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The reproduction of social inequality among university graduates in Chile

Oscar Espinoza[a], Bruno Corradi[b], Luis Sandoval[c], Catalina Miranda[d] and Noel McGinn[e]

[a]Facultad de Educación y Humanidades, Universidad de Tarapacá, Arica, Chile; [b]Programa Interdisciplinario de Investigaciones en Educación, Santiago, Chile; [c]Universidad Tecnológica Metropolitana, Santiago, Chile; [d]Departamento de Sociología, Universidad de Chile, Santiago, Chile; [e]Harvard Graduate School of Education, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA

ABSTRACT

This study analyses how social origin influences university graduates' salaries in Chile, both directly and indirectly through the type of university attended. Linear regression and Blinder-Oaxaca decomposition were used to analyse survey data from 931 recent graduates of 17 universities. The findings reveal a substantial pay gap based on graduates' social origin. Between one-fifth and one-third of this gap is mediated by institutional stratification, as graduates from privileged families are more likely to access prestigious universities associated with higher salaries. However, large disparities persist even among graduates who attended the same institutions. On average, graduates from very high-income households earn nearly US$11,500 more per year than those from low- and middle-income families. Our findings suggest that higher education contributes to the indirect transmission of privilege linked to social origin. However, they also indicate that the role of the higher education system in this process is not universal but shaped by contextual factors.

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Social reproduction; university graduates; university stratification; class ceiling; pay gap

Introduction

Since the second half of the twentieth century, different countries in Europe, America, Asia, and Oceania have expanded higher education with the expectation that this would lead to greater social cohesion. It was assumed that the expansion of their systems of higher education would result in more just and egalitarian societies (Becker 1964; Becker and Tomes 1986; Blau and Duncan 1967). However, persistent gaps in the employment outcomes of university graduates have remained linked to their social class background. Even in countries where access to higher education has become nearly universal, there is strong evidence that class-based inequalities continue to shape graduates' salaries (Witteveen and Attewell 2020).

This outcome can be partly explained by the internal differentiation of higher education systems. As enrollment expanded, universities and programmes became

CONTACT Oscar Espinoza oespinoza@academia.cl

increasingly stratified and segmented (Marginson 2016; Wakeling and Savage 2015, Boliver 2015). In this context, employers tend to favour graduates from the most prestigious institutions, offering them higher wages and better working conditions than those available to graduates from less prestigious universities (Binder, Davis, and Bloom 2016; Thompson 2019). However, access to these elite institutions is closely linked to students' social, cultural and economic background (Czarnecki 2018; Jerrim, Chmielewski, and Parker 2015). Taken together, these dynamics suggest that higher education contributes to the indirect transmission of privilege from one generation to the next, reinforcing patterns of social inequality (Bourdieu and Passeron 1964, 1970; Reay 2022; Weininger and Lareau 2018).

Moreover, social background continues to shape labour market outcomes even among graduates from the same programmes and institutions (Witteveen and Attewell 2020; Zimmerman 2019). This can be attributed to the fact that individuals from privileged class backgrounds are more likely to have access to elite social networks, as well as to embody dispositions, manners of speech, and physical appearances in ways that are positively sanctioned by employers in hiring processes (Ahsley et al. 2015; Macmillan, Tyler, and Vignoles 2015; Rivera, 2015). These findings highlight the persistence of a direct effect of social origin on labour market outcomes, even after accounting for educational attainment.

Most empirical evidence on this topic comes from the United States (Chetty et al. 2017;) Bloome et al. 2018 and Europe (Laurison and Friedman 2016, 2024). However, much less is known about how these dynamics unfold in contexts outside the Global North. Yet, cases like Chile can provide crucial insights for evaluating existing theories across institutional settings. The country is characterized by high socioeconomic inequalities (World Bank Group 2024) and an educational system shaped by neoliberal reforms implemented during the military dictatorship (1973–1990). These reforms led to the massive expansion of higher education, primarily through the private sector (Chiroleu and Marquina 2017).

Evidence shows that Chile's university system is highly stratified, and access to the most prestigious universities remains strongly associated with students' social background (Espinoza et al. 2024, 2023a; Jarpa and Rodríguez 2017; Rodríguez et al. 2022). In addition, previous studies have found a strong relationship between institutional prestige and graduates' outcomes (Schurch 2013; Villalobos, Luisa Quaresma, and Franetovic 2020). Zimmerman (2019) showed that upper-class networks are crucial in access to high-paying jobs. However, no study has systematically measured the salary gap among university graduates in Chile, nor the extent to which that gap reflects the direct and indirect influence of graduates' social and cultural background.

This article addresses that gap by analysing the relationship between social background and graduates' salaries in Chile, focusing on its direct and indirect association through the type of university attended. Theoretically, this study builds on Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction, which posits that the educational system contributes to the reproduction of social advantage and class-based privilege (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1964, 1970). Building on this framework, the analysis examines the extent to which the type of university mediates the relationship between social origin and labour market outcomes in a context outside Europe and North America. The findings suggest that the role of higher education in the reproduction of inequality is not universal but conditioned by specific contextual factors.

Literature review

Mass higher education and social stratification: the role of educational trajectories in reproducing inequality

Research on social stratification established long ago that individuals' social origin shapes their educational attainment. However, more recent studies have shown that inequalities based on social origin persist even among those who attain the same level of education, such as a university degree. This phenomenon has prompted scholars to examine how social background influences labour market outcomes beyond formal educational attainment.

A foundational approach to understanding these dynamics is the *Maximally Maintained Inequality* (MMI) thesis (Raftery and Hout 1993), which explains that inequality is maintained with educational expansion because privileged groups can maintain their advantage in access to each level of education until saturation. Only after universal enrollment do disadvantaged groups begin to gain access. Building on this, the *Effectively Maintained Inequality* (EMI) hypothesis (Lucas 2001) posited that when access becomes nearly universal, inequalities shift to qualitative dimensions of education. These shifts enable advantaged students to secure places in more selective institutions and to enrol in more lucrative fields of study, maintaining inequality.

These perspectives, rooted in rational choice theory, posit that families act strategically to maximize educational returns. The sociological approaches inspired by Pierre Bourdieu (1984; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970) offer a distinct explanation. From this view, educational institutions are not neutral but value certain forms of cultural capital more than others. Using the concepts of habitus, field, and capital, Bourdieu argued that the education system legitimates and reproduces existing social hierarchies by valuing upper-class students' cultural knowledge and behaviours.

The alignment between the habitus (how a person sees and reacts to their environment) of privileged students and the field of education means that they often feel more confident and legitimate within academic spaces (Lareau 2015; Weininger and Lareau 2018). As a result, these students not only perform well academically (McCrory Calarco, 2014) but their success is often misrecognized as a product of individual merit, masking the structural advantages they possess. As Bourdieu and Passeron (1970) emphasize, this dynamic allows the education system to disguise privilege as merit, legitimizing social inequality (Reay 2017, 2022).

In the context of mass higher education, the reproduction of social inequality occurs not only through access to education, but also through the different pathways students follow within the system (Weininger and Lareau 2018). As higher education expands and becomes more inclusive, inequality persists because not all educational trajectories are valued equally in the labour market. Employment outcomes vary significantly depending on institutional prestige, the field of study, and students' academic performance. For example, graduates from elite universities and fields such as medicine, business, and law are more likely to secure positions in high-status sectors with higher salaries (Binder, Davis, and Bloom 2016; Sullivan et al. 2018; Thompson 2019); however, these trajectories are not equally distributed.

Admission to elite universities varies with social origin. Middle- and upper-class students are more likely to attend prestigious universities with stronger employment prospects, while working-class students tend to enrol in less selective universities or non-university

institutions. (Czarnecki 2018; Jerrim, Chmielewski, and Parker 2015; Luo, Guo, and Shi 2018). This pattern allows upper-class students to secure educational advantages that translate into better labour market outcomes. This indirect transmission of advantage highlights how social origin shapes not only access to higher education but also the institutions and programmes students choose to pursue. As a result, university education contributes to the reproduction of inequality, even as it appears to offer equal opportunity. In effect, the education system operates as a sorting device that distributes credentials unequally, with upper-class students occupying more valuable pathways which reproduce their relative advantage (Bourdieu, 1984; Marginson 2016).

Beyond these indirect effects, research has also examined whether social origin directly affects labour market outcomes among graduates. The research findings are inconsistent. Some studies report that intergenerational mobility is higher among university graduates, suggesting that education can mitigate the influence of origin (Fiel 2020; Pfeffer and Hertel 2015). Other authors, such as Torche (2011, 2018), identify a U-shaped pattern in the influence of social origin. It plays a significant role among those without university education, becomes less relevant among university graduates, but re-emerges at the postgraduate level.

However, there is some evidence that even among university graduates with similar degrees and academic performance, there are persistent wage differences by social origin (Britton et al. 2016). Other studies show that graduates from upper-class backgrounds fare better even when controlling for institution, field, and academic performance (Witteveen and Attewell 2017, 2020). Among the mechanisms proposed to explain these gaps are differences in access to social capital and professional networks (Macmillan, Tyler, and Vignoles 2015), and employer selection practices that favour candidates from elite backgrounds (Ashley et al. 2015; Rivera, 2015).

The Chilean context

Chile's higher education system has undergone profound transformations over the past four decades. Neoliberal reforms implemented during the military dictatorship (1973–1990) reshaped the traditional structure. In the 1980s, the deregulation of the system allowed the establishment of new private institutions and shifted costs onto students and their families through (relatively high) tuition fees (Salazar and Leihy 2017). These changes laid the foundation for the massification of higher education beginning in the 1990s, largely driven by the private sector.

Various policy changes contributed to enrollment growth. These included student loan programmes, scholarship schemes, and revisions to national admission tests. Enrollments soared but, so also did dissatisfaction with the higher costs of post-secondary education. Increasing family and student dissatisfaction was punctuated by national student protests, of secondary students in 2006 and university students in 2011. Since 2011 several initiatives have been implemented to increase equity and quality. These include the implementation of free tuition for students from the lowest 60% of the income distribution starting in 2016, the launch of affirmative action programmes such as PACE (Programa de Acompañamiento y Acceso Efectivo a la Educación Superior), and the enactment of a new Higher Education Law in 2018 that aimed to strengthen regulation (Clasing-Manquian 2024; Delisle and Bernasconi 2018, Ministerio de Educación 2021).

The reforms initiated after 1990 have led to further expansion of the system over the last three decades. Prior to the 1981 reform, there were 8 Chilean universities. Today, there are 54, ranging from traditional public and private universities to new, private ones. University enrolment increased substantially, rising from nearly 130,000 students in 1990 to over 700,000 by 2024 (Servicio de Información de Educación Superior, 2024). However, access remains highly stratified. Although the expansion increased access across all social sectors (Ministerio de Desarrollo Social, 2023), evidence shows that access to tertiary education is linked to social origin (Jarpa and Rodríguez 2021).

For instance, scores on the national university admission test are skewed in favour of students from middle- and upper-class families (Rodríguez et al. 2022), excluding many lower-class students from the most selective universities (Espinoza et al. 2024). Students from different social backgrounds tend to choose different institutions, even when they have similar admission test scores (Espinoza et al. 2023a, 2023b). Consequently, middle- and upper-class students tend to concentrate in the country's two most prestigious universities and a small group of highly selective new private universities. Lower middle- and lower-class students are distributed across less-selective universities (Espinoza et al. 2025; Villalobos, Luisa Quaresma, and Franetovic 2020).

The consequences of this institutional stratification extend beyond enrolment patterns. Empirical evidence indicates that employment outcomes among university graduates vary significantly by programme and institutional prestige. A study of graduates from a new private university found significant salary differences across fields of study (Schurch 2013). Research on graduates from various universities found that salaries were highest among those who had studied at traditional universities, rather than at new private institutions (Murakami and Nomura 2023).

This variation in employment outcomes based on university prestige is particularly pronounced among elite institutions. Graduates from these universities earn in their first year of employment around 10% more than their peers from other institutions (Bordón and Braga 2020). Furthermore, a study of the business school programmes at the two most prestigious universities revealed that their graduates occupied over 40% of leadership positions in large companies, despite being less than 2% of all graduates (Zimmerman 2019). Only men who graduated from private secondary schools reached these top positions. The research attributed the success of these graduates to the social networks built while in the university with graduates from similar social backgrounds.

To date, however, few studies have examined how the institutional stratification among university graduates contributes to the reproduction of social origins' advantages in the labour market. Little is known about the extent to which the type of university attended mediates the association between social origin and earnings. This study seeks to fill this gap by analysing the direct and indirect influence of social origin on graduates' earnings.

Methodology

Data were generated using an online survey administered to graduates from 17 Chilean universities. The purpose of the survey was to investigate graduates' educational and occupational trajectories and to assess how the higher education system contributes to the reduction of social inequality. The participating institutions were selected through purposive sampling (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2017), to represent the diversity of the Chilean

university system in terms of geographic location (North, Center, South), academic selectivity based on admission test scores (low, high, elite), and institutional type (public, traditional private, new private).

Each participating university provided a full list of graduates from their 2015, 2016 and 2017 graduation cohorts. The list included pre-university background information, academic trajectories, and contact details. From the population of 56,168 graduates, a stratified random sample (margin of error: 3%, confidence level: 95%) was drawn ($N = 1{,}047$). This sample was distributed proportionally among the universities according to their size.

Survey invitations were sent *via* email between May and November 2023. In cases of non-response, replacements were randomly selected weekly from the remaining graduates of the same institution. This procedure ensured that proportionality was maintained. The overall response rate was 8%. Appendix A compares the characteristics of respondents and non-respondents. In general, no substantial differences are observed in variables such as gender, year of graduation or university GPA. However, an underrepresentation of graduates from low-selective private universities was detected (23.6% of the respondents and 46.8% of the non-respondents). This may bias results if non-respondents from these institutions systematically differ in labour outcomes. We discuss the implications of this limitation further in the manuscript.

A total of 116 respondents who reported being unemployed were excluded from the analysis, due to the absence of income data. While this approach ensures consistency in the estimation of earnings models, it may introduce selection bias if the probability of employment is related to individual or institutional characteristics. To assess that possibility, we compared the characteristics of both groups (employed and unemployed). There were no differences according to gender, parental education, family income, university GPA, or graduation year. While small differences were identified about field of study and university type, their magnitude (below 5 per cent) suggests that the resulting selection bias is likely to be limited.

The final analytic sample consists of 931 graduates who were employed at the time of the survey. Table 1 compares the sample to the full population of the 17 universities. It shows a high degree of similarity across key dimensions such as gender, graduation year, selectivity, and field of study. Some minor deviations are noted, particularly an overrepresentation of Social Sciences graduates. To address possible bias, weights were calculated based on this variable (Field of Study). These were used in the following analysis as a robustness check.

Variables and type of analysis

The dependent variable is the logarithm of monthly earnings (in 2023 USD), self-reported by graduates at the time of the survey. Given the skewed distribution of earnings, we used the natural log transformation to approximate normality and facilitate the interpretation of regression coefficients as approximate percentage changes. While self-reported earnings are subject to measurement error, previous studies have shown that such measures are reasonably valid (Carnevale, Rose, and Cheah 2011; Friedman and Laurison 2019).

To capture students' social origin, three variables were used, each analysed in separate models. First, parental education was coded as a binary variable indicating whether the respondent was a first-generation university student (1 = neither parent attended tertiary education). Second, family income was measured using a four-category variable (in 2023

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the sample and population of graduates from the 17 universities (cohorts 2015, 2016 and 2017).

Variable	Sample (%)	17 Universities (%)
Gender-Masculine	41.1	42.6
Graduation Year		
2015	32.0	32.6
2016	33.3	33.0
2017	34.7	34.4
Selectivity		
Low	66.7	64.0
High	21.9	22.8
Elite	11.4	13.3
Type		
New Private	34.3	31.5
Traditional Private	21.7	22.2
Public	44.0	46.3
Field of Study		
Administration and Business	8.2	9.9
Agriculture	5.3	4.2
Arts and Humanities	6.1	6.9
Social Sciences	15.3	12.2
Law	5.7	4.4
Education	18.4	18.4
Health	23.7	24.5
STEM	17.4	19.6
	Mean (Std. Dev.)	Mean (Std. Dev.)
University GPA	5.54 (0.51)	5.50 (0.50)
N	931	56,168

Source. Authors' elaboration.

USD): Low income ($0--$560), medium income ($561--$1,250), high income ($1,251--$2,000), and very high income (more than $2,000). Third, the highest-level occupation of the parents was coded into three categories: non-professional, professional, and managerial. These categories are intended to capture the stratification of graduates' social origins, consistent with the Chilean context and previous studies showing that such differences shape trajectories within the education system and subsequent labour market outcomes (Laurison and Friedman 2016, 2024; Witteveen and Attewell 2020, Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas 2024).

The mediating variable in the analysis is the type of university attended. Universities were categorized based on the work of Fleet and Guzmán-Concha (2017) and Espinoza et al. (2023a) using three criteria. First, universities were divided into two groups according to their academic selectivity (low, high). Second, they were divided into traditional (public and private), and new private universities. Traditional universities include those established before the 1981 reform, the institutions derived from them in the subsequent years, and two public institutions created in 2017. The new private universities were established after the 1981 reform. Both criteria were used to generate four types of universities. Finally, two universities from the traditional high selectivity group were separated into a fifth category called elite universities.

The analysis also included a set of control variables to account for academic performance, demographic characteristics, and job-related factors. These included gender, secondary school GPA, university GPA, field of study, work schedule, type of contract, and number of employees supervised. Table 2 describes the independent, mediating and control variables.

To estimate the direct and indirect association between social origin and graduates' earnings, a series of linear regression models was employed. For each of the three indicators

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the variables used in the analysis.

Variable	Description	Categories	Prop. (%) / Mean (Std. Dev..)
Secondary GPA	Score associated to secondary GPA (1.5–8.5)	–	6.25 (0.87)
University GPA	Graduates' university GPA (1.0–7.0)	–	5.54 (0.51)
Gender	Graduates' Gender	Feminine	59
		Masculine	41
Parental Occupation	Graduates' highest parental occupation	Non-professional	60
		Professional	36
		Managerial	4
First Generation Status	Neither parent attended higher education	No	55
		Yes	45
Family Income	Graduates' family income	Low ($0 - $560 USD)	27
		Medium ($561 - $1,250 USD)	42
		High ($1,251 - $2,000 USD)	18
		Very High (> $2,000 USD)	13
Type of University	Graduates' type of university	Private low selectivity	26
		Traditional low selectivity	41
		Private high selectivity	8
		Traditional high selectivity	14
		Elite	11
Field of study	Graduates' field of study	Arts & Humanities	6
		Administration and Business	8
		Agriculture	5
		Social Sciences	15
		Law	6
		Education	18
		Health	24
		STEM	17
Work schedule	Hours worked per week	No regular hours	13
		Part time (<30 hrs/sweek)	9
		Intermediate (31–39 hrs/week	8
		Full time (>40 hrs/week)	71
Type of contract	Graduates' type of contract	No contract	12
		Freelance	11
		Fixed term	25
		Permanent	52
Number of employees supervised	How many employees are supervised by graduate	None	55
		1 or 2	17
		3 to 5	9
		6 to 9	6
		10 or more	14
Salary	Logarithm of monthly salary	–	7.43 (0.59)

Source. Authors' elaboration.

of social origin, two models were estimated. A reduced model included only the independent variable and controls (M1) and a full model that additionally included the mediating variable (university type) (M2). The comparison between the coefficients of the reduced and full models allows for a decomposition of the associations (Breen, Karlson, and Holm 2021). The coefficient from the reduced model reflects the total association between social origin and earnings. The coefficient from the full model captures the direct relationship, after controlling for the university type. The indirect association, interpreted as the portion of inequality transmitted through university stratification, is calculated as the difference between the total and direct ones. The analyses were carried out using RStudio (R Core Team 2024).

Results

A series of linear regression models was estimated to understand the salary gap among university graduates. The full results, including all coefficients and controls, are available in Appendix B. Appendix C reports the full results, including weights to correct for possible sample bias. As there are no major differences between both approaches in terms of coefficients or significance, we proceed with the original unweighted models. For each indicator of social origin, Table 3 reports the total association with earnings, the component of this association that is mediated by the type of university attended (indirect component), and the remaining association after accounting for university type (direct component). To make interpretation easier, coefficients are presented in an exponential form that reflects the approximate percentage difference in monthly earnings. The final column indicates the proportion of the total association mediated by institutional stratification. It is important to note that this proportion is calculated based on the coefficients presented in Appendix B, not on the percentages in Table 3.

The results suggest that social origin is strongly associated with labour market outcomes, even after accounting for academic performance and job characteristics. Table 3 shows two broad patterns. First, regarding the magnitude of associations, differences in parental occupation and in family income are associated with a substantial wage gap. Graduates whose parents were managers earn, on average, 45.1% more than those from non-professional households. The earnings difference between graduates from professional and non-professional backgrounds is much smaller, only 16.0%.

The same pattern occurs with family income (Table 3). Graduates from very high-income families earn 55.6% more than their low-income peers, whereas the advantage for those from high-income backgrounds is almost half that size, at 27.6%. These results suggest that the reproduction of advantage is not only non-linear but tends to concentrate at the top of the social hierarchy. The difference associated with parental education is smaller (12.1%).

Second, when examining the proportion of the total association mediated by the type of university attended, a different pattern emerges. Regarding parental occupation and first-generation status, almost one-third of the observed gaps are explained by institutional stratification (between 29.8 and 38.0%). However, the mediated proportion for family income is notably smaller (between 15.2 and 19.0%), implying that the direct association with earnings, net of institutional effects, is stronger for this dimension of social origin.

In any event, the results indicate that institutional differentiation plays only a partial role in the reproduction of inequality. In Chile, most differences between students from different

Table 3. Direct, indirect and total relation between social origin and graduates' earnings.

	Indirect	Direct	Total	Prop. Mediated
Occ. (Ref = Non-professional)				
Professional	5.2%	10.2%	16.0%	34.5%
Managerial	11.7%	29.8%	45.1%	29.8%
FG - Status (Ref = No)				
Yes	−4.8%	−7.7%	−12.1%	38.0%
Fam. Income (Ref = Low)				
Medium	1.1%	5.4%	6.6%	17.2%
High	3.8%	23.0%	27.6%	15.2%
Very High	8.8%	43.0%	55.6%	19.0%

*$p < 0.05$**$p < 0.01$***$p < 0.001$.
Source. Authors' elaboration.

social backgrounds do not appear to operate through differences in the type of university attended.

To further explore the combination of factors associated with salary differences among graduates, the Blinder-Oaxaca Decomposition was applied (Blinder 1973) (see results in Table 4). This method estimates separate regression models for two comparison groups, allowing the coefficients of the covariates to vary across them (Jann 2008). The decomposition separates the observed salary gap into a 'explained' component, attributable to differences in observable characteristics, and an 'unexplained' component. The unexplained part may reflect unobserved factors such as soft skills, social capital, or employer bias.

Two different decompositions were conducted: one comparing first-generation university graduates with their continuing-generation peers, and another comparing graduates

Table 4. Blinder – Oaxaca decomposition for parental occupation and family income.

	Parental Occupation		Family Income	
Pay Gap	Logged Values	Values	Logged Values	Values
Privileged Origin	7.501	$1,810	7.813	$2,473
N	513		121	
Underprivileged origin	7.347	$1,552	7.325	$1,518
N	418		639	
Difference	0.154	100%	0.488	100%
Explained	0.083	54%	0.243	50%
Unexplained	0.071	46%	0.245	50%
Explained	Contribution to the Pay Gap	Difference Explained (%)	Contribution to the Pay Gap	Difference Explained (%)
Gender Masculine	−0.003	−2%	0.011	2%
Secondary GPA	0.004	2%	0.007	1%
University GPA	0.001	0%	0.002	0%
Administration and Business	0.005	3%	0.020	4%
Agriculture	0.002	1%	−0.003	−1%
Social Sciences	0.002	2%	0.004	1%
Law	0.018	12%	0.035	7%
Education	0.007	4%	0.004	1%
Health	0.003	2%	−0.013	−3%
STEM	−0.016	−10%	−0.003	−1%
Part-time work schedule	0.004	3%	0.008	2%
Intermediate work schedule	0.000	0%	0.000	0%
Full-time work schedule	−0.004	−2%	−0.003	−1%
Supervision 1 or 2	0.003	2%	0.001	0%
Supervision 3 to 5	0.004	3%	0.011	2%
Supervision 6 to 9	0.004	2%	0.008	2%
Supervision 10 or more	−0.001	0%	−0.019	−4%
Freelance	0.004	3%	0.001	0%
Fixed term contract	−0.005	−3%	−0.020	−4%
Permanent contract	−0.015	−10%	0.026	5%
Traditional Low Selectivity	−0.007	−5%	−0.023	−5%
Private high selectivity	0.041	27%	0.124	25%
Traditional high selectivity	−0.002	−2%	−0.007	−1%
Elite	0.034	22%	0.072	15%
TOTAL	0.083	54%	0.243	50%

Note: The privileged origin row refers to graduates from advantaged backgrounds, those whose parents held managerial positions or belonged to very high-income households, respectively. Conversely, the underprivileged origin row corresponds to graduates whose parents had non-professional occupations and came from low- or middle-income families.

Source. Authors elaboration.

from low and medium-income families with those from very high-income backgrounds. The aim is to evaluate how the pay gap would change if the graduates in the first group had the same characteristics as those from the second group. It was not possible to estimate the decomposition for the parental occupation variable, given the insufficient sample size in the managerial category.

Table 4 shows that the monthly salary gap between very high-income and low/medium-income graduates is approximately US$955, equivalent to almost US$11,500 per year. Of this gap, 50% is explained by observable characteristics included in the model, while the remaining 50% remains unexplained. The gap between first-generation and continuing graduates is notably smaller, at approximately US$258 per month, less than US$3,100 annually. In this case, 54% of the gap can be attributed to differences in covariates, while the remaining 46% reflects unexplained disparities between the two groups.

The decomposition also identifies which specific covariates would reduce (positive effect) or increase (negative effect) the salary gap. In both models, institutional stratification appears as a major factor driving inequality. If low and medium-income graduates had studied at a private high-selective university, their salary gap with graduates from very high-income backgrounds would have been 25% smaller. Likewise, attending an elite university would have reduced the gap by 15%. In the case of first-generation graduates, the estimated reductions are similar (27% and 22%, respectively). These results highlight the role that unequal access to prestigious institutions plays in the reproduction of advantages linked to graduates' origin. At the same time, they suggest that equalizing access to these institutions would not be sufficient to eliminate the pay gap, since a substantial portion of it remains unexplained.

Discussion

For decades, higher education has been considered a key mechanism for reducing social and economic inequality (Featherman and Hauser, 1978; Breen and Jonsson 2007). While some studies suggest that wage differences linked to social origin disappear once individuals complete a university degree (Fiel 2020; Pfeffer and Hertel 2015), more recent research indicates that these gaps persist even within university graduates (Manzoni and Streib 2019). ; Witteveen and Attewell 2020; However, it remains unclear whether these patterns extend to contexts outside Europe and the United States, and the extent to which the university attended by graduates helps to explain them. The results of this study suggest the existence of a pay gap among university graduates in Chile according to their social background. These also show that while institutional segmentation plays a role, it accounts for only a fraction of it.

Unlike what has been reported in previous studies, the wage differences by background are of a substantial magnitude in the Chilean case. On the one hand, with respect to parental education, the pay gap is slightly higher than that reported by Witteveen and Attewell (2020) in the United States. On the other hand, the gap exceeds 40% between graduates from low- and very high-income households, which is considerably larger than the 10% reported by Britton et al. (2016) in England. In net terms, the differences between Chilean graduates amount to roughly 900 dollars per month, or nearly 11,500 dollars per year. This highlights the magnitude of the gap observable in Chile, which is comparable to that reported by Laurison and Friedman (2016, 2024) for the United Kingdom and the United States,

respectively. It becomes even more striking when considering that the average monthly salary in Chile is approximately 1,050 dollars (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas 2024).

In addition, the findings showed that between one-fifth and one-third of the pay gap can be explained by the segmentation of the higher education system. Although this proportion is similar to that reported for the United States (Witteveen and Attewell 2017), it is considerably lower than the 60% reported by Britton et al. (2016) for England. This illustrates one of the mechanisms through which mass higher education systems contribute to the reproduction of inequality. Students from more privileged backgrounds tend to enrol in more prestigious universities, whose credentials carry greater symbolic and economic value (Binder, Davis, and Bloom 2016; Czarnecki 2018; Jerrim, Chmielewski, and Parker 2015; Luo, Guo, and Shi 2018; Thompson 2019). As a result, differences in the educational trajectories followed by students of different social origin, enable the indirect transmission of privilege from parents to children (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970; Reay 2022; Weininger and Lareau 2018).

Nevertheless, our findings show that in the Chilean context, the majority of the pay gap between graduates from different social origins is not explained by differences in institutional pathways. Even when academic performance, field of study, employment conditions, and type of university are similar, significant income disparities persist. This pay gap points to the operation of direct mechanisms of social reproduction, in line with Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Weininger and Lareau 2018). Graduates' unequal distribution of particular forms of cultural, social, and economic capital, especially those most valued in elite and highly paid sectors, continues to shape their post-university trajectories (Friedman and Laurison, 2024).

One plausible explanation for differences in trajectories is the unequal distribution of social capital among graduates. Those from more privileged backgrounds often benefit from access to elite networks that facilitate labour market insertion and entry into higher-paying positions (Macmillan, Tyler, and Vignoles 2015; Tholen et al. 2013). In the Chilean context, these networks not only reflect longstanding inequalities but also actively reproduce them (Zimmerman 2019). Networks and social capital play a crucial role in occupational achievement and the reproduction of inequalities, enabling those already advantaged to consolidate and extend their position (Espinoza, Rafael Rey, and Emmanuelle Barozet 2021).

Cultural capital and embodied dispositions or habitus may also contribute to the reproduction of advantages. Hiring processes tend to favour candidates whose ways of speaking, physical appearance, or tastes align with middle- and upper-class norms of employers (Ashley et al. 2015; Rivera, 2015). In Chile, these class-coded signals are further intensified by visible markers such as surnames or skin colour, which function as social signals in hiring processes (PNUD, 2017; Undurraga 2019).

The persistence of these class-based advantages, even after controlling for institutional and academic variables, reflects broader features of Chile's social structure. While the country exhibits relatively high overall levels of intergenerational mobility, existing evidence suggests that movement into the top of the social hierarchy remains extremely limited (Torche 2005; Cortés Orihuela et al. 2024). In this context, the upper class maintains a high degree of internal cohesion and social closure, reinforcing barriers to upward mobility even among highly educated individuals. Our findings, though focused only on university graduates, offer further support for this diagnosis. Access to elite positions appears to remain allocated not on a meritocratic basis, but by the durable imprint of class origin.

Conclusion

This study analysed the extent to which social origin shapes labour market outcomes among university graduates in Chile, both directly and indirectly through the type of university attended. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction, we aimed to empirically test whether the segmentation of the Chilean university system, embedded in a context of long-standing inequality, functions as a mechanism for transmitting privilege from one generation to the next. Our findings reveal the existence of a pay gap between graduates from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

Between one-fifth and one-third of this salary gap can be attributed to institutional differentiation, indicating that social origin exerts part of its influence indirectly through the higher education system. However, a larger share of the pay gap persists even after accounting for institutional characteristics. For instance, the annual pay gap between first-generation graduates and their continuing-generation peers is approximately US$3,000, while the gap between graduates from high-income households and those from low- and middle-income backgrounds reaches nearly US$11,500. These findings point to the operation of direct mechanisms of social reproduction in Chile's highly stratified society, suggesting that the role of higher education in reproducing inequality is not universal but conditioned by contextual factors such as the characteristics of the social structure.

By incorporating three distinct indicators of social origin, parental education, family income, and parental occupation, this study offers a multidimensional perspective on inequality. Across all indicators, graduates from more privileged backgrounds earn significantly higher salaries. But the magnitude of these differences is not uniform. Income-based and occupational disparities are particularly pronounced among those at the top of the social hierarchy. Graduates from managerial households or very high-income families earn substantially more than their peers from less advantaged origins. In contrast, differences across intermediate groups are more modest, suggesting that the reproduction of advantage is most acute at the upper end of the social structure.

In addition, the results of the Blinder-Oaxaca decomposition reinforce the view that university education, as it is currently structured, operates within a social context that not only fails to level the playing field but also reflects and reinforces broader social hierarchies. While policies that expand access to selective institutions remain important, they are unlikely to dismantle inequality on their own. As the Blinder-Oaxaca decomposition revealed, even if graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds were to attend the same universities as their privileged peers, approximately half of the salary gap would persist.

At the same time, these findings must be interpreted with caution. One particular limitation of the study is the pattern of non-response across types of institutions. Graduates from low-selective private universities were less likely to respond to the survey, and it is plausible that those who did respond were those with more favourable labour market outcomes. As a result, the earnings of this group may be overestimated. This does not invalidate the findings, but it does suggest that the observed differences in earnings between graduates from elite and low-selective institutions may understate the true extent of inequality.

Future research should deepen our understanding of the mechanisms underlying the direct effect of social origin on labour market outcomes. Further work is needed to identify whether these gaps stem primarily from differential access to social capital, embodied cultural dispositions, class-coded markers such as surnames, or other mechanisms.

Additionally, future studies should explore the influence of higher education on social mobility, particularly by examining whether graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds experience better outcomes than comparable individuals who did not enter the system. Finally, qualitative research is needed to explore how graduates perceive and experience the barriers to upward mobility embedded in the labour market. Investigating how these perceived constraints shape beliefs about meritocracy and fairness could provide crucial insights about the social legitimacy of higher education and its role in sustaining or eroding social cohesion in the country.

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ORCID

Oscar Espinoza http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7525-2980
Bruno Corradi http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4217-0900
Luis Sandoval http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8988-7888
Catalina Miranda http://orcid.org/0009-0001-4461-4384
Noel McGinn http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7132-2136

Data availability statement

Due to the nature of the research and ethical restrictions data cannot be shared.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Descriptive statistics for respondents and non-respondents.

Variable	Respondents	Non-respondents
Gender		
Feminine	58.7	57.2
Masculine	41.3	42.8
Year of Graduation		
2015	32.5	32.4
2016	32.8	33.9
2017	34.7	33.7
Field of Study		
Admin. & Business	7.9	9.8
Agriculture	5.6	3.6
Art & Humanities	6.8	6.8
Social Sciences	14.8	10.6
Law	5.6	3.1
Education	17.7	20.2
Health	23.3	31.6
STEM	18.3	14.3
Type of univ.		
Private Low Selectivity	26.4	46.4
Traditional Low Selectivity	40.0	29.4
Private High Selectivity	8.0	6.6
Traditional High Selectivity	13.4	6.8
Elite	12.1	10.8
	Mean	Mean
University GPA	5.55	5.49
N	1,057	12,213

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Appendix B

Table B1. Full results from linear regression models.

Variable	Parental Occupation		Parental Education		Family Income	
	M1	M2	M1	M2	M1	M2
Intercept	6.47***	6.62***	6.55***	6.68***	6.46***	6.58***
Occ. (Ref = Non-professional)						
Professional	0.15***	0.10**				
Managerial	0.37***	0.26**				
FG-Status (Ref = No)						
Yes			−0.13***	−0.08*		
Family Income (Ref = Low)						
Medium					0.06	0.05
High					0.24***	0.21***
Very High					0.44***	0.36***
Type of University (Ref = Private low selectivity)						
Traditional low selectivity		0.07		0.06		0.08
Private high selectivity		0.35***		0.38***		0.26***
Traditional high selectivity		0.13*		0.13*		0.13*
Elite		0.30***		0.32***		0.28***
Gender (Ref = Feminine)						
Masculine	0.19***	0.16***	0.18***	0.16***	0.17***	0.15***
Secondary GPA	0.08***	0.06**	0.08***	0.06**	0.08***	0.06**
University GPA	0.06	0.02	0.07	0.02	0.05	0.02
Field of Study (Ref = Arts & Humanities						
Adm. & Commerce	0.33***	0.29**	0.33***	0.29**	0.31***	0.28**
Agriculture	0.17	0.19*	0.12	0.16	0.18	0.20*
Social Sciences	0.10	0.09	0.08	0.07	0.09	0.09
Law	0.53***	0.50***	0.50***	0.48***	0.49***	0.48***
Education	−0.07	−0.01	−0.10	−0.03	−0.04	0.00
Health	0.22**	0.26***	0.19*	0.24**	0.22**	0.27***
STEM	0.28***	0.29***	0.26**	0.28***	0.29***	0.29***
Work schedule (Ref = Full time)						
No regular hours	−0.10	−0.09	−0.09	−0.09	−0.10	−0.10
Part time	−0.36***	−0.34***	−0.35***	−0.34***	−0.35***	−0.33***
Intermediate	−0.01	−0.04	−0.01	−0.04	−0.02	−0.04
Contract (Ref = No contract)						
Freelance	0.17*	0.18*	0.19*	0.19**	0.17*	0.17*
Fixed term	0.35***	0.33***	0.35***	0.33***	0.33***	0.31***
Permanent	0.40***	0.39***	0.41***	0.40***	0.38***	0.37***
Supervision (Ref = None)						
1 or 2	0.09	0.09*	0.09*	0.10*	0.10*	0.10*
3 to 5	0.12*	0.12*	0.12*	0.12	0.09	0.09
6 to 9	0.18*	0.16*	0.19*	0.17*	0.17*	0.16*
10 or more	0.15**	0.16**	0.13*	0.15**	0.16**	0.17***
F-statistic	16.7***	16.1***	16.5***	16.3***	18.7***	17.2***
Adjusted R^2	0.27	0.30	0.26	0.29	0.30	0.32

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.
Source: Authors' elaboration.

Appendix C

Table C1. Full results from linear regression models using weight to correct sample distorsion.

Variable	Parental Occupation		Parental Education		Family Income	
	M1	M2	M1	M2	M1	M2
Intercept	6.49***	6.64***	6.57***	6.71***	6.47***	6.59***
Occ. (Ref = Non-professional)						
Professional	0.15***	0.10**				
Managerial	0.36***	0.25**				
FG-Status (Ref = No)						
Yes			−0.13***	−0.08*		
Family Income (Ref = Low)						
Medium					0.06	0.05
High					0.26***	0.22***
Very High					0.44***	0.35***
Type of University (Ref = Private low selectivity)						
Traditional low selectivity		0.07		0.07		0.08
Private high selectivity		0.37***		0.39***		0.27***
Traditional high selectivity		0.15**		0.15**		0.14*
Elite		0.32***		0.34***		0.29***
Gender (Ref = Feminine)						
Masculine	0.19***	0.16***	0.19***	0.16***	0.17***	0.15***
Secondary GPA	0.08***	0.06**	0.08***	0.06**	0.08***	0.06**
University GPA	0.06	0.01	0.07	0.02	0.05	0.01
Field of Study (Ref = Arts & Humanities						
Adm. & Commerce	0.32***	0.29**	0.32***	0.28**	0.31**	0.28**
Agriculture	0.17	0.19	0.12	0.16	0.18	0.21*
Social Sciences	0.10	0.09	0.07	0.07	0.08	0.08
Law	0.52***	0.50***	0.49***	0.47***	0.49***	0.47***
Education	−0.06	−0.01	−0.10	−0.03	−0.04	0.01
Health	0.22**	0.27***	0.19*	0.25**	0.22**	0.27***
STEM	0.28**	0.29***	0.26**	0.28***	0.29***	0.29***
Work schedule (Ref = Full time)						
No regular hours	−0.10	−0.10	−0.10	−0.10	−0.10	−0.10
Part time	−0.37***	−0.35***	−0.37***	−0.35***	−0.36***	−0.35***
Intermediate	−0.02	−0.05	−0.03	−0.05	−0.03	−0.05
Contract (Ref = No contract)						
Freelance	0.17*	0.17*	0.18*	0.18*	0.15	0.16*
Fixed term	0.34***	0.32***	0.34***	0.32***	0.33***	0.31***
Permanent	0.39***	0.39***	0.41***	0.39***	0.37***	0.37***
Supervision (Ref = None)						
1 or 2	0.09	0.09	0.09	0.09*	0.10*	0.10*
3 to 5	0.12	0.11	0.12	0.11	0.09	0.08
6 to 9	0.18**	0.16**	0.18**	0.17**	0.18**	0.17**
10 or more	0.14**	0.15**	0.13**	0.15**	0.16***	0.17***

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.
Source: Authors' elaboration.