

Intergenerational Educational Mobility and Interest in Pursuing a Doctoral Degree among University Students in Chile

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Acceso abierto diamante

Abstract

Intergenerational educational mobility (IEM) is defined as the association between parents' educational level in relation to that of their adult daughters or sons, being one of the primary mechanisms of social mobility in modern societies and an indicator of the degree of equal opportunities within a society. This article analyzes the role of IEM, measured based on the educational level of the head of household, in relation to the interest in attaining a doctoral degree among university students in Chile. Using data from the 9th National Youth Survey, the sample for this study comprises 1,451 students enrolled in a university in Chile, both male and female, from all regions of the country. Through multivariate analysis using binary logistic regressions, the results suggest that the educational level of the head of the household is the main socioeducational predictor of interest in pursuing doctoral studies among university students in Chile. Particularly noteworthy is the strong association between household heads with postgraduate studies and students interested in pursuing doctoral studies. This emphasizes the social differences resulting from the influence of the family's socioeducational background and the academic goals of the students, aspects that characterize the Chilean educational system.

Keywords: HIGHER EDUCATION, UNIVERSITY STUDENTS, DOCTORATE, EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY, POSTGRADUATE STUDIES.

Resumen

La movilidad educacional intergeneracional (MEI) se define como la asociación entre el nivel educacional de padres o madres con relación al de sus hijas o hijos adultos, siendo uno de los principales mecanismos de movilidad social en las sociedades modernas y un indicador del grado de igualdad de oportunidades existente en una sociedad. Este artículo se analiza el rol de la MEI, medida en base al nivel educacional de el o la jefe/a de hogar, con relación al interés en alcanzar el nivel de doctorado en estudiantes universitarios en Chile. Utilizando los datos de la 9ª Encuesta Nacional de la Juventud, la muestra de este estudio está compuesta por 1.451 estudiantes inscritos en una universidad en Chile, hombres y mujeres, de todas las regiones del país. En base a análisis multivariados mediante regresiones logísticas binarias, los resultados sugieren que el nivel educacional de el o la jefe/a hogar constituye el principal predictor socioeducativo del interés en seguir estudios doctorales entre estudiantes universitarios en Chile. Se destaca particularmente la fuerte asociación entre las y los jefes/as de hogar con estudios de postgrado y estudiantes interesados en cursar estudios doctorales. Esto remarca las diferencias sociales resultantes de la influencia del origen socioeducativo familiar y las metas académicas de las y los estudiantes, aspectos que caracterizan el sistema educativo chileno.

Palabras clave: EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR, ESTUDIANTES UNIVERSITARIOS, DOCTORADO, DESIGUALDAD EDUCATIVA, POSTGRADOS.

Introduction

Intergenerational educational mobility is one of the primary mechanisms of social mobility in modern societies and an indicator of the degree of equality of opportunities existing in a society (Aydemir & Yazici, 2019; Naranjo et al., 2022). Specifically, it is defined as the association between the educational level of parents and that of their adult children (Torche, 2019, 2018). A high association implies that the educational level of parents significantly determines that of their children, reflecting low social mobility, regardless of individuals' abilities. In contrast, a low association indicates a high possibility of social mobility, reducing the "effects of birth" and increasing the influence of individuals' talents and personal competencies (Leone, 2019; Torche, 2014; Naranjo et al., 2022).

During the last decades, both in Chile and in other Latin American countries, there has been an expansion in access to higher education, accompanied by growth in postgraduate education and research (CONICYT, 2017; OECD, 2017). Examples of this phenomenon include the increase in international scientific exchange programs and the development of doctoral training programs in various Latin American countries, indicating the region's interest in the training of academics and researchers (Aparicio & Cros, 2015; Cros, 2017; OECD, 2017; Torres et al., 2017; Pinto, 2017). However, this process has also highlighted the persistence of inequalities in Latin American higher education (Dalle et al., 2019; Salata, 2018), especially in access to postgraduate studies and, in particular, to doctoral studies, an educational level previously reserved mainly for intellectual elites and now experiencing a progressive democratization in its access (Cros, 2017; Torche, 2018).

According to international evidence, the increase in coverage of higher education is associated with a highly differentiated tertiary education system, also structured based on socioeconomic characteristics, which ultimately constitutes a barrier to educational and social mobility often associated with democratization processes in access to higher education. In Latin America, despite the increase in access to higher education among previously excluded sectors, available evidence indicates the persistence of significant educational inequalities. The educational level of young people continues to depend largely on the educational level attained by their parents, especially in lower-income sectors (Jiménez & Jiménez, 2019). For example, in Mexico and Argentina, intergenerational educational mobility in higher education is influenced by factors such as socioeconomic status and educational level (Dalle et al., 2019). In Brazil, another reference country in the region, the socioeconomic class of the head of the household significantly influences access to higher education opportunities (Salata, 2018).

However, despite the importance of increasing access to higher education and the development of research in contemporary educational systems, there is a lack of studies addressing the factors associated with students' interest in pursuing a doctoral degree (McCulloch et al., 2017; Torche, 2018; Mueller et al., 2015). This gap is particularly noticeable in studies focusing on students from Latin American countries (Aparicio & Cros, 2017; Pinto, 2017; Torres et al., 2017).

In this context, Chile emerges as an interesting case study. On one hand, there has been a sustained increase in access to higher education since the 2000s, currently reaching over 40% of young people of study age (MINEDUC, 2019). It is worth noting the policy of free university education for the population with fewer resources, implemented from 2016 as a result of massive student mobilizations (MINEDUC, 2019; Torres, 2022), which has enabled greater access to university or higher technical education for young people from lower-income backgrounds (OECD, 2017). On the other hand, there has been a steady increase in enrollments in postgraduate programs over the last decade (CONICYT, 2017), thanks to state policies focused on human capital development through scholarships for master's and doctoral degrees, as well as exchange programs in education and research. These factors have democratized access to postgraduate education for students and young professionals, with increased access to doctoral studies at Chilean or foreign universities (CONICYT, 2017; Torres et al., 2017).

It is precisely in this context of democratization in access to higher education and postgraduate studies that understanding the variables associated with the development of trajectories towards doctoral studies becomes relevant. This understanding allows for addressing advancements in these university expansion processes, as well as the structural inequalities that emerge with it, such as the influence of social background and the type of education in the educational system, among others. Therefore, aiming to contribute to the advancement of research in this field, this article analyzes the role of intergenerational educational mobility in relation to the interest in pursuing a doctoral level among university students in Chile.

Methodology

The current study

This article analyzes the role of intergenerational educational mobility, measured based on the educational level of the head of household, in relation to the interest in attaining a doctoral degree among university students in Chile.

Hypotheses

Based on the aforementioned background, we propose the following working hypothesis:

H1: We expect a positive association between the educational level of the head of household and the interest in pursuing doctoral studies among university students in Chile.

Two specific hypotheses are derived from the main hypothesis:

H1a: Students whose heads of household have completed postgraduate studies will show significantly greater interest in pursuing doctoral studies compared to other students.

H1b: No significant differences are expected in the probabilities of being interested in pursuing doctoral studies among students whose heads of household have completed primary education or lower, completed secondary education, completed technical education, or completed university education.

Sample

The data used in this study are derived from the 9th National Youth Survey (ENJ), conducted by the National Youth Institute of Chile (INJUV) among young people aged 15 to 29 residing in all regions of the country, during the period from December 2018 to April 2019.

For this study, a sample of 1451 young people who identified themselves as university students was considered. Two criteria were used for their selection: i) enrolment in higher education institutions and ii) active participation in formal studies at a Chilean university.

The selected sample consists of a demographically balanced group, with 45% men and 55% women, whose ages range from 17 to 29 years with an average age of 22.82 years (SD = 2.79). In terms of geographical location, 27% reside in the Metropolitan Region of Santiago, while the remaining 73% are distributed in other regions of the country.

Variable operationalization

Dependent variable

In order to assess the interest in pursuing doctoral studies among university students in Chile, the following question from the survey was considered: "What level of education would you like to achieve?". The response options to this question, ranging from completed primary education to doctoral level, were recoded into two

levels: 1= Doctoral level and 0= Other level. These levels represent 33% and 67%, respectively, of the students who comprise the sample.

Independent Variables

Firstly, intergenerational educational mobility, understood as the educational level of parents in relation to the level of their adult children (Naranjo et al., 2022), was operationalized through the following question: "What is the highest level of education attained by the head of your household?" The response options describing the educational levels attained by the head of the household were recoded as follows: 1 = Completed or lower primary education, 2 = Completed secondary education, 3 = Completed higher technical education, 4 = Completed university education, and 5 = Completed postgraduate education. These educational levels represent 16%, 41%, 16%, 24%, and 4% of the sample, respectively.

The educational trajectory of university students aiming to attain a doctoral level was operationalized taking into account certain considerations. The secondary education trajectory was characterized by the question "From what type of institution did you graduate from secondary education?". The responses were coded according to the three main types of secondary education institutions in Chile: 1 = Municipal public, 2 = Private subsidized by the State, and 3 = Private without public funding. The distribution of the sample according to the type of educational institution was 32%, 55%, and 13%, respectively.

It is worth noting that in Chile, education is strongly linked to the socioeconomic and cultural contexts of students. This is evident in the orientation of these types of schools. Private schools, constituting 6% of institutions, are concentrated in the sectors with the greatest resources, with students from higher levels of economic and cultural capitals, resulting in better performance in exams such as PISA. Private establishments with a State subsidy represent approximately 49% of the total establishments (MINEDUC, 2019), being the largest number of establishments in the country. They are defined by heterogeneity: their student body is stratified from medium-high to medium-low socioeconomic groups according to the cost that families can assume and the subsidy that the establishment receives from the State. The academic performance of its students also presents heterogeneity, but on average their results in standardized tests are lower than that of students from private schools (OECD, 2017). Municipal schools, comprising 43%, represent public education and are located in areas with less private provision, attracting students from low-income backgrounds and showing lower academic results compared to other types of schools (Bellei, 2015; OECD, 2017; MINEDUC, 2019).

To operationalize the higher education trajectory, we have classified the universities where students pursue their careers into two categories, which are based on the level of research development in each university. According to the literature, students' contact with research during their educational trajectory would be a relevant predictor of interest in pursuing doctoral studies (Eagant et al, 2013; Guerin et al., 2015). Based on the parameters proposed by the Chilean literature on the organization of the university system (López et al., 2019; Muñoz and Blanco, 2013; Reyes and Rosso, 2013), the classification used is as follows:

1= Consolidated Universities in research and doctoral programs: these are universities which, in addition to teaching, carry out most of the research in Chile. They have the largest number of publications in indexed scientific journals and research projects. Each university offers seven or more doctoral programs accredited by the Ministry of Education in different scientific disciplines. 29% of the students in the sample indicated being enrolled in this type of universities.

2= Emerging Universities in Research and Postgraduate Education and/or Teaching-oriented: these are universities that, in addition to teaching, are oriented towards research. They have a significant number of publications in indexed scientific journals and offer fewer than seven accredited doctoral programs by the Ministry of Education and/or are primarily teaching-oriented universities, with a relatively low number of

publications in indexed scientific journals and no accredited doctoral programs by the Ministry of Education. 71% of the students in the sample indicated being enrolled in a university with these characteristics.

Following the survey's sampling design, three sociodemographic independent variables were included for analysis, which could also be significant according to the literature (Dalle et al., 2019; Perna, 2004; Salata, 2018). These variables are gender (1= male or 2= female), age (ranging from 17 to 29 years), and finally the respondent's region of residence, recoded as follows: 1= Santiago Metropolitan Region (which includes the capital of Chile and encompasses 40% of the country's total population) and 2= Other regions.

Data Analysis

Regarding the data analysis methods, descriptive techniques were used through cross tables and multivariate inferential techniques were used through binary logistic regressions and probability graphs.

Results

Table 1 presents a binary logistic regression model on the interest in attaining the level of doctoral studies among university students in Chile. The dependent variable is the interest in the educational level that the student would like to achieve, categorized dichotomously as Doctoral level or Other level.

In terms of intergenerational educational mobility, the influence of the educational level of the head of household stands out, particularly in the case of heads of households with postgraduate studies, as the main determinant of the dependent variable in the model. To better illustrate these results and provide an interpretation in terms of the study sample, we can refer to the odds ratios provided. A clear way to understand these odds ratios is that for every 100 individuals in the reference category, there will be a number of individuals equal to the odds ratio of the specific category multiplied by 100. Thus, as observed in Table 1, for every 100 university students interested in pursuing doctoral studies, among whom the head of household has completed primary education or less, there would be 547 university students whose heads of household have postgraduate education, who also express interest in pursuing doctoral studies, with this relationship being statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) while holding other variables constant. On the other hand, there would be 143 students whose heads of household have completed University studies and show interest in pursuing doctoral studies, with this association being significant ($p < 0.1$). Meanwhile, the other educational levels attained by the head of household of the students do not have a significant effect on the dependent variable.

Secondly, regarding the variables describing the educational trajectory of the students, we observe that, on one hand, the type of secondary education establishment (municipal, state-subsidized private, and private without public funding) does not show a significant effect on the likelihood of expressing interest in pursuing doctoral studies. On the other hand, the type of university (whether it is an institution “established in research and doctoral programs” or an “emerging institution in research and/or with a teaching orientation”) also does not demonstrate a significant effect on the interest in obtaining a doctoral degree among the students.

In terms of sociodemographic variables, it is observed that age and gender do not have a significant effect on the dependent variable. However, the significant effect of the region of residence in the country on the likelihood of students desiring to pursue doctoral studies is highlighted ($p < 0.05$). Considering the Santiago Metropolitan Region as the reference variable and keeping the other variables constant, for every 100 students from the Santiago Metropolitan Region interested in pursuing doctoral studies, 143.7 students from other regions would express the same interest.

Table 1.

Variable	Beta	Odds Ratios
Head of household Education		
Postgraduate	1,699 (0,357)**	5,471
Completed University studies	0,359 (0,212)*	1,432
Completed higher Technical studies	0,250 (0,220)	1,285
Completed Secondary education studies	0,281 (0,186)	1,325
Completed Primary or lower education studies (ref.)		
Type of University establishment		
Consolidated in Research and Doctoral programs	0,139 (0,134)	1,149
Emerging Universities in Research and Postgraduate Education and/or Teaching-oriented (ref.)		
Type of Secondary education establishment		
Private Paid	0,134 (0,220)	1,143
Private State-subsidized	0,123 (0,138)	1,131
Public Municipal (ref.)		
Age	0,036 (0,022)	1,036
Sex		
Woman	0,197 (0,121)	1,218
Man (ref)		
Region		
Other regions	0,363 (0,147)*	1,437
Metropolitan (ref.)		
Intercept	-2,351 (0,563)***	0,095
N	1451	
Nagelkerke R2	0,04	

Binary Logistic Regression on the Interest in Attaining the Level of Doctoral Studies among University Students in Chile

Notes: *p < 0,1, **p < 0,05, *** p < 0,01. Dependent variable: question, what level of studies would you like to achieve?, response values 1= Doctorate and 0= another level. Standard error in parentheses. Odds ratios are equivalent to the exponential of the Beta coefficient (Exp β).

Source: Author's own elaboration based on 9th National Youth Survey (ENJ).

Figure 1 displays the predicted probabilities for the interest in pursuing a doctoral level of education among university students in Chile based on the educational level of their household head. It can be observed that the predicted probability of a university student desiring to pursue a doctorate is 9% if their household head has completed primary education, meaning 9 out of every 100 students with this profile. This probability remains similar for students whose household heads have completed secondary education, technical-professional education, and university education. However, a notable increase in the predicted probability is highlighted for students whose household heads have completed postgraduate studies (34%). Thus, the probability of a student desiring to pursue doctoral studies is approximately 20% higher if their household head has completed postgraduate studies compared to students whose household heads have other educational levels.

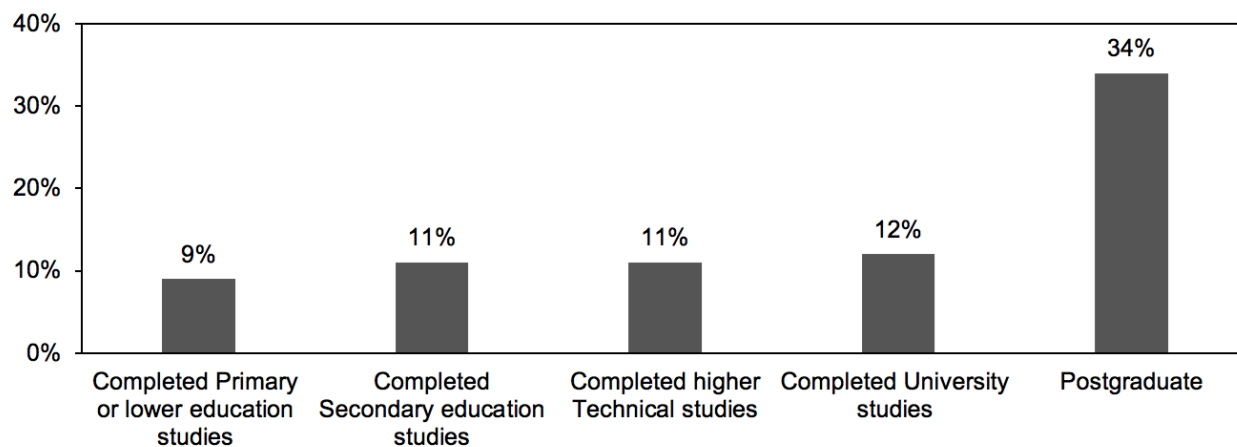


Figure 1.

Predicted probabilities of interest in reaching a PhD level by university students in Chile according to the educational level of the head of household

Figure 2 illustrates the predicted probabilities of university students desiring to pursue doctoral studies based on the type of university establishment and secondary education they attended. According to the results, there is no significant difference in the predicted probability of a student from "Research-intensive and doctoral programs Consolidated Universities" and one from "Emerging in research and postgraduate education and/or Teaching-oriented Universities" being interested in pursuing a doctoral level of education. Similarly, in terms of secondary education establishment, there is no significant difference between students who graduated from a "Public Municipal" (12%), "State-subsidized private" (13%), and "Private unsubsidized" (13%) secondary education institutions.

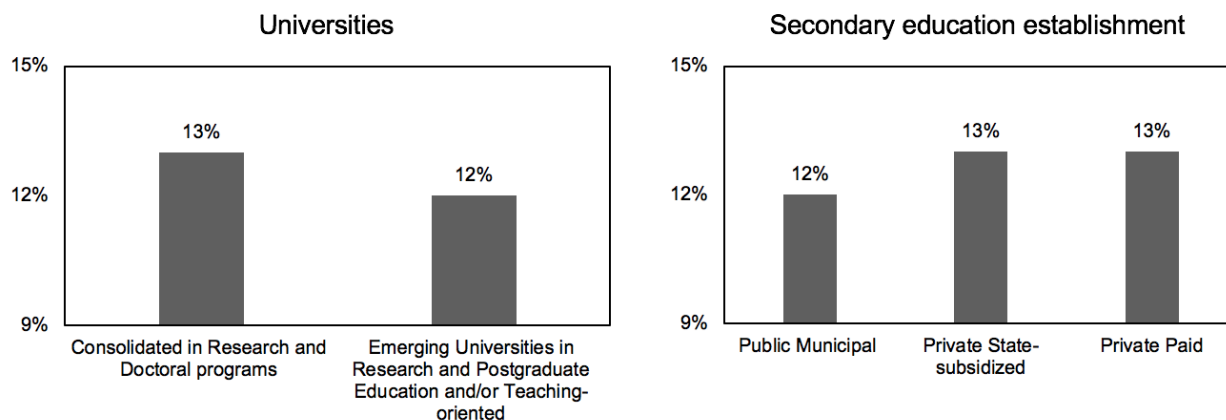


Figure 2.

Predicted probabilities of interest in reaching a PhD level by university students in Chile according to the type of higher and secondary education institution attended by the student

Discussion and conclusions

In this article, we explored the relationship between intergenerational educational mobility, addressed through the educational level of the household head, and the interest of university students in Chile in pursuing doctoral level studies. We formulated a general research hypothesis and two specific hypotheses, which are discussed below based on the results obtained.

Regarding the general hypothesis of this study (H1), the results highlight the positive and significant relationship between intergenerational educational mobility, measured by the educational level of the household head, and the interest in pursuing doctoral studies among university students in Chile.

Concerning the first specific hypothesis (H1a), the educational level of the household head emerges as the main socio-educational predictor of the dependent variable. It is also noteworthy that the educational level of the household head has a significant effect on the interest in pursuing doctoral studies only when the household head has postgraduate education, with students whose household heads completed primary education or less serving as the reference group. The results indicate that the probability of having an interest in pursuing doctoral studies is higher among Chilean students whose household heads have postgraduate education, being three times higher compared to those students whose household heads have other educational levels.

In relation to the second specific hypothesis (H1b), the results show that the probabilities of expressing interest in pursuing doctoral studies are not significantly different among university students whose household heads attained the following educational levels: Complete primary education or lower, Complete secondary education, Complete technical education, or Complete university education, i.e., those who did not pursue postgraduate studies. These findings suggest that, regardless of whether household heads have the aforementioned educational levels, including complete university education, students exhibit notably similar probabilities of expressing interest in pursuing doctoral studies.

In reference to the relationship between educational trajectory and interest in pursuing doctoral studies, on one hand, there is no significant effect observed from the type of secondary education institution where the student completed their studies. On the other hand, it is noted that students who pursue their undergraduate studies at research-intensive universities, traditionally associated with higher levels of reputation, as well as those emerging in research and/or with teaching-oriented approaches, do not show significant differences concerning the dependent variable. This contrasts with international research suggesting that the experience in research-focused institutions may motivate students to pursue postgraduate studies (Borrego et al., 2018; Eagan et al., 2013; Guerin et al., 2015).

The analysis of sociodemographic variables indicates that the region of residence in Chile has a significant effect, showing an increase in the likelihood of interest in pursuing doctoral studies among students from regions other than the Metropolitan area. This finding is in line with previous research highlighting the effects of residential macro-zones on higher education in Latin America (Dalle et al., 2019; Salata, 2018). Contrary to the literature on educational trajectories (Dalle et al., 2019; Perna, 2004; Salata, 2018), this study indicates that age and gender do not significantly influence the dependent variable. Regarding gender, this result may be attributed to the progressive closing of gender gaps in access to higher education in Chile in recent years, with the participation of women in university education currently slightly higher than that of men (MINEDUC, 2019).

These results are consistent with findings in the literature, which indicate that while there is stable intergenerational educational mobility over time, significant levels of inequality based on parents' education levels are still observed, particularly at higher levels of education (Grujters et al., 2019; Torche, 2019, 2014). This result reflects the underlying structures of the Chilean educational system, which, despite expanding its offerings and democratizing access through compensatory policies in primary and higher education (Torres, 2022), still exhibits a marked lack of educational mobility among youth from low-income backgrounds and a concentration of postgraduate studies in socioeconomically advantaged strata (Jiménez and Jiménez, 2019; OECD, 2017).

These results also have particular implications in terms of human capital formation policies, an area in which Chile has made significant progress (OECD, 2017). Significant doctoral scholarship programs implemented in Chile for over a decade should be highlighted, enabling students to pursue doctoral studies both domestically and abroad, as well as policies aimed at the professional integration of these doctoral

graduates (CONICYT, 2017; Torres et al., 2017; Pinto, 2017). In this regard, the findings of this study can inform further advancements in democratizing the training of future researchers and academics. The results suggest that the development of educational and scientific programs that, throughout the educational trajectory, promote contact between young people from middle and low socio-educational backgrounds with research, could increase the likelihood of their interest in pursuing doctoral studies, thereby limiting the effects of social background.

In terms of future perspectives, and considering the limitations of this study, quantitative research could further explore these findings through empirical models that include unexplored variables and specific sampling designs. On the other hand, qualitative research could unravel the meanings of the variables under study, delving into the subjective experiences of students aspiring to a doctoral level of education. This is particularly relevant for first-generation university students, whose trajectory is noteworthy due to their aspiration to achieve an educational level that is improbable given the educational level of their household heads.

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