

# Do universities contribute to reducing inequalities in the progression to postgraduate studies?

Oscar Espinoza<sup>1</sup>  | Luis Sandoval<sup>2</sup>  | Catalina Miranda<sup>3</sup>  |  
Bruno Corradi<sup>1</sup>  | Javier Loyola<sup>3</sup>  | Noel McGinn<sup>4</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Facultad de Educación y Humanidades, Universidad de Tarapacá, Arica, Chile

<sup>2</sup>Universidad Tecnológica Metropolitana, Santiago, Chile

<sup>3</sup>Departamento de Sociología, Universidad de Chile, Santiago, Chile

<sup>4</sup>Harvard Graduate School of Education, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA

## Correspondence

Oscar Espinoza, Facultad de Educación y Humanidades, Universidad de Tarapacá, 18 de Septiembre 2222, Arica, Chile.  
Email: [oespinoza@academia.cl](mailto:oespinoza@academia.cl)

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## Abstract

Given the increasing devaluation of tertiary-level qualifications, some university graduates have sought to enhance their employability by pursuing postgraduate studies. However, access to such opportunities remains influenced by their socioeconomic background. This study uses Bourdieu's concept of habitus to examine the role of the Chilean university system in access to postgraduate studies. By conceptualising graduates' social background as individual habitus and university cultures as institutional habitus, it explores whether universities reflect or mitigate existing social inequalities. Data were collected through a survey conducted in 2023 with 934 graduates of 17 Chilean universities (cohorts 2015, 2016 and 2017). A structural equation model was estimated to evaluate direct and indirect effects, while also including additional controls such as gender and field of study. The results reveal that both the individual and the institutional habitus directly influence students' access to tertiary and postgraduate education. Perceived institutional motivation was also moderately associated with postgraduate enrolment. It is concluded that the segmentation of the Chilean university system partially contributes to reproducing social origin inequalities from the tertiary to the postgraduate level, conferring cumulative advantages on graduates from privileged social backgrounds. It is acknowledged that expanding

enrolment opportunities at universities with greater academic distinction could foster more equitable academic and professional outcomes.

**KEYWORDS**

higher education, postgraduate education, segmentation, social inequalities

**Key insights****What is the main issue that the paper addresses**

This paper examines the role of the university system in access to postgraduate studies for Chilean graduates. It explores whether universities reflect or mitigate social inequalities through their institutional culture (institutional habitus).

**What are the main insights that the paper provides?**

The study shows that both individual and institutional habitus influence access to postgraduate education. University segmentation partially reflects social inequalities, favouring privileged graduates. This highlights the need for equity-oriented institutional policies.

**INTRODUCTION**

Over the past few decades, the expansion and massification of higher education systems worldwide have significantly impacted labour markets. As universities have broadened access to a more diverse student population, their traditional role has evolved. Once primarily focused on cultivating intellectual and civic elites, they are now increasingly oriented towards preparing graduates for employability and competitiveness in the labour market (Alam et al., 2020; Newman, 2008). However, alongside this redefinition of the university's role, there has been a decline in the value of university credentials, as the growth in the supply of graduates has outpaced the demand for highly skilled workers (Collins, 2002). For instance, in East Asian countries (Mok, 2016) and Europe (Green & Henseke, 2021), there have been reports of rising unemployment rates, a contraction in wages and a higher prevalence of education–work mismatches among new graduates.

In response, many graduates are now pursuing additional qualifications to improve their employment prospects following graduation (Jonbekova, 2020; Jung, 2020). Recent studies have shown that individuals with a fourth-level credential are more likely to secure employment (Rozhkova et al., 2021) and receive higher wages compared to those who hold only an undergraduate degree (Britton et al., 2020). However, in contrast to the international agenda promoting equitable and lifelong access to education (United Nations, 2015), opportunities for pursuing postgraduate education remain largely conditioned by the socioeconomic background of graduates (Posselt & Grodsky, 2017). Graduates who were the first in their families to pursue higher education (First-Generation, FG) and those from low-income families face

greater constraints in accessing postgraduate qualifications, particularly those offered by elite institutions (Brighouse, 2025; Jung & Lee, 2019; Mateos-González & Wakeling, 2022).

What role do universities play in the reproduction of socioeconomic inequalities in access to postgraduate education? Some research has revealed that universities, through their institutional habitus, can exert a sociocultural influence on the habitus of their graduates, restructuring their horizons of possibilities (Lee, 2021) and providing them with institutional and social resources they can mobilise following graduation (Haltia et al., 2023). This may explain why some graduates, who initially did not consider pursuing postgraduate studies, develop this aspiration and acquire the necessary skills and capitals to enter these programmes. However, other studies have revealed that socioeconomic segmentation at the undergraduate level contributes to the reproduction of existing inequalities in access to postgraduate education (In & Breen, 2023; Mateos-González & Wakeling, 2022). Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to gain admission to prestigious and selective universities than their peers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. It is these institutions that are most likely to encourage their students to pursue further studies (Jung & Lee, 2019). Consequently, there is a path dependency between the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, where social inequalities are reproduced from one level to the other.

Chile has experienced similar trends. In recent decades, the country has undergone a process of expansion and massification of tertiary education, primarily driven by neoliberal reforms implemented during the military dictatorship (1973–1990) that were further deepened by democratic governments (Espinoza, Corradi, et al., 2023). Between 2010 and 2025, for instance, there has been a 35.8% increase in university enrolment and a threefold increase in the number of undergraduate programmes offered (SIES, 2024, 2025). Neoliberal reforms set up in the 1980s not only expanded access but also redefined the mission of universities, placing them within market logics that emphasise competitiveness, institutional differentiation and employability (Salazar & Leihy, 2017). In this context, the university system has become highly stratified. At the institutional level, only a small number of universities hold a privileged position regarding research activity and academic prestige (Muñoz & Blanco, 2013; Quaresma & Villalobos, 2022). These institutions are also the most selective and are primarily located in the country's largest cities. In terms of student demographics, the system clearly reflects an elite-mass division, where the most socioeconomically and academically privileged students are concentrated in the highest status universities (Espinoza et al., 2025; Kuzmanic et al., 2023; Villalobos et al., 2020).

In parallel with these transformations at the undergraduate level, postgraduate education in Chile has been gradually expanding as well. Over the past 15 years (2010–2025), enrolment in postgraduate programmes, including master's and doctoral degrees, has risen from 33,000 to over 54,000 students (SIES, 2025). Similarly, the number of students in Certificate Programmes, which are shorter courses that do not lead to an academic degree, has grown significantly, increasing from 14,000 to over 70,000 students during the same period. The total number of programmes has also expanded considerably, primarily driven by Certificate Programmes (397% growth) and followed by doctorates (135% growth) and master's degrees (119% growth) (SIES, 2025). However, the postgraduate level also displays some signs of institutional stratification. As of 2025, three universities—two elite and one mass institution, all of them located in the country's largest cities—account for over 40% of all postgraduate enrolments and offer about 30% of all available programmes (SIES, 2025). This trend may be related to the deregulation that characterises postgraduate education in Chile, which also influences admission processes. Admission to postgraduate studies is mainly decentralised and selective, with criteria varying across institutions and programmes. These criteria generally include academic performance, entrance exams, interviews and reference letters. Tuition fees vary significantly depending on the institution and field of study, ranging

from tuition-free options in some Certificate Programmes to over 20,900 USD per year for specific master's programmes (SIES, 2025). Public funding for postgraduate students is limited. While some scholarships are offered through national agencies (ANID, 2025), most students need to cover tuition costs privately.

This expansion raises important questions not only about who can access these programmes but also about the factors driving demand for them. One likely explanation is the saturation of the Chilean graduate labour market, which has resulted in an escalating prevalence of labour mismatches (Didier, 2022; Sevilla & Farías, 2019) and a decline in graduates' working conditions (Espinoza, González, Miranda, et al., 2024). In this context, postgraduate education offers a strategy for differentiation and upward mobility (Espinoza, González, Sandoval, et al., 2024). However, little is known about the extent to which access to these programmes is socially stratified. Most studies have focused on aspects of their professional careers, including their salaries (Schurch, 2013) and their job satisfaction (Espinoza, González, Miranda, et al., 2024). Regarding postgraduate education, research has primarily concentrated on assessing the quality of programme provision, with a particular focus on selected case studies (Careaga et al., 2017; Gaete, 2021). However, the reproduction of social inequalities in access to postgraduate education, as well as the role that universities play in this process, remains underexplored.

This study aims to analyse how social background and institutional characteristics interact to shape access to postgraduate education, and whether universities reflect or mitigate existing social inequalities. The findings of this study seek to contribute to the existing knowledge on the socioeconomic segmentation of the Chilean university system (Espinoza, Corradi, et al., 2023; Kuzmanic et al., 2023), specifically by investigating whether access to fourth-level studies reproduces the inequalities observed at lower levels of education.

## **THE INFLUENCE OF HABITUS ON THE PURSUIT OF POSTGRADUATE STUDIES**

The massification of higher education systems worldwide has long been regarded as a pivotal mechanism for reducing inequality gaps in society (Marginson, 2016). Unfortunately, both international (Friedman & Laurison, 2020; Reay, 2004) and national studies (Espinoza, González, et al., 2023; Palma-Amestoy, 2022) have shown that enrolment growth has been accompanied by increased socioeconomic stratification. Students from more privileged backgrounds tend to pursue studies at more prestigious institutions, while those from disadvantaged sectors have predominantly accessed less selective and lower quality programmes (Luo et al., 2018).

The concept of habitus is a useful tool for analysing this situation. It helps for understanding how students conceive certain futures as either 'possible' or 'impossible' (Palma-Amestoy, 2022; Reay, 2017). Habitus can be understood as a set of attitudes, perceptions and dispositions that individuals internalise from the social and cultural environment in which they are socialised. In this sense, family socialisation plays a central role. As the first space in which dispositions are formed, families pass on to their children, to varying degrees, interpretative frameworks regarding what is possible, legitimate and desirable in relation to their future (Lahire, 2019). These internal structures shape their future practices and actions (Bourdieu, 1980). In the higher education context, for instance, upper-class students tend to be more familiar with the established norms and procedures of the educational system and thus can navigate it with relative ease (Reay, 2004). In contrast, students from less privileged backgrounds tend to experience higher education as a foreign environment. These students frequently exclude themselves from accessing spaces that they perceive as culturally and socially unfamiliar (Espinoza, González, et al., 2023).

The influence of habitus extends beyond the undergraduate level (Lai, 2024; Lee, 2021) as the pursuit of postgraduate studies is influenced by graduates' socioeconomic background. Similar to secondary school graduates who, due to familial or educational socialisation, either do not aspire to pursue tertiary education or only aim for less selective institutions (Palma-Amestoy, 2022), many university graduates reject further education. In part, this is because postgraduate studies require a considerable investment of financial resources and are primarily self-financed by their students (Jung, 2020). Moreover, admission to these programmes frequently requires the fulfilment of specific criteria associated with the possession of social and cultural capital (Woo et al., 2023). Many graduates may not understand labour market dynamics and the advantages of a postgraduate credential on their employability prospects (Bathmaker, 2021). Therefore, graduates with lower levels of social and cultural capital are less likely to access postgraduate studies (Mateos-González & Wakeling, 2022).

Universities can be considered as an additional space of socialisation, oriented towards preparing graduates to respond effectively to future demands. Some authors (Byrd, 2019; Reay, 1998) posit that universities may also possess an institutional habitus, which is rooted in the institution's position within the social and institutional hierarchy and is collectively shaped by students and the academic community. This habitus is reflected in the organisational culture of the institution, which is evident in the everyday practices and discourses of staff regarding 'who we are' and 'how things are done'. Through these, universities instil in their students specific modes of conduct that align with dominant models and norms (Cornbleth, 2010). This results in a negotiation process for students, who reflect internally on their circumstances, motivations and future goals based on how compatible this institutional culture is with their own individual dispositions.

This is illustrated in research conducted in China (Lai, 2024), the United States (Hanson et al., 2016) and the United Kingdom (Lee, 2021). Research showed that universities play a key role in translating labour market requirements into graduates' specific preferences and attitudes towards postgraduate education. Both university academics (Hanson et al., 2016) and informal connections formed in the university environment (Lee, 2021) have been demonstrated to significantly influence graduates' aspirations to pursue further studies. In China, it has been found that less prestigious universities often encourage their graduates to pursue a fourth-level degree at a more renowned institution, whether domestically or internationally (Lai, 2024). Although these interactions at university enable graduates to envision new possibilities after graduation, their actual impact on the utilisation of available resources cannot be defined uniformly. In the United Kingdom, the discrepancy between the institutional habitus of elite universities and the habitus of non-white and working-class students results in the latter failing to utilise the social and cultural capital that studying at these universities could provide (Lee, 2021).

A substantial body of research has revealed that graduates from more privileged social contexts tend to benefit more from the resources provided by the higher education system. This is due to two main factors: first, they pursue their third-level studies at universities that are better positioned in the higher education field (Mateos-González & Wakeling, 2022; Posselt & Grodsky, 2017), and second, their social background makes it easier for them to mobilise these resources and convert them into capital (De Schepper et al., 2024). Conversely, other research indicates that graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to pursue further studies after graduation, largely due to their awareness of discrimination in the labour market (Carroll & Li, 2022). Graduates from fields such as the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences share a similar motivation. In South Korea (Jung & Lee, 2019) and the United States (English & Umbach, 2016), graduates from these fields tend to face greater challenges in securing employment that aligns with their expectations and training. In such contexts, postgraduate qualifications can help improve their job prospects in the labour market.

## CONCEPTUAL MODEL

This research presents a conceptual framework to illustrate the relationships between the social background of graduates, the university they attend and its organisational culture, and access to postgraduate programmes. This representation is derived from the theoretical and empirical arguments presented in the previous section on the pursuit of fourth-level studies, which conceptualises it as a complex and multifactorial process (see [Figure 1](#)).

The model employs a three-factor approach to analysing the pursuit of postgraduate studies. First, in line with the social reproduction perspective in educational contexts (Reay, 1998, 2004), the concepts of individual and institutional habitus are integrated as latent constructs. The first concept refers to the schema of dispositions formed on the basis of graduates' social origins, which is expected to influence their future decisions regarding the pursuit of fourth-level studies.

The second one is the institutional habitus of the universities. It is anticipated that diverse institutional cultures will encourage their graduates, to varying degrees, to pursue postgraduate education following the completion of their undergraduate studies. Additionally, each university culture is associated with a specific level of motivation to pursue further studies. Consequently, it is reasonable to hypothesise that the institutional habitus of each university exerts a direct effect on the pursuit of studies, as well as an indirect effect, each mediated by the level of motivation it provides to its graduates.

The third factor to be considered is the graduates' working conditions. According to the theory of credentialism (Collins, 2002; Tomlinson & Watermeyer, 2022), some argue that the expansion of higher education systems has led to the devaluation of tertiary qualifications. In turn, this has resulted in two forms of differentiation among graduates: one based on the reputation of their undergraduate institutions, and another based on the distinction between undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications. Given the oversupply of professionals in the labour market, it has been observed that employers have begun to base their selection processes on the prestige associated with qualifications (Tomlinson & Watermeyer, 2022). In Chile (Espinoza, Corradi, et al., 2023; Kuzmanic et al., 2023) and in other countries (Croxford & Raffe, 2015; Luo et al., 2018), the opportunity to obtain a qualification from a renowned university is largely contingent upon the social background of graduates. This would determine a direct effect of institutional habitus on graduates' working conditions, as well as a mediating effect, which reflects an indirect effect of social origin on working conditions.

Graduates seek to differentiate themselves in the labour market by pursuing postgraduate credentials (Jonbekova, 2020; Jung, 2020). Given that those who obtain undergraduate credentials from prestigious institutions and degrees already have an advantage in

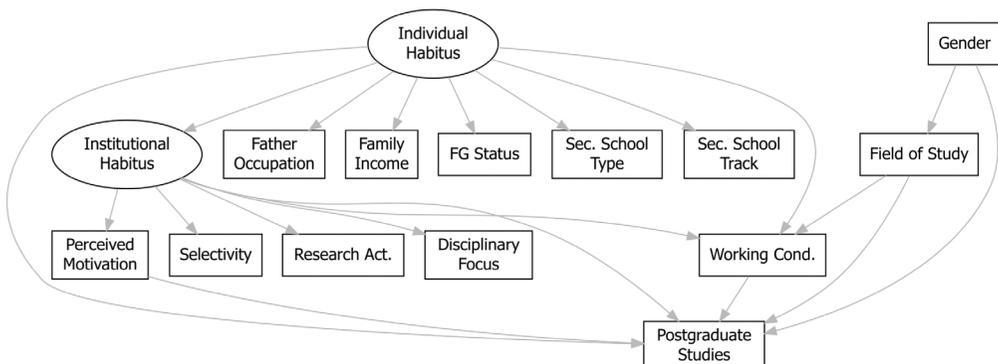


FIGURE 1 Conceptual model. Source: Authors' elaboration.

recruitment and job placement processes, a prestigious degree would be particularly important for graduates from lower ranked institutions within the higher education field (Wright & Wei, 2022). Those who graduate with less profitable degrees or those with poorer job prospects (Espinoza, González, Sandoval, et al., 2024; Jung & Lee, 2019) would be in a similarly unfavourable position. A reasonable hypothesis is that graduates' gender exerts a direct influence on their field of study, which in turn has a direct influence on their working conditions. Graduates from programmes with high female enrolments generally receive lower salaries (Barone & Assirelli, 2020; Schurch, 2013).

In addition to the effect mediated by the university, working conditions would also be influenced by a direct effect of social origin, associated with the social and cultural capital that shapes their habitus (Witteveen & Attewell, 2020). Ultimately, the working conditions of graduates exert a direct and indirect influence on their decision to continue their studies.

## METHODS

The data employed in this study were obtained through a two-stage sampling process. First, intentional sampling (Cohen et al., 2017) was used to select 17 Chilean universities that are part of the *Sistema de Acceso a la Admisión Universitaria* (SAAU), the national body that includes all universities in the country with selective admission processes. Three criteria were used in the selection of institutions: (i) geographical location (north, centre and south); (ii) administrative dependence (public, traditional private and new private) and (iii) level of selectivity (low, medium and high) (see Appendix A for a comparison between the sampled universities and the total population of institutions within the SAAU). Institutions that declined the invitation to participate in the study were replaced by others with similar characteristics. These universities provided information regarding the academic trajectory (years of entry and graduation, degree, secondary school GPA, entrance test scores and graduation marks); educational background (type and track of secondary school attended); and socioeconomic background (family income, first-generation status) of all their graduates from the 2015, 2016 and 2017 graduation cohorts. To ensure the confidentiality of the graduates, universities assigned each respondent a unique identification number. The requirement of email addresses was made with the assurance that the research team would use this information solely for the study and that confidentiality would be maintained. Second, a random sample was selected from this population of graduates ( $N=56,168$ , with a margin of error of 3% and a confidence interval of 95%). This sample was drawn within each university by selecting a sample size and distributing it proportionally among the institutions according to their size.

The graduates responded to an online survey, which was distributed via email between May and November 2023. The survey was validated through pre-testing, cognitive interviews and expert judgement. Questions included socioeconomic status prior to entering university, as well as their professional and academic development after graduation. To maintain a representative sample, those who did not respond to the survey were replaced on a weekly basis by randomly selecting new graduates into the sample (see Appendix B for the number of graduates selected to participate in the survey and the proportion of non-respondents). This process was repeated for 29 consecutive weeks until the requisite number of observations for each university had been obtained. The study sample comprised 1057 graduates, distributed proportionately across all participating institutions. Due to the presence of missing values, the analyses were conducted on a final sample comprising 934 graduates.

Table 1 illustrates the representativeness of the sample employed in the analysis in comparison to the graduate population across the 17 universities. Overall, there are no notable discrepancies between the two data sets, with differences below 5%.

**TABLE 1** Descriptive statistics for the sample and the graduate population.

	Sample (%)	Graduate population (%)	Difference (%) <sup>a</sup>
Gender			
Male	40.7	42.5	1.8
Female	59.3	57.3	2.0
University administrative dependence			
Public	45.1	46.3	1.2
Traditional private	21.1	22.2	1.1
New private	33.8	31.5	2.3
Field of study			
STEM	18.2	19.7	1.5
Admin. & Business	8.1	9.9	1.8
Health	22.9	24.5	1.6
Educ. & Humanities	18.8	19.8	1.0
Social Sciences	15.2	12.2	3.0
Agriculture	5.9	4.2	1.7
Art & Architecture	5.0	5.4	0.4
Law	5.8	4.4	1.4
	<b>Mean</b>		
University GPA	5.5	5.5	
<i>N</i>	934	56,168	

<sup>a</sup>The differences are in absolute values.

Source: Authors' elaboration.

## Measures

### Individual habitus

Individual habitus was operationalised in terms of different indicators to represent the economic, social and cultural capitals that the graduates had prior to their undergraduate studies (Bourdieu, 1997). On the one hand, their family income is employed as a measure of their economic capital. Categories for this variable were established based on the national income distribution in 2010, the year when most graduates entered university. According to the 2010 Supplementary Income Survey (INE, 2010), the average monthly household income in Chile was approximately 1402 USD, while the 10th decile exceeded 1800 USD. Using these benchmarks, four broad income groups were defined, reflecting significant thresholds within the Chilean context: (i) low (<880 USD), which roughly includes the bottom three deciles; (ii) middle (880USD–1408 USD), around the national average; (iii) high (1408 USD–2347 USD), which falls between one and two times the average monthly household income; and (iv) very high (>2347 USD), representing the upper segment of the income distribution. Social capital can be defined as the access to social groups and networks associated with a specific social position, which individuals can utilise to obtain a range of benefits (Lin et al., 2001). Given low levels of employment of mothers, father's occupation was used as the most appropriate proxy to encompass the social position of families and a reliable indicator of the social circles to which they have access.

Individual habitus is shaped by both family and school socialisation (Palma-Amestoy, 2022; Reay, 1998). For that reason, the operationalisation of cultural capital included three proxies associated with both the family and the school environment that surrounded the graduate prior to entering university: the parents' level of education, indicating whether the graduate is the first in their family to attend higher education (first-generation [FG] status); the type of secondary education school; and the track pursued at that level (see Table 2).

## Institutional habitus

The institutional habitus of universities can be defined as their institutional culture (Cornbleth, 2010). The habitus is shaped by the university's internal composition and the position it assumes within the field of higher education. In contemporary systems, characterised by expansion and competition, this position also reflects broader transformations in the mission of universities, which have progressively shifted from cultivating intellectual elites to prioritising employability, research productivity and institutional prestige (Alam et al., 2020; Newman, 2008). Accordingly, the institutional habitus is conceptualised as a latent variable, which can be measured through two principal indicators. First, in mass university systems such as that of Chile, a greater intensity of academic activity enables elite institutions to maintain their prestige and sociocultural background despite the increased social heterogeneity of their student body (Quaresma & Villalobos, 2022). The level of research activity is often used in rankings of national and international universities (Boliver, 2015). Research activity was assessed as a continuous variable determined by the number of Web of Science-indexed publications per full-time academic staff member in 2016 (ranging from 0 to 1.48, with a mean of 0.49) (CNED, 2024). This method accounts for the size of the institution and provides an accurate estimation of research intensity across universities.

University selectivity in admissions, the second indicator, plays an equally important role. Selectivity acts as a proxy for both the quality of the institution (Dale & Krueger, 2002) and the academic and socioeconomic profile of its students (Rosinger et al., 2021). This variable was operationalised using the average score on the national admission test of students admitted in 2016. The selectivity of the universities was then classified into three levels: low (<550 pts); medium (550–600 pts); high (>600 pts). These thresholds were determined empirically based on the distribution of institutional averages within the university subsystem, which represents a positively selected segment of the overall national test score distribution. For context, the mean PSU score (Reading and Mathematics) in 2016 was approximately 475 points, with a standard deviation of approximately 110 points (DEMRE, 2016). Since most university entrants scored above the median, even the low selectivity group includes institutions that admit students well above the population average. Therefore, this categorisation meaningfully differentiates academic selectivity within the stratified landscape of Chilean universities. This information, as well as that used to measure research activity, is available to the general public on the website of the National Education Council (CNED, 2024).

Moreover, the disciplinary focus of universities is also relevant for understanding their institutional habitus, as certain fields of study possess greater academic and social prestige than others (Villalobos et al., 2020). Overall, the universities in the sample can be categorised into four main enrolment profiles: multi-disciplinary, STEM-oriented, Health-oriented and Education-oriented. Consequently, the concept of institutional habitus is conceived as a multidimensional continuum that reflects both academic distinction and the institutional orientation within the field of higher education. Higher levels of this variable are correlated with greater distinction in terms of academic performance and social prestige, while the disciplinary focus contributes to the differences in how institutional cultures are structured across universities.

**TABLE 2** Descriptive statistics of the variables included in the study.

Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
Postgraduate studies	No postgraduate degree	679 (72.7)
	At least one postgraduate degree	255 (27.3)
Individual habitus		
Father's occupation	Neither technical nor professional	558 (59.7)
	Technical	157 (16.8)
	University professional	182 (19.5)
	Senior executive or managerial	37 (4)
Family income	Low (<880 USD)	231 (24.7)
	Middle (880 USD–1408 USD)	227 (24.3)
	High (1408 USD–2347 USD)	232 (24.8)
	Very high (>2347 USD)	244 (26.1)
FG Status	Not FG	536 (57.4)
	FG	398 (42.6)
Sec. school type	Private	148 (15.8)
	Subsidised	485 (51.9)
	Public	301 (32.2)
Sec. school track	Academic	793 (84.9)
	Vocational	141 (15.1)
Institutional habitus		
Selectivity	Low	369 (39.5)
	Medium	232 (24.8)
	High	333 (35.7)
Research activity	Low	401 (42.9)
	Medium	270 (28.9)
	High	263 (28.2)
Perceived motivation	Strongly disagree	72 (7.7)
	Disagree	143 (15.3)
	Neither disagree nor agree	265 (28.4)
	Agree	284 (30.4)
	Strongly agree	170 (18.2)
Working conditions	Poor	188 (20.1)
	Intermediate	513 (54.9)
	Excellent	233 (24.9)
Gender	Male	380 (40.7)
	Female	554 (59.3)
Field of study	STEM	170 (18.2)
	Admin. & Business	76 (8.1)
	Health	214 (22.9)
	Educ. & Humanities	176 (18.8)
	Social Sciences	142 (15.2)
	Agriculture	55 (5.9)
	Art & Architecture	47 (5)
	Law	54 (5.8)

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Given the diversity of institutional orientations and cultures within the higher education field, it is to be expected that the degree of encouragement provided by each institution for their graduates to pursue postgraduate education will vary. From the perspective of the graduates themselves, this motivation provided by the universities is captured by the variable 'Perceived Motivation'. This variable is defined as the extent of agreement with the statement, 'While at university, we were motivated to pursue postgraduate studies'. It is measured on a five-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating strong disagreement and 5 indicating strong agreement.

## Working conditions

To represent the working conditions of the graduates, different profiles were constructed using Latent Class Analysis (LCA) (Lazarsfeld & Henry, 1968) (see Appendix C). Three variables were employed to reflect the level of precariousness of the jobs to which graduates have access after graduation (ILO, 2012): (a) *salary* (1 = <880 USD<sup>i</sup>; 2 = 880USD–1408 USD; 3 = 1408 USD–2347 USD; 4 = >2347 USD), with thresholds defined based on the national income distribution reported in the Supplementary Income Survey (INE, 2010); (b) *working hours* (1 = part-time; 2 = full-time); (c) *type of contract* (1 = fee or no contract; 2 = fixed-term; 3 = permanent). In Chile, fee-based contracts represent the most precarious type of contract. Since employees enter into a temporary service agreement with their employers, they cannot access fundamental labour rights, including holidays and severance pay.

The model with three classes was identified as the optimal fit to the data based on statistical fit criteria, including Akaike (AIC) and Bayesian (BIC), as well as the interpretability of the results. Therefore, the data revealed three distinct categories: (1) a class with poor working conditions, which is paid less and has less stability in terms of contracts and working hours; (2) a class that works full time but does not benefit from contractual stability and has low pay, representing intermediate working conditions; (3) a class with excellent working conditions, which is paid well, works full time and has a high level of contractual stability (see Table 2).

## Analysis

Structural equation models (SEM) were estimated to test the relationships proposed in the conceptual model (Danner et al., 2015). This technique estimates multiple relationships simultaneously, considering both observed variables and latent constructs. Moreover, by including mediating variables—such as institutional characteristics and perceived motivation—SEM allows for the estimation of both indirect and direct effects, offering a more comprehensive analysis than traditional regression models (Baron & Kenny, 1986). The main dependent variable in this study is 'postgraduate studies', which is a dichotomous variable with two levels: 0 (no postgraduate degree) and 1 (at least one postgraduate degree). In addition to the main measures, the variables 'gender' (0 = male; 1 = female) and 'field of study' (1 = STEM; 2 = Business & Management; 3 = Health; 4 = Education & Humanities; 5 = Social Sciences; 6 = Agriculture; 7 = Art & Architecture; 8 = Law) were included. For SEM, the Weighted Least Squares Mean and Variance adjusted (WLSMV) estimation method was selected, as it adjusts the means and variances of the data in the event of a transgression of the assumption of normality and takes into account the categorical or ordinal nature of the variables (Li, 2016).

Additionally, to assess the robustness of the results to intra-university correlations, the model was re-estimated using the MLR estimator with cluster-robust standard errors. This adjustment considers the possibility that graduates from the same university may share

unobserved characteristics that could lead to correlated residuals among individuals. After applying the cluster correction, the direction and significance of the main structural relationships remained consistent. However, some differences appeared in the measurement part of the model, particularly concerning the loadings and variances of the latent constructs. These differences indicate that some elements of the measurement structure are influenced by shared institutional characteristics among respondents, highlighting the importance of interpreting institutional coefficients with caution.

All analyses were performed using the Rstudio statistical software. For SEM estimation, the `sem` function of the `lavaan` package (Rosseel, 2012) was employed.

## RESULTS

Figure 2 presents the result obtained following SEM analysis. Only those coefficients ( $\beta$ ) shown to be statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) are reported (see Appendix C for remaining coefficients). First, the results of the measurement models are presented, which elucidate the relationships between each item and its associated latent construct. In the case of both individual and institutional habitus, two variables (father's occupation and selectivity, respectively) were selected as fixed parameters. This procedure involves setting the variance of an observed variable to 1, which simultaneously allows the identification of unique solutions in the model and the interpretation of the coefficients of the other observed variables (Graves & Merkle, 2021).

Concerning father's occupation, all the observed variables were found to be statistically significant in their contribution to a privileged individual habitus. The item associated with family cultural capital (FG Status) has the strongest association with social capital ( $\beta = -0.96$ ). In other words, not being an FG degree holder is strongly associated with a more privileged individual habitus. Additionally, a coefficient of 0.82 suggests a strong relationship between family income and individual habitus, with a higher level of income associated with the formation of a more advantaged habitus. In contrast, the type of school where graduates completed their secondary education has a smaller association with the formation of the individual habitus (with an absolute value of  $\beta$  slightly higher than 0.6). Nevertheless, with a coefficient of  $-0.64$ , it is the school type that is most closely associated with this habitus; graduating from a private school is indicative of a more privileged habitus. Regarding institutional habitus, both the absence of a specific disciplinary focus ( $\beta = -0.87$ ) and a greater research activity ( $\beta = 0.51$ ) contribute to a habitus characterised by greater prestige and academic distinction (see Figure 2).

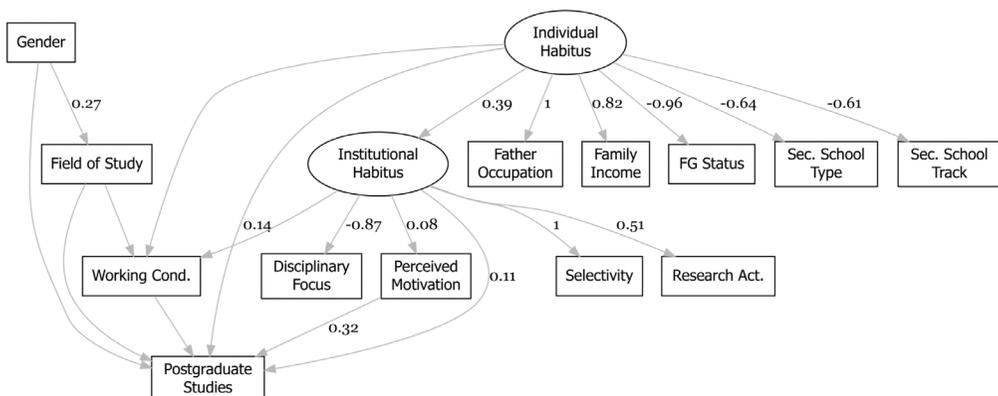


FIGURE 2 Model estimation. Source: Authors' elaboration.

Most of the proposed structural relationships within the model were found to be statistically significant. Individual habitus is positively associated with the institutional habitus of universities ( $\beta=0.39$ ), indicating that graduates from privileged socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to gain admission to the most highly ranked universities. Similarly, both graduates' individual habitus and the institutional habitus of the universities they attended show a positive association with the pursuit of postgraduate studies, although their effect sizes are relatively modest ( $\beta=0.14$  and  $\beta=0.11$ , respectively). The relationship between institutional habitus and graduates' perceived motivation to pursue further studies was found to be significant, albeit with a very weak association, indicated by a coefficient of 0.08. This implies that the universities' habitus does not exert a substantial influence on graduates' perception of the contribution of their educational institutions. However, there was a moderate association ( $\beta=0.32$ ) between perceived motivation and the pursuit of postgraduate education (Figure 2).

Regarding the third factor in the conceptual model—working conditions—no significant association was found between social origin and working conditions, nor between the university attended during the undergraduate level and these conditions. The gender of the graduates is strongly associated with the field of study pursued during their undergraduate degree ( $\beta=0.27$ ).

## DISCUSSION

In Chile, as in other countries around the world, university education has been perceived to reduce social inequalities and to facilitate upward social mobility (OECD, 2018). In recent decades, this idea gained credibility when the expansion in access to tertiary education increased the presence of historically excluded social groups (Marginson, 2016). Now, however, in a context of devaluation of university qualifications in the labour market, it is graduates from the most highly regarded and distinguished universities who are most likely to secure the best jobs (Friedman & Laurison, 2020; Zimmerman, 2019). The expansion of enrolments in fourth-level credential programmes has maintained social inequalities (Jonbekova, 2020).

This study indicates that the socioeconomic and institutional segmentation of the Chilean university system contributes to limiting the enrolment in fourth-level studies of graduates from disadvantaged social backgrounds. The expansion of tertiary systems has been accompanied by socioeconomic segmentation at the institutional level. This situation has been noted in recent national (Espinoza, Corradi, et al., 2023; Espinoza, González, et al., 2023) and international research (Croxford & Raffe, 2015; Luo et al., 2018; Mok, 2016). Graduates with a more privileged individual habitus, the outcome of socialisation in families and schools with greater economic, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1980, 1997), are more likely to pursue their tertiary studies at selective universities that have high levels of research activity. Conversely, graduates whose individual habitus is characterised by a lower accumulation of capital are more likely to attend universities with a lower academic reputation.

Social origin also affects access to postgraduate programmes. In line with research conducted in England (Mateos-González & Wakeling, 2022) and South Korea (Jung & Lee, 2019), this research has shown that graduates' individual habitus has a modest but significant association with their access to fourth-level studies. This occurs regardless of the universities where they studied for their undergraduate degree.

One explanation for this phenomenon is that, for Chilean graduates with lower levels of social capital, university graduation is often perceived as being the most prestigious and socially valuable level of higher education (Palma-Amestoy, 2022). University degrees are not seen as 'incomplete' credentials (Jonbekova, 2020). Some graduates may not consider

postgraduate studies as a possibility within their horizon of post-graduation options, probably because they did not internalise this aspiration from their family and educational socialisation (Espinoza, González, Sandoval, et al., 2024). Together with their lack of knowledge of the intricacies of the labour market (De Schepper et al., 2024), these factors would contribute to graduates with lower levels of social capital being less aware of their disadvantages and the resources available to address them.

A second factor, however, is the segmentation of Chilean universities according to their academic distinction. Institutions with a stronger reputation are more likely to attract the attention of graduates with higher aspirations. This results in a path dependency between socioeconomic segmentation at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, similar to that observed in the British system (In & Breen, 2023; Mateos-González & Wakeling, 2022). In other words, graduates with greater economic, social and cultural capital tend to gain access to the most prestigious universities. While institutional segmentation does not appear to strongly reinforce inequalities by itself, it also does not counteract them. Therefore, graduates from more privileged backgrounds benefit the most from the influence of universities' habitus, while the habitus of universities only partially contributes to the reproduction of social inequalities in postgraduate access.

The study also illuminates other socioeconomic inequalities that appear following graduation. In general, graduates whose first employment offers poor working conditions are more likely to enrol in postgraduate programmes. But female graduates who receive the lowest salaries (Francesconi & Parey, 2018) and are hired with unstable employment contracts (Bastianelli & Vignoli, 2022) are least likely to pursue postgraduate programmes. This may indicate that gender is linked to an additional layer of postgraduate inequalities. Female graduates from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds face higher obstacles than do men to obtain higher-value academic qualifications and, consequently, to secure more advantageous employment opportunities in the labour market.

## Limitations of the study

The study has some limitations. The university sample was purposively designed to ensure diversity across key dimensions (such as geographical location, administrative dependence and selectivity), rather than to achieve statistical representativeness. Appendix A compares the 17 universities included in the study with the total of 45 institutions that participated in the Chilean University Admission System in 2016. While some differences are noted, particularly in geographical distribution and administrative dependence, these differences reflect the intended diversity of the sample and do not undermine the analytical scope of the study. However, these differences are acknowledged in this section for completeness and transparency. At the individual level, Appendix C compares respondents with non-respondents (i.e., graduates who were invited to participate but did not complete the survey). It shows that graduates from private low-selectivity universities are overrepresented among non-respondents. This pattern may limit the external validity of the findings for that subgroup. Therefore, the external validity of the findings to the broader population of Chilean graduates should be interpreted with caution.

When discussing the selected indicators of institutional habitus, it is crucial to acknowledge that these may reflect existing traits within the student population, potentially mixing institutional effects with selection effects. Furthermore, these indicators might not fully capture the complexity of socio-cultural dynamics within universities and their impact on students and graduates. Although more difficult to quantify, elements such as networking instances, internships and mentoring programmes play a key crucial role in shaping aspirations (Bathmaker, 2021; De Schepper et al., 2024). Future studies could incorporate

these dimensions to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the institutional effect on aspirations. Additionally, as graduates were nested within 17 universities, there may be some remaining dependence related to the institutions they attended. Although the analyses addressed this potential clustering and confirmed the consistency of the main relationships, some aspects of the measurement structure may still show similarities among respondents from the same university. Consequently, caution should be exercised when interpreting the institutional-level coefficients. Lastly, while SEM is a powerful analytic tool, it does not establish causality. Therefore, conclusions drawn from these analyses should be seen as suggestive rather than definitive.

## CONCLUSION

After decades of expansion and massification of higher education systems, attention is now focused on the outcomes of graduates following their graduation. The progressive devaluation of tertiary-level qualifications in the labour market is no longer a guarantee of access to the level of working conditions new professionals had expected. In response, some graduates have sought more qualifications through further graduate study. Achievement of the higher qualifications has not been distributed equally among graduates. Those from socially and culturally advantaged backgrounds have had greater access to such programmes.

The present study analysed the role played by Chilean universities in shaping access to postgraduate studies among their graduates. Particularly, it examined how social background and institutional characteristics interact to influence access to postgraduate education, and whether universities reflect or mitigate social inequalities. Findings indicate that, in Chile, pre-existing social inequalities are manifested from the outset of tertiary education and continue to influence access to further studies. Graduates from privileged social backgrounds tend to benefit from a cumulative advantage in accessing universities of higher academic distinction. They are more likely to have attended universities that promote access to the postgraduate level. The segmentation of the university system, evidenced by the differentiation of universities according to the socioeconomic composition of their student body, academic prestige and social value, partially contributes to the reproduction of social inequalities in the trajectories of graduates.

Two significant conclusions regarding the Chilean higher education system emerge from these results. First, access to the most academically distinguished universities is not limited exclusively to students with greater capital. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who have shown a high level of academic achievement also are admitted. Some high-performing students can benefit significantly from the resources and opportunities offered by these institutions and can partially overcome the structural barriers associated with their social origin. Therefore, expanding access to elite universities for students from less advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds could emerge as a key initiative to reduce educational disparities and improve long-term outcomes. Addressing these disparities is not just about enhancing individual success, but also essential for ensuring the long-term sustainability and fairness of the higher education systems.

Second, the negative effects of the path dependency that leads to segmentation in high prestige institutions could be ameliorated by changes in the academic practices of universities with a lower academic standing. These currently position themselves as a viable option for students from middle and low socioeconomic backgrounds who aspire to university and fourth level education. Considering the disadvantages faced by graduates in the labour market, it is crucial that these universities enhance their ability to place their graduates in occupations with high demand and prospects for social mobility. This would not only help create more opportunities for graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds but also strengthen the

universities' institutional position and sustainability in an increasingly competitive system. Further research could explore more deeply the factors that influence access to postgraduate studies. This could include the interplay between graduates' socioeconomic background and gender, the employability of graduates from different fields of study and the postgraduate credentials that are most demanded in the labour market. It would be beneficial to inquire whether all graduate qualifications are of equal value in the labour market and to identify the additional obstacles graduates encounter in attaining higher value qualifications.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data available on request owing to privacy/ethical restrictions.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

The research project that originated this article was approved and endorsed by the Ethics Committee of the Universidad de Tarapacá on 12 January 2024.

University graduates gave their consent before answering the survey.

## ORCID

Oscar Espinoza  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7525-2980>

Luis Sandoval  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9452-4945>

Catalina Miranda  <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-4461-4384>

Bruno Corradi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4217-0900>

Javier Loyola  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8336-6873>

Noel McGinn  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7132-2136>

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup>The amounts were converted to US dollars based on the average exchange rate prevailing during the survey application period (May to November 2023).

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**APPENDIX A**

## Comparison of university sample and national universities

	University sample	SAAU universities	Difference (%)
Geographical location <sup>a</sup>			
North	17.6	17.8	0.2
Centre	47.1	62.2	15.1
South	47.1	37.8	9.3
Administrative dependence			
Public	47.1	35.6	11.5
Traditional private	23.5	20.0	3.5
New private	23.5	44.4	20.9
Selectivity			
Low	58.8	60.0	1.2
Medium	17.6	22.2	4.6
High	17.6	17.8	0.2
Disciplinary focus			
Multi-disciplinary	29.4	29.5	0.1
STEM	35.3	27.3	8.0
Health	17.6	20.5	2.9
Education	17.6	22.7	5.1
<b>Mean</b>			
WoS publications per full-time academic staff	0.49	0.62	0.13
<i>N</i>	17	45	

<sup>a</sup>Percentages do not total 100 because some universities have a national presence or operate campuses in multiple regions.

Source: Authors' elaboration.

**APPENDIX B**

## Descriptive statistics for sample frame, respondents and non-respondents

Variable	Sample frame	Selected graduates	Responded the survey	Did not respond the survey
Gender				
Female	57.4	57.3	58.7	57.2
Male	42.6	42.7	41.3	42.8
Year of graduation				
2015	32.6	32.4	32.5	32.4
2016	33.0	33.8	32.8	33.9
2017	34.4	33.8	34.7	33.7
Field of study				
Admin. & Business	9.9	9.6	7.9	9.8
Agriculture	4.2	3.8	5.6	3.6

Variable	Sample frame	Selected graduates	Responded the survey	Did not respond the survey
Art & Architecture	5.5	5.3	5.1	5.3
Social Sciences	1.8	1.3	3.0	1.2
Basic Sciences	12.2	10.9	14.8	10.6
Law	4.4	3.3	5.6	3.1
Education	18.4	20.0	17.7	20.2
Humanities	1.4	1.5	1.7	1.5
Health	24.5	30.9	23.3	31.6
Technology	17.8	13.3	15.3	13.1
Type of univ.				
Private low selectivity	23.6	44.8	26.4	46.4
Traditional low selectivity	40.4	30.3	40.0	29.4
Private high selectivity	7.9	6.7	8.0	6.6
Traditional high selectivity	14.8	7.3	13.4	6.8
Elite	13.3	10.9	12.1	10.8
	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Mean</b>
University GPA	5.50	5.49	5.55	5.49
<i>N</i>	56,168	13,270	1057	12,213

Source: Authors' elaboration.

## APPENDIX C

### LCA fit statistics

	2 classes	3 classes	4 classes
<i>N</i>	934	934	934
%	73.5	57.2	48.6
	26.5	21.6	23.3
		21.2	14.5
			13.6
Parameters	13	20	27
LL	-2639	-2734	-2705
LLRT (DF)	-	95 (7)*	29 (7)*
AIC	5217	5462	5464
BIC	5280	5558	5595
Entropy	0.46	0.74	0.68
ALCPP	0.87	0.88	0.80

Abbreviations: ALCPP, average latent class posterior probability; DF, degrees of freedom; LL, log-likelihood; LLRT, log-likelihood ratio test.

\* $p < 0.001$ .

Source: Authors' elaboration.

## APPENDIX D

### SEM estimates

Latent variable	Coefficient	Standard error			
<b>Individual habitus</b>					
Father's occupation	1.0	-			
Family income	0.82***	0.03			
FG status	-0.96***	0.04			
Secondary school type	-0.64***	0.04			
Secondary school track	-0.61***	0.05			
<b>Institutional habitus</b>					
Selectivity	1.0				
Research activity	0.52***	0.02			
Disciplinary focus	-0.87***	0.03			
<b>Path (direct effects)</b>					
Institutional habitus ← Individual habitus	0.39***	0.04			
Working conditions ← Individual habitus	-0.07	0.05			
Postgraduate studies ← Institutional habitus	0.11*	0.05			
Postgraduate studies ← Working conditions	-0.05	0.04			
Working conditions ← Institutional habitus	0.02	0.05			
Postgraduate studies ← Individual habitus	0.15**	0.05			
Working conditions ← Field of study	-0.07	0.04			
Postgraduate studies ← Field of study	-0.01	0.04			
Perceived motivation ← Institutional habitus	0.08*	0.04			
Postgraduate studies ← Perceived motivation	0.32***	0.04			
Field of study ← Gender	0.27***	0.07			
Postgraduate studies ← Gender	-0.14	0.08			
<b>Indirect effects</b>					
Individual habitus → Institutional habitus → Postgraduate studies	0.04*	0.02			
Individual habitus → Working conditions → Postgraduate studies	0.00	0.00			
Individual habitus → Institutional habitus → Working conditions → Postgraduate studies	-0.00	0.00			
Field of study → Working conditions → Postgraduate studies	0.00	0.00			
Individual habitus → Institutional habitus → Perceived motivation → Postgraduate studies	0.01	0.01			
Institutional habitus → Perceived motivation → Postgraduate studies	0.03*	0.01			
Gender → Field of study → Postgraduate studies	-0.00	0.01			
<b>Goodness of fit indices for the estimated conceptual model</b>					
<b>N</b>	<b><math>\chi^2/df</math></b>	<b>CFI</b>	<b>TLI</b>	<b>RMSEA</b>	<b>SRMR</b>
934	2.29	0.98	0.98	0.04	0.04

\* $p < 0.05$ .

\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

Source: Authors' elaboration.