si bien estas políticas buscan contrarrestar la desigualdad, los enfoques institucionales que predominan en el abordaje e implementación de dichas políticas podrían estar generando nuevos tipos de exclusión.

Palabras clave: equidad, diversidad, inclusión educativa, educación superior

In recent years, the debate around alternatives oriented towards reducing inequality in higher education has gained strength, and this has been translated into the design and implementation of complementary or alternative entry programs to the University Selection Test (PSU by its initials in Spanish). Among these is the creation of the System of Prioritized Admission for Educational Equity (SIPEE) by the University of Chile. This policy outlines among its primary intentions the increase of educational diversity through the inclusion of population sectors which historically have not had access to higher education. Unlike educational integration, which is supposed an adaptation process of the groups admitted the institutional culture, the focus of educational inclusion is the transformation of educational systems and institutions—and the type of interactions which this promotes—to guarantee equity in response to the diversity of the student body (Blanco, 2008).

Within the framework of the policy implemented by the University of Chile in 2013, for the first time 48 students entered the University of Chile, School of Medicine through the System of Prioritized Admission for Educational Equity (SIPEE), distributed throughout its eight healthcare degree programs. In this work, we present the results of an exploratory study which aims to investigate the experience of these students during their first year of integration in the university life.

The investigation aims to weigh up the advances achieved in terms of equity and inclusion as a result of the students' experiences in daily institutional practices. Currently in Chile, investigations which approach the issue in terms of descriptive statistics and correlations of socioeconomic variables dominate, but the experiences of the individual recipients of these policies are unknown. In this sense, we believe that a qualitative investigation, which highlights these individuals' experiences, will be significant.

Equity policies in Chilean higher education. General background

National and international studies indicate that of Latin American countries, Chile is among those with the highest levels of inequality in income distribution (Cepal, 2010; OCDE, 2009; Solimano & Torche, 2008). This inequality is correlated with a highly segmented and stratified education system (Bellei y Huidobro, 2003; OCDE, 2004; OCDE 2009; Valenzuela, Bellei, & De los Ríos, 2008).

In the case of higher education, studies signal that although access has gone from being elitist to widespread in the last 30 years, this growth has been accompanied by stratified development,¹ with low income sectors remaining largely excluded from highly selective institutions (Bellei & Orellana 2012;

¹ While in 1983, more than 60% of students were concentrated in the "traditional" universities, particularly the public ones, in 2009 these only accounted for 35% of students, with their majority concentrated in recently created private establishments (Bellei & Orellana, 2012).

Latorre, González, & Espinoza, 2009; OCDE, 2009; Williams, 2013)². As such, selective universities reproduce the inequalities of the school system by determining admission based mainly on performance in the University Selection Test (PSU), whose results are correlated with the socioeconomic level of the students (Contreras, Corbalán, & Redondo, 2007). In consequence, inequality exists not only in the distinct stages of higher education (access, continuation, graduation and entering employment), but the richness of the educational experience of students belonging to different segments of the system is also restricted by not having opportunities to interact with peers from different sociocultural backgrounds. The investigations conducted during the last decade demonstrate that, while education concentrated in homogeneous groups reproduces existing social inequalities, educational experiences in a context of diversity are positively related with cognitive development, attitudes and civic behavior which stimulate a general disposition towards complex thinking and socially responsible attitudes (Bowman, 2010, 2011; Sebastián, 2007). From this perspective, it is no longer possible to speak of quality education and academic excellence if this is not conducted in a diverse and inclusive atmosphere.

In this context, during recent years the debate and national and international investigation around alternatives oriented towards reducing inequality in higher education have taken on increasing importance.³ The recommendations of international bodies and the pressure generated by social movements during the last decade (OCDE, 2009), have created a favorable scenario for the development of the issue of equity in higher education during successive governments in Chile, which has translated in the design and implementation of concrete admission programs which are complementary or alternative to the PSU. Among these, it is possible to highlight the creation of several pre-university programs which aim to provide students with the best ranking from highly vulnerable schools, access to an educational process for a few months to select and prepare them for good performance at the university.⁴ Another complementary admission program to the PSU is the System of Prioritized Admission for Educational Equity (SIPEE) of the University of Chile.⁵ This policy not only involves a commitment to widening access, but also «to the continuation and graduation of all worthy students who aspire to be part of the university and who come from distinct social realities» (Pérez, 2011). From the viewpoint that quality requires attention to diversity, this initiative is accompanied by fundamental agreements which are oriented towards promoting «a group of improvements and innovations in teaching and intensifying support for academic performance and the quality of student life»⁶, among other profound internal transformations.

In this sense, measures such as the System of Prioritized Admission for Educational Equity (SIPEE), the Academic Excellence Scholarship (BEA by its initials in Spanish)⁷ or the inclusion of grade rankings⁸ in the 2013 admissions process of universities which are part of the Rectors' Council (Cruch by its initials in Spanish), whose primary intentions are to increase the diversity and inclusion of population sectors which historically have had little access to higher education⁹, without prejudice to their academic excellence, ask questions of universities and their institutional practices which from their origin have been oriented towards the education of the elite.

² In this work highly selective universities will be understood as those institutions which admit students with high scores in the University Selection Test (PSU), who correspond mostly to the highest income quintiles (Manzi, Bravo, Del Pino, Donoso, & Martínez, 2006; Ruffinelli & Guerrero, 2009). These highly selective universities include the University of Chile (UCH), the University of Santiago (USACH) and the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (PUC).

³ There are several relevant affirmative action programs on an international level, including university quota policies reserved for ethnic, racial and sexual minorities, etc., in Brazil, the United States (Arriagada, 2006; Gentili, 2006), Germany, Denmark, Spain, France and the UK (García-Huidobro, 2006).

⁴ We are referring to programs such as those of the University of Santiago (USACH), the Universidad Católica Silva Henríquez (UCSH) and the Universidad Tecnológica Metropolitana (UTEM), among others which have been implemented, particularly in regions outside of Santiago.

⁵ The System of Prioritized Admission for Educational Equity (SIPEE) consists of the generation of special entry quotas to several degree programs reserved for students arriving from municipal schools, who belong to the three lowest income quintiles and who have a minimum points requirement to apply (600 points in the PSU). Selection of applicants then takes place, where the vulnerability level of the school of origin is prioritized, followed by the income quintile of the student's family, and in third place, those who belong to the 10% with the highest grade averages of their school.

⁶ Equity and Inclusion Commission, 2011 Agreements, University of Chile.

⁷ This scholarship rewards students from municipal and subsidized schools who are among the 7.5% with the highest performance in their school.

⁸ The grade ranking is a measure of the relative position which the student occupies in their secondary education trajectory. The inclusion of this factor seeks to recognize students' effort during secondary school, independently of the type of the institutions and their socioeconomic condition.

⁹ A study conducted by the Department of Evaluation, Measurement and Educational Records (DEMRE by its initials in Spanish) in 2013 which analyzes four simulations with distinct weightings of the selection factors (secondary school grades, PSU points and ranking) and a real case confirms that the use of grade rankings generates a positive impact in the selection of students with the best school performance from lower socioeconomic levels who belong to municipal or subsidies establishments, vulnerable establishments and of female gender (Larroucau, Ríos, & Mizala, 2013, p. 98).

Equity, diversity and inclusion in higher education: main tensions

It is necessary to make some conceptual clarifications regarding the notion of equity. Although this is a complex and multidimensional concept, it is relevant for this work to consider the distinction established by the literature between equality and equity. While equality demands the same treatment for everyone, equity refers to fairness and entails different levels of attention in accordance with the particular needs and conditions of specific individuals and groups.

Along the same lines, Latorre, González and Espinoza (2009) state that:

If equality involves recognizing that every person [...] should have the same rights, possibilities and opportunities; equity [...] is focused on the search for justice so that equality can exist, giving special treatment to those who are disadvantaged or discriminated against (p. 19).

In this sense, the notion of equity begins with the recognition of the existence of inequality in our society. It is therefore understood that the concept is based on an ideal of corrective justice in accordance with which equal treatment in distinct parts of the system (access, continuation, graduation, etc.) threaten equity and justice by masking the disadvantages of some students due to their distinct conditions (socioeconomic, ethnic, due to disability, gender, etc.).

In the same way, Blanco (2006, 2008) defines equity, clarifying that equal opportunities in an educational environment implies the exercise of conceptualizing the needs of all students as equally important, but different from each other. As such, achieving greater equity requires unequal treatment for that which is different with the aim of guaranteeing equality (Blanco, 2006, 2008; García-Huidobro, 1994, 2006).

As a result of these conceptual distinctions, it is necessary to clarify notions of ‘diversity’ which, sustained by perceptions and suppositions that operate in daily practices, tend to create tension in the implementation of affirmative action policies. One of the central elements which underlies the problems of diversity or difference in education—and in a general social context—is the normative approach which permeates how the *other* is visualized, that is to say, individuals with distinct social and cultural capital from the dominant group. From the normative perspective, the difficulties of academic performance in the process of integration in university life are usually attributed to deficiencies of the student (located in the social, psychological or family sphere, etc.). This approach, which comprehends difference as a deficit, sustains a logic of intervention which aims to “normalize” the students, favoring their adaption of the *status quo*, to that which is established (Blanco, 2008). A teaching body which promotes diversity and equity must take seriously the differences which students arrive with upon admission, not from the deficit perspective, but with an approach that strengthens their abilities and offers support to allow them to integrate themselves fully and creatively in the university culture of which they are part. Assuming that differences are always shaped by interaction, strengthening them supposes opening spaces for diversity to manifest itself under equal conditions and that knowledge of forms and uses both of one’s own and others is favored (Duschatzky & Skliar, 2001). In this sense, to understand the scope and limits of the social and educational inclusion process, it is necessary to consider the analysis of social interactions or intersubjective links, as the phenomenon of exclusion is generated both by structural conditions and by interactions.

Unlike educational integration—which supposes an adaptation process for the groups admitted to the institutional culture—the focus of education inclusion is on the transformation of educational systems and institutions, and the type of interactions which this promotes, to guarantee equity in response to the diversity of the student body (Blanco, 2008). The evidence demonstrates that, while the imbalance between universities’ institutional culture and codes, values, beliefs and experiences of students which belong to diverse sociocultural groups affects the possibility of continuation and graduation of those students in a negative way (Canales & De los Ríos, 2007; González, 2005), the interaction between diverse students within the framework of a protected social climate promotes more complex levels of thought and learning (Bowman, 2010, 2011; Sebastián, 2007).

From the perspective of understanding that the students are immigrants who arrive in a new culture (Carlino, 2005, 2013), we can no longer speak of quality education and significant learning if academic practices deny or devalue the personal and cultural identity of the students or if their previous experiences are unknown, as these are always influenced by the culture, and social and age group to which they belong.

Problem and research objectives

We assume an approach which understands equity and inclusion as a question of rights, from which the distinct problems that affect students' academic trajectories are understood as areas of shared responsibility between the students and the university which receives them. In the face of existing structural inequality, it is not possible to privatize academic failure as if it were the exclusive responsibility of the student, and as such the university is required to generate adequate resources and educational opportunities for students to achieve the desired learning (Donoso & Cancino, 2007).

Based on these considerations, the magnitude of the challenge is clear: to generate inclusive processes in systems which are not necessarily inclusive such as highly selective higher education institutions, which implies a process of cultural change in those institutions.

Within the framework of the policy implemented by the University of Chile in 2013, 48 students entered the School of Medicine through the System of Prioritized Admission for Educational Equity (SIPEE), distributed throughout its eight healthcare degree programs.¹⁰

Along with the equity quotas, the faculty created a Teaching and Learning Development Unit, whose principal aim is to articulate and strengthen the support mechanisms which strengthen the abilities of all students with a view to favoring an inclusive institutional culture.¹¹

Understanding that the students are not mere receptors of policy, but active subjects in this process, one year on from the implementation of the System of Prioritized Admission for Educational Equity in the University of Chile School of Medicine, we conducted an exploratory study with the aim of getting to know the experiences of the students who entered healthcare degrees via this route. The objectives which guided this work were as follows:

1. General objective:

- Investigate the experience of students who entered via the SIPEE in the process of integration in the university life during the first year of healthcare degrees.

2. Specific objectives:

- Get to know the students' opinions regarding the new academic and social experience at the university.
- Analyze students' perceptions regarding the fit exists between their abilities and the academic demands required by the university context.
- Explore the students' experiences regarding the diverse instances of support (academic and psychosocial) which the institution has provided during the first year of university.

To investigate the implementation of these programs based on the experiences of its recipients results in a type of analysis which we hope will allow us, on the one hand, to weigh up the advances achieved in terms of equity—as well as the challenges which remain going forward—and on the other hand change the suppositions which operate at the base of these inclusive policies and their concrete practices.

Research methodology

The epistemological perspective of this work is conducted within the framework of an interpretative approach, oriented towards understanding “the motives and beliefs which are behind people's actions” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1987, p. 16), that is to say, to approach reality from people's point of view and emphasize the process of understanding on the part of the researcher. This approach recognizes subjectivity and inter-subjectivity as alternatives to understand and interpret, rather than to explain reality.

¹⁰ Ten places were created in the Medicine degree, 8 in Medical Technology and 5 places each in the rest of the degree programs (Kinesiology, Speech Therapy, Nutrition, Obstetrics, Occupational Therapy and Nursing).

¹¹ The main lines of action which this unit coordinates and articulates with each degree program include: early and systemic detection of possibly difficulties in academic and/or psychosocial integration of the students and the implementation of support programs and remedial courses.

This exploratory study finds to understand students subjective experience and the meanings they create and recreate about their experiences of life in the integration process to the university life (Sandín, 2003).

The subjects of the investigation were the students which entered the School of Medicine's degree programs in 2013 through the System of Prioritized Admission for Educational Equity (SIPEE). The focus group technique was used to collect information.

In order to structure the focus groups, the 48 students who entered via SIPEE system in 2013 were summoned with the aim of configuring a type of *convenience* sample, that is to say, using volunteers (Martínez-Salgado, 2012).

Three students from the same degree program came to the first focus group, and for this reason it was decided that a second group should be held. Ten students from four different degrees came to the second focus group.

As a result of the large amount of data¹² which was collected during the first level of analysis of information collected from the focus groups, it was decided that this stage should be finalized. As such, the body of the research is made up of the information collected during the two focus groups, which consist of a sample of 13 subjects, distributed, as is shown in Table 1, as follows:

Table 1
Number and distribution of the subjects which made up the sample

Degree program	Focus group 1 (G1) N° of subjects	Focus group 2 (G2) N° of subjects
Degree program 1 (C1)	3	2
Degree program 2 (C2)		2
Degree program 3 (C3)		2
Degree program 4 (C4)		4
Total	3	10

The qualitative content analysis technique used (Rodríguez, Gil, & García, 1996), allowed us to organize the information by identifying issues considered as significant for the investigation and determining *recording units*, that is, fragments (quotes of expressions or comments) referring to the same issue. The identification of the thematic units required an information categorization process through which the units covered by the same issue were classified conceptually. To be able to define the dimensions and categories of analysis, we recurred to a deductive-inductive process as, although at the beginning extensive categories that were defined *a priori* within the theoretical framework of the study were used, these were then redefined in accordance with the information collected. This process allowed for the establishment of three category axes or dimensions of analysis.

- Trajectory: history of previous educational opportunities.
- Academic integration experiences of the priority admission students.
- Continuation in the programs and support offered by the faculty.

Ethical considerations: the students were duly informed regarding the aim of the activity and the research objectives, as well as the way the information would be used, under a strict commitment to confidentiality. This process was formalized through an informed consent letter signed by the students.

¹² In qualitative investigation, the data saturation point is determined as being when, taking the research objectives as a reference, new information was no longer being obtained or was becoming redundant (Martínez-Salgado, 2012).

Analysis of results

The descriptive-interpretative analysis of the information presented is articulated around the three categorical axes based on which it is possible to discern the most significant experiences of the priority admission students during their first year of university.

Trajectories and expectations: “believing in themselves” when “entering university” was unexpected

When the students narrate their first experiences at the university, their previous history of educational opportunities during secondary education (municipal schools, technical schools) and their origins (urban or rural regions, etc.) emerge as issues which are permanently referred to in their stories.

It would seem that these trajectories are implicated in the way in which the students interviewed ascribe meaning to their experiences and those of their peers.¹³ Belonging to a family whose members have not had access to higher education and to have graduated from a municipal school and/or a technical school are some of the conditions which determine their previous expectations, as throughout secondary education they never thought it would be possible to enter the university, and they do not have close role models who have achieved this: «I come from a very, very municipal school, where university wasn't part of my classmates life plans» (Student 1, Focus group 1-Degree program 1).

For these students, the admission program «arrived» as an opportunity which, all of a sudden, it meant a strong shift in their trajectory. «Believing in themselves» would seem to be the first major challenge for these students, as this implies overcoming the weight of statistics and tradition which feed the belief that they don't have the possibility of entering university or being successful: «Believing in yourself is hard... I assumed that I wouldn't be in university by the second semester... [laughter]» (Student 4, Focus group 2-Degree program 2).

Furthermore, the educational opportunities which the students have had prior to entering university not only influenced their expectations and those of their families, but also marked their first university experiences, particularly with regards to academic performance: «I didn't have chemistry or physics... it was all very basic...» (Student 2, Focus group 1-Degree program 1). «I didn't understand anything; in school I never studied physics... It was very hard for me» (Student 7, Focus group 2-Degree program 4).

I felt bad because my fellow students were doing well, because in the municipal school in chemistry they only taught us what they had to, by memory and very basic... there was no explication of the relationships, of where things come from, of why... (Student 12, Focus group 2-Degree program 4).

The students' stories are evidence of the fact that in Chile there are schools which prepare for university, and others which do not. Furthermore, the particular trajectories which are expected—in accordance with families' socioeconomic level— correspond to particular types of secondary institutions. For students whose families are among the lowest income quintiles, the possibility of continuing to study in higher education are limited and are in large part associated with low selectivity technical studies. As such, for these students, the System of Prioritized Admission presented an unexpected opportunity to change their trajectories.

It is precisely the study of social trajectory proposed by critical social theory—which takes into account the strong relationship between social positions and the subjective dispositions of the agents which occupy them (Bourdieu, 1988)— which provide elements of analysis to understand the experiences of frustration and anxiety which the students describe with regard to the difficulties they face during the first year of university: «I think that there should be a SIPEE freshman guide, two points: prepare for frustration! [laughter]» (Student 4, Focus group 2- Degree program 2).

¹³ For the objectives of this work, it is interesting to incorporate analysis of the students' *trajectories* in a construct which allows us to take into account the position which the subjects occupy in the social structure and field of power relationships between social groups and the subjective dispositions which are produced by—and at the same time produce— this condition (Davila & Ghiardo, 2005).

I was doing very well, always among the top marks, and then when I entered the University of Chile I had only threes and fours... It was a blow to my self-esteem, it affected me a lot and many times I thought, «Look at what you were and look at what you are now!» (Student 13, Focus group 2-Degree program 4).

The gap which students experience between the challenges and codes which the university environment proposes and their «inherited cultural capital» (Bourdieu, 1988), leads them to question not only their own abilities but also the set of beliefs and values which until that point sustained their own visions of themselves and their achievements: «In a way I think that they idealized me at school, I never thought that here I was going to do so badly» (Student 8, Focus group 2-Degree program 3). «Immediately the bad grades began... and I asked myself several times, why do they let us in? For this?» (Student 3, Focus group 1-Degree program 1).

The students, pressured by these new demands begin to doubt not only their ability to face university life, but also the legitimacy of that which, with their own effort, they have achieved thus far, such as being the best student at school or having entered a highly selective university.

Although the development of new historical conditions always opens new opportunities to reorganize acquired dispositions (Gluz, 2006), the stories evidence that the experience of integration to university life for these students is destabilizing. By the way in which the issue is manifested in their stories, it is possible to discern the great psychological and emotional effort that was required for many students to convince themselves that continuing in the degree program was worth the effort.

This is relevant if we consider that the students' interpretation of their experiences and in particular the academic difficulties which they must face as part of integration to university life is an important factor which defines the results of the process (Dixon, Robinson, & Arredondo, 2006). If the student does not believe in his or her abilities or if he or she interprets his or her difficulties as the result of individual or personal inability, the experience of admission to university could lead to failure or desertion.

The first year of university: «feeling really special»when «the disadvantage is enormous»

The students affirm, without exception, that they feel «special» for having entered through an equity quota. The reasons are different and complementary. One of the first experiences which the students highlight as decisive in this sense was when they realized that the admission score was highly valued by their peers and professors: «When we entered [...] they asked us, “How many points were you admitted with?”. They couldn't believe it, we felt terrible because we didn't have any relation to the rest, the disadvantage was enormous» (Student 11, Focus group 2-Degree program 2).

But they have also felt at a disadvantage compared to their fellow students when faced with the difficulties of integrating themselves into the rhythm which university life demands: «My fellow students welcomed me, but they went at the speed of light and I ended up studying alone» (Student 13, Focus group 2-Degree program 4). «I felt really special, the adaptation process was difficult and to see that nothing was working out for me being a special quota student weighed on me. Everyone was doing well, except for me» (Student 3, Focus group 1-Degree program 1).

The treatment they received from some professors when faced with their first failing grades also constitute experiences which the students narrate frequently when finding reasons as to why they feel different: «I felt at a disadvantage for not having done the PSU... A professor said to me directly that... I didn't understand anything about anything, in school I never studied physics... it has been very hard for me» (Student 5, Focus group 2-Degree program 3). «The professors at the beginning were “the big authority” and I didn't ask when I didn't understand» (Student 9, Focus group 2-Degree program 1).

⁶ The *colonial*, *consumption*, *educational inheritance* and *modern* categories are labels that the team defined to describe student narratives of aspects that, in their opinion, provided a higher status in their degree program. Strictly speaking, they are the researchers' constructs (Barbier, Bourgeois, De Villers, & Kaddouri, 2006).

Their stories denote the conflict which these students must face in an institution which legitimizes certain forms of knowledge, values, practices and codes which constitute the dominant academic culture (Giroux, 1983), for which they were not prepared: «Yes, I felt a very important disadvantage when I entered for not having done the PSU, because I also didn't have the PSU mentality and you could tell. It's also an issue of form; one doesn't know how to respond» (Student 6, Focus group 2-Degree program 4).

Feeling «special» constitutes an issue which puts pressure on the process of integration of these students to university life, and affects both their identity and their possibilities of establishing new relationships and friendships: «I felt very lonely, I cried every night, if something was difficult for me I didn't ask for help [the tears obligate her to interrupt her story]» (Student 10, Focus group 2-Degree program 1). «It was hard for me to make friends... I'm the only one from my school who reached university» (Student 1, Focus group 1-Degree program 1).

Although reconstructing social networks of friendships and support is part of university life, for the *SIPEE freshmen* this process was made more difficult by the lack of acquaintances or previous social networks within the new educational context. The insecurities worsen further for those students from other regions who have left the family home to study at university: «A classmate from Valdivia couldn't do it any more... there is an extreme moment in which one sees everything negatively, that's what happens» (Student 4, Focus group 2-Degree program 2). «To be SIPEE and from other regions is a deadly combination! You find yourself in a hostile territory and far away from your family... I collapsed a lot of times; I felt that this wasn't my place» (Student 5, Focus group 2-Degree program 3). «Everything was strange for me because I came from the south... we came to a completely different world» (Student 3, Focus group 1-Degree program 1).

Here a new situation of unequal conditions appears between the students who arrive from other regions and their fellow students from the capital who had more opportunities to prepare themselves for university. The pre-university experience, for example, is one of those:

As it happened I took a pre-university course and I had the opportunity of visiting the school. Our professors in the fourth year of medicine are supportive. However, we had a classmate who came from the VIII region and who didn't have that... to be in the University of Chile a pre-university course was key (Student 9, Focus group 2-Degree program 1).

The stories make evident that the main bonds which these students are able to create in the first year of university are between classmates who entered by the same route, which operate both as a space for self-identification and as supportive relationships in light of the difficulties which must be faced (Williams, 2013): «We want to accompany those who come, connect with them, so that the same thing that happened to us doesn't happen to them» (Student 12, Focus group 2-Degree program 4). «I failed a course in first year and it's harder for me now that I'm not with my classmates» (Student 2, Focus group 1-Degree program 1).

Feelings of loneliness and the sensation of being at a disadvantage affect the self-concept of these students, which in some cases could have repercussions in the development of a sense of belonging at university. This is particularly relevant, given that with academic and social integration the students' possibility of continuation in university life is at stake.

Extracurricular academic support programs: a lead lifejacket?

Regarding the question of the appropriateness of tutorial and academic support programs, the responses are varied. Some students value the accompaniment of their tutor positively: «Our tutor has helped us a lot, in an emotional and academic sense, even in vacations... I don't know what I would have done without her» (Student 13, Focus group 2-Degree program 4).

However, the majority of the students have not had the possibility of getting to know their tutor due to the lack of free time which they have between classes and studies, given the heavy academic load during the first semester.

On the other hand, all of the students interviewed valued their academic tutorials positively, which consist of extracurricular workshops and study groups. It is worth noting that among the most valued aspects of these spaces is the type of bond that is created with the tutor and fellow students: «The biochemistry group worked very well, because there was only a few of us and the professor gave us the confidence to ask» (Student 4, Focus group 2-Degree program 2).

However, the stories highlight the enormous difficulties which they must overcome to be able to take advantage of these spaces. «I took the physiology workshop, it was very helpful but it was hard for me to go because I had a lot to do» (Student 8, Focus group 2-Degree program 3).

Here the busy timetable is the worse, the university was far away, I can't study on the bus, I would arrive home late to study, the tiredness kills you... and the social life as well... [laughter]. But it's important! [laughter] (Student 7, Focus group 2-Degree program 4).

Compressed curricula, rigid and strenuous timetables combined with the time that the students require to travel to their homes, are factors that combine and often make these extracurricular instances further overload their agendas, to the detriment of their learning achievements.

The type of academic and psychosocial support strategy implemented is indicative of the predominant institutional perspective from which students' inter-individual diversity is understood and approached during this first year of work. Although the strategy includes individual tutorials in the process of integration to university life, the stories evidence that the most significant experiences for the students were those extracurricular support activities oriented towards improving academic results.

The predominance of activities oriented towards leveling knowledge or reinforcing comprehension processes that the student was not able to achieve in classes corresponds more to a normative approach (which attributes performance problems to the individual deficiencies of the students) than to an inclusive approach of difference which, by definition, focuses on the analysis and transformation of the types of interaction which are generated in formal (classroom and curricular activities) and informal (recreation and social interaction spaces) educational spaces, with a view to strengthening diversity to enrich the educational experience of all those involved.

Discussion and conclusion

The objective which we set ourselves at the beginning of this study was to investigate the experience of students who were admitted via the SIPEE during the first year of integration to healthcare degree programs of the University of Chile, School of Medicine.

The System of Prioritized Admission for Educational Equity emerged as an initiative which aims to counteract the inequality which has deepened in Chilean society during the last decades. However, the results of this study suggest that if priority admission policies are not accompanied by a process oriented towards the review of teaching approaches and curriculums belonging to traditional academic culture, they could be promoting educational practices which continue to violate the rights of less favored groups and generate new types of exclusion.

The stories of the students interviewed allow us to discern the gap which exists between the traditional practices which characterize the institution—which from its origins and for generations have been responding to the characteristics of a homogenous group of students belonging to the most well-off sectors of society—and the needs and expectations of an ever increasing number of students who access university with a different cultural capital. This gap sheds light on the juxtaposition or lack of understanding between different cultural capitals, with their respective associated codes, without the existence of a space for possible negotiation or dialogue. The problem is that this lack of understanding constitutes an obstacle which prevents the successful fulfillment of the principles of equity and inclusion which inspire the policy, with profound consequences of an ethical nature. In the words of Sebastián and Scharager (2007):

The institutional framework would not be able to generate practices which assure the principal of equity, as the differences between students at the point of admission, more than a source of enrichment in the learning process which leads everyone [...] to develop higher level competencies, are determinants of the results obtained in this learning process (p. 23).

The predominance of a normative approach which comprehends difference as a deficit of the students, whose approach towards individuals does not question the traditional practices in place, far from attending to the distinct educational needs of different groups, promotes practices which end up favoring some to the detriment of others.

The analysis exposed in this work is far from providing conclusive generalizations, both due to the incipient character of the program's development at the point of conducting the investigation and the exploratory nature of the study. In this sense, the approach exposed here constitutes a point of entry which leaves space in the future for specific research.

If we begin with the premise that the distinct aspects which affect students' academic trajectories constitute fields of shared responsibility between the students and the university which receives them, in the context of the implementation of policies which promote equity and diversity in higher education, it is necessary to develop a line of research which allows us to tackle to complexity of the phenomenon to account for institutional factors which are at stake in the development of an inclusive culture.

On the other hand, the System of Prioritized Admission, one year after its implementation in the faculty, has allowed us to highlight inequalities which were not being attended to; however, other diversities are still pending, and must be investigated based on the challenges which equity and inclusion policies in higher education pose. We are referring to issues related to gender, native peoples and people with disabilities, among others, which present profound and specific problems that concern not only the students but all of the university system's actors.

The depth of these transformations—which go beyond technical aspects or people's good will—require spaces for dialogue and joint construction of all of the actors involved.

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