

Academic journeys of socially disadvantaged students in Chile's more equitable pathways to university entry

Walter Walker-Janzen

Universidad Católica Silva Henríquez, Chile

Mauricio Véliz-Campos

Universidad de Talca, Chile

Leonardo Veliz

Deakin University, Australia

More equitable pathways to university have been recently implemented in Chile. An alternative entrance pathway program was launched in 2009 at a Santiago-based university. This study aimed to describe the personal and academic journeys of the first three cohorts of students under this scheme, with a focus on the qualitative features that underpinned unexpected positive retention and program completion rates. Informed by a mixed methods methodology, using descriptive statistics and 26 interviews, 20 with graduates and six with their lecturers, the study suggests that such successful academic performance, remarkable retention and graduation rates relate to the participants' early inner drive to pursue university studies, wherein university epitomised a journey to professionalism and a way out of financial scarcity. The participants placed emphasis on the need to be assisted through a scholarship scheme and placed much value on their family support, the learning environment, and on their lecturers in particular. From the lecturers' data, it emerged that central to graduates' performance and overall academic achievement was their tenacity and determination to sustain their motivation to successfully accomplish their academic goals.

Introduction

The massification of higher education is, by and large, viewed as a positive phenomenon. However, despite the evident expansion of higher education in Latin America – Chile included – several indicators denoting a lack of equity in higher education can still be observed, particularly in the socially underprivileged young section of society. While 13 million young people of the poorest 50% of Latin America have accessed higher education in the last 15 years (Haimovich-Paz, 2017), access to higher education is still four times more inequitable than access to secondary education (ibid.).

In Chile, higher education coverage rates have reached unheard-of levels, with nearly 60% of the young aged 18-24 pursuing post-secondary courses at tertiary education level. Such coverage, which is higher than in the rest of Latin America, differs greatly from the notion of (higher) education of the élites, yet it has brought about a fragmented, socially-tiered higher education model, in terms of the relationship between the institution's profile and the students' profile. As a way of illustration, the results of the 2017 (Chilean) *National Socio-Economic Characterization Survey (CASEN)* show that more than 62% of the highest income decile, aged 18-24, attend university, while only 28% of the lowest income decile attend university (Ministry of Social Development, 2016; 2018). This scenario results partly from the fact that the Chilean higher education system is largely a private one,

comparable to the systems found in the UK and South Korea (OECD, 2013), with students' families contributing 73% of all financial resources put into the system. Added to this structural model is the fact that scores on the national university entrance examination correlate positively with household income levels (Koljatic & Silva, 2010).

Equity in higher education is a complex and multidimensional concept (Moya, 2011). However, it seems quite indisputable to argue that equity implies an opportunity to access (and successfully graduate from) higher education (McCowan, 2007), which is often implemented through an institutionalised model of compensatory mechanisms (Matear, 2006). Indeed, it took Chile more than 10 years to institutionalise equity-oriented mechanisms. After several years of scholarly and political debate, the Ministry of Education validated an equity-oriented alternative pathway for university entry as a pre-university *Foundation Course* (FC) called *propedéutico* intended for at-risk schools and socially disadvantaged students. This program implies that students who stand out in their schools are recruited by some universities to take an on-site one-year FC during Year 12. Upon successful completion, the students have the national standardised university entrance exam cut-off score waived and either take a two-year Bachelor's program or move on to pursue an ordinary university program and get credits recognised. Similarly, another equity-oriented measure meant that in 2013 a new variable was incorporated into the entrance examination composite score, the students' school exit rank. This initiative was aimed at rewarding hard-working students who strove to stand out within their local socially disadvantaged contexts, by placing a greater score weight on the school leavers' secondary school grade point average.

The theoretical and empirical principles that underpin the FC alternative university entrance pathway are threefold: (i) socially disadvantaged students can certainly be nurtured, from the perspective of contextual variability of talent, to realise their full potential, within an appropriate environment suited to their profile; (ii) academic talent is evenly ubiquitous and cuts across all socioeconomic and ethnic tiers (Scott-Carrol, 2008); and (iii) diversity is beneficial to all those partaking in the university system (Tinto, 2006).

The studies done thus far have either examined FC students' academic trajectories from a purely quantitative perspective, or FC students' socio-psychological profiles prior to and during the FC implementation. This study goes beyond the purely quantitative outcomes denoting possible success in terms of retention of FC students/graduates; it seeks to gain a better understanding of the underlying factors enabling FC students to navigate university life successfully. This study is unique in that it gets under the skin of participants of a relatively recent public policy in Chile which allowed students from three different cohorts to gain alternative access to and navigate university life. Thus, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the main features of the academic trajectories of three cohorts of socially-disadvantaged students who gained entry to university through an equity-oriented alternative mechanism?

2. What are the most salient psychosocio-cultural and educational factors perceived by students and lecturers that contributed to academic retention, achievement, and success of socially-disadvantaged students?

Literature review

Access to university and retention in students from disadvantaged backgrounds

Access to university in Chile is largely determined by students' scores on a national standardised university entrance exam called *University Selection Test* (UST), bitterly criticised for its role in a university model that perpetuates inequality, as was the case with its predecessor, the *Academic Aptitude Test* (AAT). As Moya (2011) claimed, Chile has maintained a harmful incentive policy, which involves the state providing traditional and state-run universities with financial resources relative to the institutions' ability to attract students with the highest scores on the UST. This was seriously aggravated by the fact that a positive correlation has been found between UST scores and students' family income level (Koljatic & Silva, 2010). This rather inequitable and biased university access model drove a handful of universities to implement pilot programs aiming to introduce greater equity to university access. Consequently, over the past two decades, highly and mid selective universities have incorporated alternative entrance pathways which vary slightly from university to university, yet all share a commitment to "enhancing the representation of low-income students, particularly from schools that have not traditionally sent graduates to higher education" (Santelices, Horn & Catalán, 2017, p. 1). The rationale behind the policy move from standardised-test scores to more inclusive and varied composite selection criteria promoted increased democratisation of higher education and greater diversity that has already proven beneficial in various respects relating to structural diversity, informal interactional diversity, and classroom diversity (Deo, 2012; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado & Gurin, 2002; Niu & Tienda, 2010).

Academic success, understood as smooth access to university, reasonable retention rates, and uneventful completion of degree courses for economically and culturally disadvantaged students, remains a challenge (Arieli & Hirschfeld, 2013). Retention rates in first generation university students coming from low parental income have been found to correlate with higher dropout rates (Tinto, 2006; Wolniak et al., 2012). A similar phenomenon has been observed with the Latino community in the United States, where it has been found that Latino students are less likely to complete a bachelor's degree (Astin & Oseguera, 2005).

In 1992 the University of Santiago introduced an initiative whereby students with an outstanding secondary school academic record from at-risk school environments and low-income backgrounds were given an additional score bonus, as their raw AAT scores alone did not make them eligible candidates for university places. This equity-oriented initiative was theoretically and empirically underpinned by the fact that (i) talent is evenly distributed across all socioeconomic tiers (Scott-Carrol, 2008); (ii) talent requires contextual catalysts to become evident; and (iii) talent is best evidenced in students' school trajectories (Soria-Barreto & Zúñiga-Jara, 2014). Not only has this initiative contributed to

turning the Chilean university system into a more equitable and inclusive one, but it has also shown in preliminary studies that talented students from socially disadvantaged contexts can deal successfully with the academic challenges they face, and even stand out in their academic contexts if compared with students who gain access to university through mainstream mechanisms (Soria-Barreto & Zúñiga-Jara, 2014). The scant, yet growing literature examining the academic progression of students recruited through the FC pathway has shown that these students may evidence similar trajectories to those who enrol through mainstream access mechanisms (Gil & Del Canto, 2012; Scheele & Treviño, 2012).

Increased awareness of inequitable access to university and ensuing (low) retention rates of students from disadvantaged backgrounds has resulted in prolific research, part of which has taken the form of nationwide public policies and the implementation of various initiatives in some parts of the world (Arieli & Hirschfeld, 2013; Arancibia, Hanisch & Rodríguez, 2012; Arancibia et al., 2012; Román, 2013; Soria-Barreto & Zúñiga-Jara 2014).

At an international level, equity-driven university access initiatives have attempted to incorporate under-represented groups into higher education, usually in the form of 'affirmative action' initiatives. Phinney et al. (2011), for instance, conducted a study intended to enhance college performance of Latino students in the U.S. through a mentoring program targeting psychosocial features which influence performance, namely academic and university motivation, self-efficacy, support, ability to cope with stress and depression, and sense of belonging. The results suggested that students who had been mentored sustained academic motivation, while those that had not saw their motivational levels drop. As Santelices et al. (2017) reported, a group of universities have implemented an inclusive university entrance quota system in Brazil, largely based upon racial inequality and merit. It was found, for instance, that quota students underwent a lower attrition rate compared to non-quota students (Cardoso, 2008). A similar quota system has also been recently implemented in Ecuador, where students from the lowest socioeconomic quintile have benefited from this initiative. A thorough examination of the impact this initiative has not yet been carried out.

In Chile, a handful of studies have focused on assessing the impact of the implementation of individual, equity-driven mechanisms used to access higher education. One of these studies examined the academic performance of students who gained access through equity-based mechanisms based on the students' school performance – and not on university entrance exam scores – and showed that their performance was on par with those entering university through entrance standardised test scores (*Talent and Inclusion*, 2012). Other studies, however, have shown conflicting results. For example, Castro et al. (2012) found that students from mainstream admissions evidenced higher academic performance than those from alternative, equity-driven mechanisms. Hence, the need for further research in this area is evident. Thus, this study intends to shed light on both (i) the actual academic trajectories of three FC students/graduates in terms of their retention rates and performance and (ii) the underlying psychosocial-cultural factors that contributed to academic retention, achievement, and success of such socially-disadvantaged students.

The Foundation Course (FC) program: Structure and rationale

The pre-university Foundation Course (FC) program targets high performing students, placed within the top 15% of their corresponding school cohorts, from low-income and socially disadvantaged contexts. This alternative, equity-based university access system was officially launched in 2009 at the University where this study took place. The FC scheme was later officially incorporated as an alternative university access mechanism under the *Teaching Career Law* in 2016.

Because university access is not enough, as retention in these students is often threatened by their underdeveloped literacy skills which hinders their ability to engage properly in academic activities (Abbate, 2008), the curriculum structure of the one-year FC is quite simple. It addresses the most widely-documented aspects capable of sustaining retention, namely: literacy, numeracy, and personal development, which focuses on the development of self-regulation mechanisms, vocational counselling, and communication skills (González et al., 2012).

As for the theoretical underpinnings that support this particular alternative admission scheme, the FC program is predicated on the premise that talent is often acknowledged as high grades, outstanding homework, projects, academic performance, and such like (Gagné 2015, p. 282), regardless of the context of the learner. Thus, if talent translates as outstanding performance (Gagné, 2015), talented students can be found across all socioeconomic groups as there are always students who stand out academically. However, that talent, found in students of underprivileged backgrounds, most often does not always lead to securing a place at university level via standardised university exam scores (Koljatic & Silva, 2010). Therefore, talent is understood in this work as potential capacity to stand out academically based upon a set of the learner's cognitive and affective features, among which are metacognitive development, high motivation, self-awareness, a pursuit of excellence, self-regulated, quick, and long-lasting learning, and high motivational levels (Alegria et al., 2010; Arancibia et al., 2012; Román, 2013).

Research design

The present study is positioned with the methodological tradition of mixed methods. Despite the extensive disagreement over the alleged incompatibility of quantitative and qualitative methodologies for knowledge construction, several researchers (e.g. Onwuegbuzie, Johnson & Collins-Thompson, 2009) have provided philosophical justifications for combining these two paradigms within the same study. It must be noted that within the realm of qualitative research and mixed-methods research designs, questions sometimes arise about the trustworthiness or credibility of findings gleaned from qualitative data sources. Oldfather and West (1994) pointed out several ways in which qualitative findings can be made 'believable'. One of these includes what has been widely known as 'triangulation', which is defined as "the use of more than one approach to researching a question" (Dawson 2009, p. 47). In order to ensure the richness and quality of the data gathered, and therefore of its findings, our study employed two techniques: triangulation through multiple analysts, and member checking.

In particular, this study corresponds to a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, which “implies collecting and analyzing quantitative and then qualitative data in two consecutive phases within one study” (Ivankova, Creswell & Stick, 2006, p. 3). It allows for gauging the weight afforded to the quantitative and qualitative data, wherein “quantitative data provide a general picture of the research problem” and the analysis of qualitative data allows an in-depth explanation of the overall phenomenon (Subedi, 2016, p. 572). In this study, the quantitative data include retention rates, completion rates, and exit rank for the three different cohorts examined. The data were taken from the FC databases for which ethical approval was granted by the University. The qualitative data comprise interview transcripts from FC graduates and lecturers. The descriptive statistics used in the study dealing with the academic progression of the participants inform a richer, predominantly qualitative analysis, since the latter better accounts for the emergent and complex nature of data coming from the participants’ semi-structured interviews.

Method

In order to answer the first research question dealing with the academic progression of the sample of participants, descriptive statistics are used, namely retention and program completion rates, and exit rank for the different cohorts examined. As for the second research question, which relates to the graduate participants’ and lecturers’ perceived salient psychosocio-cultural and educational factors that contribute to academic retention, achievement, and academic success, individual semi-structured interviews were set up by one of the researchers with graduates and a sample of their former lecturers. The use of interview protocols in our study is grounded in the premise that interviews are not mere methods for data collection, but an interactional instance understood as social practice, as suggested by Talmy (2010).

The graduates’ interview contained ten questions addressing the role of the FC in their academic journeys, the major difficulties encountered along their academic experience, and the devices used to overcome the hurdles found. The lecturer interview comprised seven basal open-ended questions dealing with the lecturers’ views on the students’ academic performances, perceived students’ socio-cognitive and affective salient features, and the perceived graduates’ degree of preparedness to face the job market successfully. Both interview structures, designed and conducted in Spanish, made room for during-interview spontaneity and provided the interviewee with the necessary freedom to elaborate on their responses in greater depth. The interview data were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

The Foundation Course (FC)

As pointed out earlier, the FC is an equity-driven alternative mechanism for university entry intended for at-risk schools and socially disadvantaged students. Eligible candidates must comply with the following criteria: (i) Candidates’ school must evidence a high social vulnerability index of 70% or over as measured by the National Socio-Economic Characterization Survey; (ii) candidates’ score on the national entrance university examination must be lower than 475 points, where 500 is often the cut-off point for

university application; and (iii) candidates' GPA, upon completion of secondary school, must be ranked within the top 10 percent considering the first three years (out of four) of secondary school. Table 1 below summarises the participants' demographics.

Table 1: FC participants' demographics of three cohorts under study

| | N of FC participants | N transferred to Uni programs | Males | Females | Mean age | Mean social vulnerability index |
|----------------|----------------------|-------------------------------|-------|---------|----------|---------------------------------|
| 2009 FC cohort | 14 | 10 | 6 | 8 | 18 | 73% |
| 2010 FC cohort | 61 | 61 | 25 | 36 | 18.5 | 79% |
| 2011 FC cohort | 38 | 38 | 13 | 25 | 18 | 77% |

Recognising students' outstanding scholastic performance despite scoring low on standardised tests draws heavily on the theoretical (and empirically proven) principles posited by Gagné (2015), according to which talent most often takes the form of high grades, outstanding homework, projects, academic performance, or such like, in all possible settings, particularly in disadvantaged contexts where the students' personal and relational attributes defy social determinism. Similarly, the scheme is also premised on the principle that talent is evenly ubiquitous and cuts across all socioeconomic and ethnic tiers (Scott-Carrol, 2008).

Students who comply with the above requirements are invited by the University to take part in an on-site, one-semester long program comprising 72 contact hours on Saturdays, from 8.30 to 13.00. The courses that make up the FC are Literacy, Numeracy, and Personal Development. Personal Development is offered by psychologists and counsellors who help the students navigate university life. Biology is offered as an optional course for those wishing to pursue health-related academic programs. The FC teaching staff is made up of highly qualified lecturers; also, previous experience working at socially vulnerable schools is highly valued. Finally, the FC offers the students a support structure in the form of psychologists, counsellors, and fellow students as mentors, who closely monitor students' progress and personal development.

The participants

The non-probabilistic convenience sample of graduates was made up of 28 participants, all of whom had already successfully completed the different university programs they had pursued and completed by January of 2017, which corresponds to the temporal cut-off point for this study. All 28 graduates gained entry to the university through the equity-oriented FC mechanism. They all came from highly vulnerable and disadvantaged contexts as measured by the Ministry of Education and the National Socio-Economic Characterization Survey. Twenty of these graduates, five males and 15 females, agreed to be interviewed. 17 graduates were from the 2010 FC cohort, while three were from the 2011 cohort. No one from the 2009 FC cohort, the year the equity initiative was launched, was able to participate in the interview sessions. As far as the FC lecturers are concerned, six of them agreed to be interviewed. All six lecturers had taught at least some of the FC

graduates who partook in the present study and hold postgraduate degrees in their corresponding areas of expertise.

University ethics approval was granted in writing by the Research Ethics Committee. Similarly, ethical clearance in the form of written informed consent was sought from the participants. In the case of the FC graduates, it was obtained prior to commencing the study, while in the case of the lecturers, it was obtained prior to the interview.

Data analysis

Quantitative data are used to provide the backdrop against which the participants' academic trajectories are described. The data used comprise raw figures for the number of students who (i) completed the FC program successfully; (ii) transferred to ordinary university programs upon FC completion; and (iii) successfully completed university programs. The rates of retention and program completion for the three cohorts are also provided, which are presented in light of the national average rates in order to gain a better understanding of the relevance and significance of the data presented.

Interview data were elicited in the participants' first language (L1), Spanish, and were transcribed and thematically coded utilising a dynamic, iterative process in order to establish the initial emerging salient features in the responses. The data were then further analysed to identify thematically emergent categories and subcategories. Once key emerging themes had been identified in the data, they were translated into English to be used and reported in the present study. In an attempt to eliminate any possible bias and ensure agreement on the translation of the source data, three different bilingual (English-Spanish) academics engaged in a meticulous process of cross-checking the accuracy of representative samples of interview data.

In order to protect respondents' confidentiality and, at the same time, give their voices a sense of ownership and personification, pseudonyms were used. Graduates from the two different cohorts (2010 and 2011) are identified as CO10 (cohort 2010) and CO11 (cohort 2011). Lecturers are identified as L (lecturer) followed by a number (1, 2, 3, etc.).

Findings and discussion

This section reports on the quantitative and qualitative results obtained from the data sets. In order to provide a general overview and account of the academic profile and trajectory of the participants, such as retention and program completion rates, we first present Table 2 with the most significant statistics for the three cohorts of FC participants, followed by a discussion of the quantitative data available to January 2017, the cut-off point for this study.

It must be borne in mind that course completion rates for the 2011 cohort cannot be fully displayed in Table 2 as there were other FC graduates who were still in their final stage of their course of studies by January 2017, which corresponds to the temporal end boundary for the study. Given this context, where course completion rates fall outside the temporal

scope of this investigation, attention should be turned to retention rates to Year 4 instead, as they better illustrate successful academic trajectories founded on FC completion.

Table 2: Academic progression of FC participants

| | N completed FC | N transferred to Uni programs | Retention rate, Uni year 4 | National mean retention rates, Year 4 |
|----------------|----------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 2009 FC cohort | 14 | 10 | 40% | 38% |
| 2010 FC cohort | 61 | 61 | 66.5% | 42% |
| 2011 FC cohort | 38 | 38 | 79% | 39% |

As can be observed, FC cohorts 2010 and 2011 show retention rates revised to Year 4 which are considerably higher - in relative terms - than national mean retention rates revised to Year 1. According to the Chilean Higher Education Information System (HEIS), retention rates revised to Year 1 in 2013 ranged between 67.5% - 70.8%, depending on whether the students come from state-run schools, which corresponds to the former mean retention rate, or subsidised schools, which corresponds to the latter. The mean retention rate for 2014 was of 72.2% and 77.2% for 2015. The national mean retention rates revised to Year 4, as reported by HEIS and Basso (2016), are on average of 40%. Put differently, the 2010 and 2011 FC cohorts evidence considerably better retention rates than national mean scores.

On a similar note, not only do the 28 FC graduates exhibit a remarkably high retention rate revised to Year 4, but also, they show particularly high class exit ranks. Six of the FC students ranked first in their graduating classes, which ranged from small cohorts of five to 107 graduating students; two FC graduates ranked second; two third; and two fifth. Put differently, 42.9% of the sample under study ranked within the top five places in their corresponding graduating classes (see Figure 1), a result that corroborates previous research which suggested that talented students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds and low cultural capital can attain successful trajectories if provided with the right institutional academic and personal-development scaffolding (Gil & Del Canto, 2012; Phinney, et al., 2011; Scheele & Treviño, 2012).

Analysis and discussion of qualitative data

It should be borne in mind that the analysis corresponds to the examination of the factors enabling FC graduates from socially disadvantaged backgrounds who qualify as talented (Gagné 2015; Scott-Carrol, 2008) to gain access to university and sustain successful university navigation, as they were part of the top ten per cent in their corresponding disadvantaged school contexts (Gagné, 2015).

Three broad categories emerged in the data analysis process. These were subsequently developed into themes, which are used to address the second research question. The emergent categories/themes tap into the students' early imagined academic future, the

affordances of family and educational environment, including the ways in which lecturers contributed to students' personal and professional growth

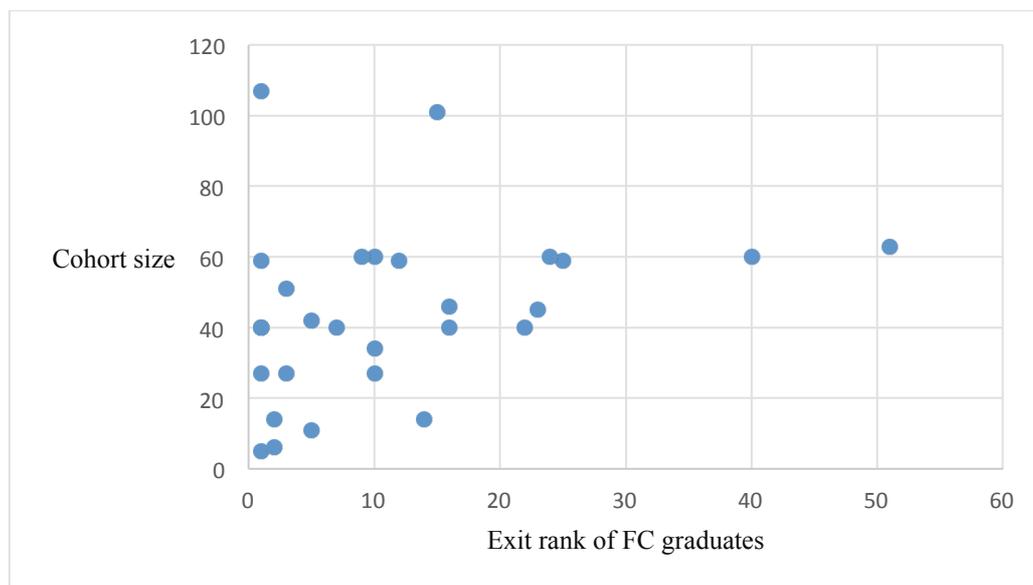


Figure 1: FC graduates' exit rank

Students' early imagined academic future

When asked whether the idea of entering university was ever visualised, most graduates indicated that such an idea had not been thought over, primarily due to scarce financial resources. The following two students commented:

When I was in year 12 I never thought about going to university. I had planned to finish school and start work soon afterward because I was doing like a vocational course. (CO10).

I had some ideas but it wasn't something I had considered because of financial issues at the time, and also because it was very unlikely for students in my school to go to university. (CO11).

Students' socio-economic hardships are often understood as complicated paths or deterrents to university entry. In most cases, these financial constraints lead to pessimism about future academic opportunities, which sometimes result in individuals losing hope in governments' equity agendas (Zhang, Chan & Boyle, 2014). The students hinted that going to university was hindered by their financial limitations and that they felt pressurised to enter the workforce, probably in an attempt to provide financial assistance to their families. This became apparent in other responses, which made explicit references to the socio-economic limitations, and particularly to the necessity to help meet the needs of scarcity.

I never imagined going to university; in fact, I'm an assistant accountant and was hoping to find employment to help my family as there was no university culture in my home. (CO11).

The unimaginable idea of attending university is clearly not the result of unwillingness to pursue further studies, but a reflection of how socio-economic factors along with the graduate's sense of responsibility for family welfare seems to affect future decisions, and obscure prospective plans for university entry. The absence of what the graduate calls 'university culture' in his family - or 'institutional habitus', following Thomas (2002) - probably had a significant impact on his elusive ideas about higher education.

A similar view was expressed by another graduate:

Well, no, I come from a highly socio-economic disadvantaged family; my dad works in construction, and my mum in fruit picking, so university was not in my mind. (CO11).

The graduate's personal and family economic limitations to accessing higher education illustrate that despite the commitments made by countries to provide education for all, there continues to exist pervasive ideas deeply ingrained in people's minds that educational opportunities are not always readily available to all (Matsuura, 2006). Nevertheless, despite these barriers, the majority of graduates did envisage opportunities which broadened their imagined academic trajectories. Some of these, as expressed in the following responses, were rooted in self-assurance and self-awareness of inherent academic abilities and talent, as suggested by Alegría et al. (2010) and Román (2013). The following quotes attest the findings in this respect:

I wanted to continue studying because I always excelled in my high school studies. (CO11).

Although there were a lot of negative factors in my case, like I had a brother and it was only my dad who had a job... Still, I thought I could succeed at university as I was always within the best three students in my class. (CO10).

As has been argued by Howie, Scherman and Venter (2008), students' abilities and academic potential can be hampered by their socioeconomic backgrounds. However, the identification and further development of academic talent in socially and culturally disadvantaged contexts is fundamental to the provision of a smooth transition to university access, and to the minimisation of attrition rates. The graduates' observations above hint that a more equitable and fairer access to education rests primarily on individuals' human and cultural capital, irrespective of issues of affordability of higher education.

Academic talent, however, was not the only attribute which enabled graduates to visualise concrete possibilities for university. In their responses, graduates observed that there was always "an inner force", a strong motivational impetus that pushed them to not just seek opportunities for further studies but, once sought, ensure they were not wasted (Román 2013). This is what one graduate reflected on:

When in high school I had this inner force that moved my ideas and thinking about university. Although I had difficulties, I was convinced that if you're motivated you can achieve anything in life (CO10).

Román (2013) pointed out that talented students are generally characterised by a greater sense of motivation and a strong desire to pursue excellence. The graduate's response evidences not only the motive and inspiration to accomplish goals in life, but also, and most importantly, a tacit, albeit increasing, willingness to continue education. This, along with their talent, was probably one of graduates' main initial driving forces that contributed to paving their way to university, and to potentially successful retention and completion rates irrespective of their financially constrained backgrounds. Indeed, the lecturers concurred on the fact these students most likely view university entry and successful course completion as an opportunity they cannot possibly pass up, and value such experience accordingly, even in the face of adversity. As a result, they try harder, develop a stronger sense of achievement, and higher levels of cognitive and emotional maturity. As L1 remarked:

Their dedication and perseverance are to be commended. They start working towards clearly established goals from Year 1; they feel they cannot afford to waste this university experience opportunity ... and behave more maturely than their fellow students. (L1)

This view is aligned with the findings made by Arancibia (2009) in terms of the socio-affective development that talented students across the socioeconomic spectrum develop. Lecturer 5 adds, in this respect, that FC students are more critical with themselves and their academic performance, which corroborates Román's (2013) notion of pursuit of excellence by talented students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

The above features are also foregrounded by L2 who reported that the FC student he had taught "stood out academically despite the fact that she came from a socially deprived context and the various health issues she underwent". Interestingly, some of these students were concerned with both academic duties and contributing to their (broken) families' income. L3 reported that his FC student "came from a low socioeconomic background and worked with her dad in his small business, yet she was focused on successfully completing her degree course", which might explain the development of a stronger sense of responsibility and leadership, features that L3 also highlighted.

Affordances of family and educational environment

During the interview, the graduates recalled when and how they were offered a place at the FC at UCSH. Although the FC opportunities came in a timely fashion to fulfil the expectations of those who had dreamed about university and to challenge those who had never thought about it, these naturally generated a great deal of uncertainty about this new undertaking. Throughout the graduates' university/academic trajectories several psychosocial factors contributed to a smooth transition toward successful stages at university.

A fundamental support network which provided a greater impetus for graduates to enter and continue university, and therefore not to desert studies, was their families, as observed in the following remark:

My family gave me a lot of support; everyone was delighted. My friends couldn't really believe that I was going to university, even our neighbours were very supportive. (CO10).

Several authors (e.g. Zhang, Chan & Boyle, 2014) have pointed out that access to education for disadvantaged groups can be severely restricted by such factors as place of residence, parents' educational levels, the student's circle of friends, or lack of family interest in higher education. As seen in the above quotes, graduates' narratives evidence not only their families' great sense of pride but also reveal potential hopes, expectations and aspirations of the wider community for those who, despite their socio-economic conditions, prove capable of pursuing further studies. The appropriation of family support is fundamental as it maximises individuals' levels of trust, perseverance and motivation to learn (Zajda, Majhanovich & Rust, 2006). Despite some of the pressing concerns about the lack of economic resources to pay university fees, graduates generally referred to their family, and the support they provided, as having a personal investment in their university success, which is explained in the reflection below, where parents regarded university as a way to a better future and better life:

... my parents always told me that university would take me far and allow me to have a life different from the one they had, so they were a very important pillar (CO10).

The significance of family support was echoed by several other graduates who recognised its value and contribution to academic success:

It was great, though I didn't know how I would pay; I was the first in my family to go to university so this was seen as a great personal achievement, and my parents motivated me a lot, which was very important until I finished my studies. (CO11).

The motivation and aspiration from the family circle to participate in higher education were significantly important for successful completion of university. This certainly ratifies what was found in Phinney et al.'s (2011) study: those students who had received different forms of support (through a mentoring program, for example) showed greater levels of academic and university motivation. This, as in the case of the above graduate, facilitated university entry and academic success, which culminated in completion of university studies.

There were several reported elements pertaining to the educational environment of graduates which helped them navigate their way through the FC. Given the preparatory nature of FCs, graduates described being challenged but very well prepared through the range of subjects in the FC. Thus, there was overt recognition that the FC provided a solid, albeit challenging, platform for future academic studies. For example, one of them said that:

I had very poor teaching in my school, and when I came to the FC I realised that I had a lot of gaps in my knowledge, so all the subjects, although mathematics was a bit challenging, were very useful in helping me catch up with new content. (CO11).

As reported above, the graduate came to the realisation that he had not acquired the necessary skills and knowledge valued by academic institutions through his school experiences, thus needing to embrace new horizons for the acquisition of what Bourdieu (1991) called ‘cultural capital’. Access to education, as argued by O’Shea et al. (2018), is by no means only about possessing financial resources but, most importantly, about the possession of social and cultural capital, or what in Tevington’s (2018) work translated into ‘nonfinancial assets such as knowledge’. Primarily drawing on work by Lareau (2015) and Bourdieu (1991), Tevington (2018) defined cultural capital as “the knowledge and skills that are prized by institutions” (p. 205). This, however, does not necessarily refer to knowledge of subject matter, but to skills and abilities that enable individuals to navigate their own paths or routes to learning, as indicated by the following graduate: “... the foundation course was an opportunity to get closer to the academic world, and to develop different work and study habits and skills.” (CO10). Coupled with the disciplinary knowledge and development of academic study skills, graduates felt that the FC was a stepping stone to radical changes from a ‘fixed mindset to a growth mindset: “... I think it changed my perspective because I only thought about finishing school and get a job, but now I was looking forward to a new adventure...” (CO10).

Along with the space for the acquisition of academic skills and knowledge, the FC also played a fundamental role in building graduates’ resilience, which would therefore contribute to future academic success:

Because I thought that going to university would be very expensive, and for the people with economic means, I didn’t really have many expectations about accessing university, but when I was invited to the FC, and while I was studying, I realised that university is for anyone, so I felt a bit more valued and that I could contribute to society with my knowledge (CO10).

The graduates’ changed perceptions of university education, what it is and who it is for, were most likely the result of the potential ‘transformative’, rather than reproductive, effect of higher education on individuals. The graduate came to see themselves, including the knowledge and the values they possessed, as more valued, and surely more inclusive, members of society. The graduates’ transformed attitudes to their limited life opportunities were also fostered by the assistance provided by academic, professional and administrative staff from the University. Thomas (2002) pointed out that “relationships between students and staff seem to be fundamental to attitudes towards learning and coping with academic difficulties” (p. 432). One of the graduates expressed great appreciation for the invaluable, professional and practical assistance provided by administrative staff:

The School Secretary and the coordinators of the program went above and beyond what we needed. They gave us all the basic information, helped us in the transition process, and a lot of other things. It was a new world for us so this was so important. (CO11).

This is quite an interesting reflection as it demonstrates graduates' great sense of recognition of the guidance and assistance they received from their immediate university environment, singling out fundamental factors which contributed to their process of academic adaptation and, most importantly, to their academic performance and potential maximisation of retention rates. This is, to a large extent, in line with Thomas' (2002) notion of 'institutional habitus', which alludes to a set of dispositions, experiences and understandings of reality that are framed by individuals' affiliations with a particular institution. Furthermore, it is a reflection of the significance of social networks and institutional support as determinant factors for students' adaptation and success in higher education (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges & Hayek, 2007).

Central to graduates' performance and overall academic achievement, as reported by their lecturers, was their tenacity and determination to sustain their motivation and drive to accomplish their academic goals successfully. One of them indicated quite convincingly that "it was different things, but a fundamental characteristic was their perseverance and dedication, and their clear orientation towards the goals they wanted to achieve." (L2). A different lecturer valued similar attributes which, in his view, were "important personal factors that influenced their academic behaviour" (L1). The lecturer goes on to say that:

Students in the FC were always outstanding; in most cases it was their intellectual and emotional capacities, as well as impressive levels of maturity at all levels, personal, emotional, psychological, etc. (L3).

This comment evidences a truly remarkable case of individuals, who despite their adverse circumstances, showed great capabilities to use personal, emotional and psychological resources to cope with and succeed in new challenges. Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor and Schellinger (2011) pointed out that negative factors such as socio-economic status and dysfunctional family structures can impact severely on an individual's overall ability to operate within a situation and with other people. In the above responses, it can be observed that such personal variables, which may not have been readily available or fully developed by the time they started the FC, enabled them to maintain appropriate levels of discipline, motivation and new coping strategies for a new, albeit challenging, academic environment.

To sum up, it seems fair to say that while graduates' participation in higher education could have been hampered, or at least delayed, by the scarcity of socio-economic resources, avenues for equitable access to education were provided to them through university equity measures in the form of a FC, along with several personal and socio-economic assistance schemes. Success at university, as reported by the graduates and their lecturers, was driven and achieved by a plethora of family and psychosocial factors which contributed to transformational paths to learning and achievements.

One of the limitations that needs to be acknowledged in this study deals with the fact that data relating to retention rates take a relatively long time to obtain, for which reason examining three cohorts alone may well not be sufficient evidence to arrive at more robust findings. Future research should benefit from the use of complementary data gathering

instruments, namely ongoing data collection processes either through diary writing or a series of interviews throughout the FC students' academic journeys, spanning the FC and ordinary university programs, thus better capturing the circumstances that facilitate or hinder their personal navigation in university life.

Conclusions

The present study has sought to analyse and understand the personal and academic trajectories of a group of participants from socially disadvantaged backgrounds who completed their university courses successfully, thanks to an equitable university access mechanism. Analysis of the quantitative data revealed outstanding features of the academic trajectories of participants of all three cohorts. What becomes most salient in their academic progression is, first and foremost, the successful completion and retention rates at the FC. This is particularly relevant as it has been well documented that socio-economic hardships put individuals in an underprivileged position (Banerjee, 2016). As observed in the reported data, however, participants who transferred to university degree programs after successful completion of the FC evidenced very satisfying retention rates of over 60% for the last two cohorts, which is particularly remarkable when compared, for example, to the alarming attrition rates in some developed countries like Australia which reach figures close to 30% (Cheng, Cheung & Ng, 2016). The academic achievements attained by the participants demarcates some boundaries which clearly distinguish those populations which, as a result of their underprivileged socio-economic position in society, have been marginalised, and those privileged groups for whom education has always been routinely assumed.

Central to graduates' academic success is an array of intra and interpersonal factors which enabled them to overcome all kinds of adversities, and facilitated their seamless transition from high school to FCs, thus providing a solid platform for academic success. In this respect, Zajda, Majhanovich and Rust (2006) argued that "contextual indicators, learning trajectories, family support and career paths continue to be determining parameters for educational attainment." (p. 36). Although these facilitating factors are not always readily available to individuals, as is the case of family support, they exist in the public rhetoric of politicians who argue that "education is a basic right and human necessity of which no one can be deprived regardless of their family background, socio-economic status, age or race" (Tevington, 2018, p. 206).

The remarkable academic achievement of participants in this study suggests that higher education institutions along with the Chilean government must continue to ensure that marginalised populations have equality of opportunity in all forms of education. Indeed, this requires that social justice interventions are systematically enacted so that societies do not become dysfunctional, and therefore not deemed weak democracies in failing to provide (adult) education to nurture social capital (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011).

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Dr Walter Walker-Janzen, Foundation Studies, Universidad Católica Silva Henríquez, Santiago, Chile, is Professor in Mathematics and Statistics, and has worked in education for over 20 years. His publications are within the areas of mathematics, higher education and international relations. His current research projects focus on education in vulnerable contexts.

Email: walker@ucsh.cl

Dr Mauricio Véliz-Campos earned his doctoral degree in TESOL and Education at Exeter University. He is a Senior Lecturer at Universidad de Talca, Chile. His research interests include the study of the various variables affecting English pronunciation learning at teacher education level, namely language aptitude, language learning strategies, and language motivation.

Email: mauricio.veliz@utalca.cl

Dr Leonardo Veliz earned his PhD at Deakin University where he currently lectures in undergraduate and postgraduate programs. His research interests include teacher cognition, language teacher education, and metaphor and multimodality.

Email: leonardo.v@deakin.edu.au

Web: <https://www.deakin.edu.au/about-deakin/people/leonardo-veliz>

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