

## High School to College Transition Experiences of Students Admitted in a Chilean Traditional University (CRUCH) through Inclusive Special Admission

### Experiencia de transición de la secundaria a la universidad de estudiantes admitidos en una universidad tradicional chilena (CRUCH) vía admisión especial de carácter inclusivo

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#### Abstract

Based on a qualitative research design, this study aimed to reconstruct the transition experience from high school to university of a group of young university students from their own perspective. They were accepted through Talent+Inclusion, a special admission program at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, a traditional institution belonging to the Council of Rectors of Chilean Universities (CRUCH). The perspective of young students, who are key players in the whole learning process, may provide relevant information to the continuous improvement of support programs offered to freshmen when entering higher education. The main findings were summarized, describing the interviewees' entry trajectory and its principal characteristics, challenges, and difficulties faced by students in their first year, as well as the enablers and projections about future. Differences among academic cultures, identified in students' narratives, were observed and described, and their impact on inclusion, promotion of learning, and students' sense of belonging to the university were discussed.

**Keywords:** transition to college, inclusion and higher education, identity, diversity, affirmative action

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## Resumen

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En base a un diseño cualitativo de investigación, el presente estudio aspiró a reconstruir, desde la perspectiva de los propios estudiantes, la experiencia de transición de la secundaria a la universidad de jóvenes admitidos a través del programa de admisión especial Talento+Inclusión en la Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, institución tradicional del Consejo de Rectores de las Universidades Chilenas (CRUCH). El punto de vista de los jóvenes universitarios, actores centrales de todo proceso de aprendizaje, permite acceder a información significativa que aporta a la mejora continua de programas de acompañamiento ofrecidos a los nuevos estudiantes en su ingreso a la educación superior. Se ofrece una síntesis de los principales resultados del estudio, describiendo la trayectoria de ingreso referida por los entrevistados y sus características centrales, así como las dificultades y los desafíos enfrentados por los estudiantes en su primer año, facilitadores de inserción y proyecciones a futuro. Se observan y describen diferencias entre culturas académicas identificadas en los relatos de los estudiantes y el impacto de estas en términos de inclusión, promoción del aprendizaje y sentido de pertenencia de los alumnos con su universidad.

**Palabras clave:** transición a la universidad, inclusión y educación superior, identidad, diversidad, acción afirmativa

The coverage of higher education in Chile has increased steadily in the last 25 years (Mineduc, 2013). The massification of the system has allowed the participation of students who are diverse in terms of age, gender, social background, schooling background and expectations (Aequalis, 2011). However, in Chile as well as in Latin America, higher education continuity is not equally distributed (ONU, 2008); nowadays, is possible to observe a “continuing inequality in rates of access to and retention in university, and a segmentation by class according to students’ university of destination” (Leyton, Vásquez, & Fuenzalida, 2012, p. 62).

In order to confront the segmentation of the system and to increase diversity and inclusion, several universities, including the most selective<sup>1</sup>, have incorporated admission routes for traditionally excluded groups. These can be understood as affirmative action that aims to “compensate or remedy the specific effects of the lack of opportunities in the education system” (Reynaga, 2011, p. 153). Examples of this are university propaedeutic programs, *equity quotas* or places for students with *academic talent*.

From an inclusion perspective, social opening challenges universities to educate in diversity, identifying barriers to access, progress and graduate of the new students (Unesco, 1998, 2009). When observing the differences in continuity and graduation of Chilean students in higher education, the challenge becomes clear: “students from poorer families or from municipal schools have higher drop-out rates and take longer to complete successfully” (OCDE, 2009, pp. 91).

Dropping out and academic lag cannot be seen as exclusive responsibility of students. Taking students in and providing them with fair opportunities is a challenge that corresponds to the universities. These institutions are responsible for “the provision of proper resources that allow students to achieve the expected learning, a process that also includes compensatory policies” (Donoso & Cancino, 2007, p. 209), and even indemnity policies, for the effects of a school system that provides credentials without ensuring the necessary learning (Baquero, 2009). The point is not to differentiate teaching for different students, but to design university instruction and university life for diversity.

With the aim of contributing to the national debate on inclusive university policies and to the continuous improvement of strategies for receiving students, the general objective of this study was to reconstruct the high school to college transition experience of students admitted via an inclusive admission program to a selective university belonging to Chilean Council of Rectors (CRUCH - *Consejo de Rectores de Chile*), from the perspective of the students themselves. In particular, this study focused on the high school to university transition experience for students entering the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (UC) via the Talent+Inclusion (T+I) admission quotas.

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<sup>1</sup> Following Torres and Zenteno (2011), selective universities are understood as “institutions whose first year enrolled students have an average PSU score greater than or equal to 550 points” (p. 21).

The specific objectives were to describe periods of higher education first year identified by the participants, their academic expectations before and after starting university, their relationships with professors and classmates, the difficulties they faced and the resources they recognized and used to face these difficulties.

The features of the UC inclusion program and the background and frameworks that guided the study will be described below.

## **Background and theoretical framework**

### **UC Inclusion Program**

The program provides routes for admission, financing, academic leveling and support, and was created to ensure access and retention for students who face limitations in the admission to this university. T+I started in 2011 as part of the Inclusion Program and offers quotas for graduates of municipal or subsidized private schools who, among other requirements, pertain to any of the first four quintiles and are in the top 10% of their class. In 2013, 188 students were admitted via this route and were distributed among the nine undergraduate programs that offer this admission program.

### **Academic trajectories from a relational approach**

To explain students' university performance and retention, it is important to guide discussions using a relational approach (Gallardo & Moretti, 2013). This means understanding that while the results of a learning process are verified in the student, "this not implies that learning, like development, is a process that can be explained in a self-sufficient mode by individual's internal processes" (Baquero, 2008, pp. 25-26). The student's adjustment to an institution is constituted in the historical and contingent relationship between the student's learning trajectory and the university culture, expressed through discourses and practices (Carlino, 2005; Zittoun, 2008).

Following this line, although it has been documented that entering university is a challenging period of change for all new students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Soares, Almeida, Diniz & Guisande, 2006), social origin deserves consideration as a particularly influential element in this adjustment (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2003; Bourgeois, 2009). In this regard, entering the university is particularly complex for non-traditional students, since they must negotiate a delicate balance between their previous world and their new social world (Lehmann, 2014).

The concept of *habitus* is useful for understanding the process of adjustment to university. This concept, coined by Bourdieu, is defined as "the system of durable and transportable dispositions that work as the inclination or propensity to act in a particular way and to exhibit particular forms of judgement" (Gayo, Teitelboim, & Méndez, 2009, p. 45). For students from distant contexts from university world, this is presented as a discontinuous space of tension and challenges (Bourgeois, 2000; Fukushi, 2013; Lehmann, 2014; Zimmerman, Di Benedetto, & Diment, 2008). Metaphorically, those who find a consistent extension of their cultural class context in the university quickly become "fish in water" in the new environment, unlike those who, confronting the distance between their origin and the university world, perceive the "weight of the water," defined by the dominant cultural modes of the new context (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2005).

### **Transition process to the university**

The period following any break or inflection point experienced in life is understood as a life-course transition (Bronfenbrenner, 1987; Zittoun, 2007, 2008, 2009). Anyone who experiences a life-course transition begins a period of active changes, aimed at adjusting his or her life to the new environment, new role, or both. In this sense, transitions are opportunities for development, enabling new understandings and the elaboration of personal redefinitions (Zittoun, 2004).

The transition from high school to university can be understood as a transition that modifies the student's environment and social role, requiring the activation of cognitive, motivational and psychosocial resources, inseparably interwoven throughout the learning process (Bourgeois, 2009). This transition culminates in the second year when the student's continuity in the undergraduate program is confirmed (Rodríguez, Fita, & Torrado, 2004).

The full integration of the student into the university, both socially and academically, indicates a successful transition (Hu & Kuh, 2000). Socially, the integration involves the generation of bonds in the institution, feeling *part of*, finding space *to be oneself* and to change at the same time. Academically, the integration means that the students perceive that they have the skills to perform, pass their courses and remain in the university (Clark, 2005; Coromina, 2001).

Indicators of difficulty in the transition are failing courses, dropping out or finding an inconsistency between what is received and the students' aspirations. The perceived ineffectiveness of previous study strategies make the process more stressful (Zimmerman et al., 2008). In the social sphere, the feeling of not belonging to the institution or to the peer group creates a problematic transition for the student (Ezcurra, 2005; Roberts & Rosenwald, 2013).

At the successful conclusion of the transition, when the new student's continuity in the institution is confirmed, their identity is transformed, integrating the past, opening up a context of development in the present and outlining possible futures (Arnett & Tanner, 2006; McLean & Pasupathi, 2012; Swenson, Nordstrom, & Hiester, 2008). The student's identity, which is in permanent transformation, will be produced on base of narratives available in context (Crahay, 2002; Gallardo, 2012).

### Methodology

Considering the proposed objectives and the relational and dynamic nature of the transition processes under observation, a qualitative research design was chosen (Cornejo, 2006; Creswell, 2007; Flick, 2004), prioritizing depth and uniqueness in access to student testimonials. The analysis of life-course transitions through stories has been a favored way of exploring experiences of subjective change (Zittoun, 2009). Qualitative research has illuminated the psychological complexity of the trajectories of non-traditional university students, which were frequently invisibles (Roberts & Rosenwald, 2013).

According to the above, two strategies were developed for collecting data directly related to students: group interviews and a self-administered questionnaire, both conducted in December 2013.

Four group interviews were held with 12 students who were admitted in 2012 and 2013 via T+I. They were students of departments that in 2013 had already incorporated the program (Civil Engineering, Law, Business, Social Sciences and Natural Sciences and Mathematics). The main advantage of the group interviews is that they are "data-rich, encourage the respondents and support them in remembering" (Flick, 2004, p. 127). Each interview lasted approximately one hour and followed a similar semi-structured guideline. All interviews were recorded. Participants were given an informed consent letter, which promised confidentiality and anonymity in their responses. In addition, an online questionnaire, with both multiple choice and open answer questions, was sent to 2011, 2012 and 2013 T+I admission students was completed by 49 students.

Before the contact with students, in order to improve the interview guidelines and learn about the program, interviews were held with those in charge of T+I in each undergraduate program and at the central level and with a student who was formerly an undergraduate peer tutor coordinator.

This document looks at the results obtained in the student group interview analysis, which was conducted together with open-ended questions of the questionnaire, based on *grounded theory* procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 2002). The analysis also used the *graphic narrative*<sup>2</sup> tool, which allowed the narratives of entering higher education to be expressed schematically.

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<sup>2</sup> Proposal adapted from the writer Kurt Vonnegut by Gallardo (2012).

Triangulation between researchers was used as criteria of rigor in the analysis (Pedersen, 1992), discussing as a team the coding of the texts and the organization of the resulting categories, as well as their description and organization into comprehensive models.

In order to ensure the interviewees' confidentiality, since these students could be recognizable in their respective undergraduate programs (as they were part of the first generations admitted via T+I), overall results are given instead. For this reason, the specific undergraduate program is not indicated in cases of quotations.

## Results

### Periods of the transition process to the university

The testimonies of the participants described four different periods in the transition process:

1. Selection by the institution
2. Induction period
3. Period of strangeness
4. Period of evaluation and continuity

Using the *graphic narrative* tool, these periods can be represented as follows (with the Y axis representing the fortune of the main character of the story and the X axis representing the time from the beginning to the end of the narrated story).

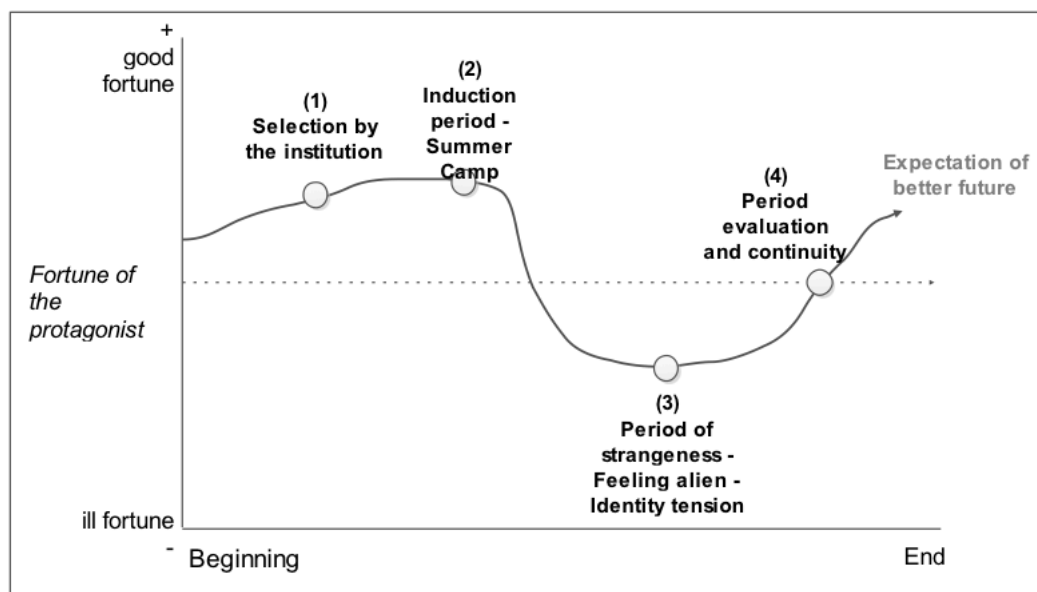


Figure 1. The plot of the story of first year students admitted by T+I access.

The main characteristics of each period identified are presented below:

1. Selection by institution: students described this moment as one of special happiness and increased expectations for future development, given the possibility of access to an institution that neither the students nor their families have considered previously within their educational projections.

In this pre-entry period, students reported having had different expectations regarding their future university classmates. Some were related to social origin: while some students expected to find diverse peers, others expected to find a homogeneous group of students who are “mostly from a high

socioeconomic class”, “*cuicos*”<sup>3</sup>, “[people who] do not leave their neighborhood” and “are from an upper-class family and private schools” (2013 admission student).

The expectation of finding peers primarily from a high social origin, in some cases, involved pre-entry perceptions of potential integration difficulties, according to the interviewees: “I thought it would be really difficult to get used to it or to feel included” (2013 admission student).

Other students expected to integrate with their peers in a not influenced way by differences in social origin: “I expected to find friendly and nice peers. People with whom I could easily relate, regardless of social class or sex” (2013 admission student).

2. Induction period: in January<sup>4</sup>, some departments developed induction processes preferentially aimed at students admitted via T+I. These actions included tutoring, campus tours and academic leveling. Interviewees positively evaluated their participation in induction periods before starting their first semester (depending on the undergraduate program, these could be called summer school or summer camp).

For students, the January induction was a highly-valued landmark in their transition, because in addition to knowing the institution and their classmates admitted via a similar route, making friends and forming study groups, they were also given access to academic leveling and were able to anticipate difficulties.

Regarding the academic leveling, students from some departments noted that it served as a reference to face the first classes; however, the progress of the semester would make evident their personal limits which were derived, in their opinion, from a weak previous education. For them, if there had been no induction experiences, the experience of academic gap would have been greater; the start without leveling “would have been even worse; chaos” (2013 admission student).

A major benefit of the induction reported by the students was the formation of a peer group, consisting of students who entered via T+I, before the start of the semester. This reduced the concern about social integration in the university. Many of the interviewees referred to the group as “a family” (2013 admission student).

In addition, students reported having received narratives from members of the institution about their future progress, discourses that had helped them to anticipate their freshman year and to know that “initially it would be difficult,” but they had been chosen “for a reason” and would soon be academically “indistinguishable” from their peers.

This period is remembered by students as particularly intense and motivating and full of joy and enthusiasm.

3. Period of strangeness: regardless of the undergraduate program, and moving past the initial joy, the first university semester (and in some cases the first year) emerged as a strange, complex and challenging period in the testimonies. Strangeness is understood here as the feeling of not fitting in with the new environment, increased by the observed inefficacy of previously effective strategies for social integration and academic performance.

Comparing how demanding their transitions were to the experience of some peers who, according to the interviewees, experienced this period with less pressure and demand, was something that promoted the sense of strangeness among interviewees. Comparing how special and well received they felt in the summer with the anonymity of the first days of classes “at the real university” (2013 admission student) also contributed to this feeling.

Meeting classmates who were closed off to meeting them also contributed to the strangeness:

<sup>3</sup> Pejorative term to refer to upper class people in Chile.

<sup>4</sup> In Chile, the first academic period starts in March.

As students in the [T+I] program, we came in alone; we had no acquaintances, relatives or friends here. On the other hand, people who came in by regular admission aren't alone; they have plenty of their friends. That's what causes them to close off as a group (2013 admission student).

Describing peer relationships, interviewees generally distinguished between T+I peers and the "other classmates" who entered by regular admission. The welcome period in January facilitated the generation of cohesive T+I groups in every department. From these base groups, students described the experience of opening up to the other classmates, who were distinguished between two profiles, some of them characterized by being welcoming and the others being closed off to diversity. In the latter group they perceived a "tendency to stick with what's comfortable, with what's familiar." With respect to the classmates described as welcoming, the students highlighted characteristics such as openness to meeting new people and an interest in talking about issues apart from academics.

According to interviewees, creating good relationships with classmates, whether they entered through the T+I program or regular admission, could promote a better process of integration into the university and strengthened the students socially and academically.

In the academic sphere, the first "failing grades" in their lives as students (less than 4.0 out of 7.0) and the difficulties in explaining their performance at home (given their past success in school) made the transition process more difficult. One interviewee described this period as "a process of falling" that was difficult to bear and share with friends, for whom she was always "the nerd" (2013 admission student).

For the interviewees, the presence of institutional support was crucial to coping with the stress they experienced. In general, the complexity of this period was tempered by the enthusiasm and support from faculty and staff with whom they dealt directly. Institutional support services were also mentioned, such as CARA,<sup>5</sup> for example, as well as actions taken by the Student Centers and peer tutors.

The specific support for the T+I program, such as peer and professor tutoring and meetings with the program heads, were interpreted by interviewees as advantages over their peers, especially those classmates who, in their opinion, were similar to them (in terms of social origin and access to socioeconomic benefits), who did not receive the same set of institutional support or have the same information that would have allowed them to "take full advantage of everything" (2013 admission student).

According to the testimonies, the role of the professors was critical in this period. Their influence could both facilitate and hinder integration: their interventions were strong enough to bring out the student and convince him or her of his or her abilities and place in the institution, or to push him or her away from learning, adding to the sense of strangeness.

In the students' opinion, building a good teacher-student relationship with professors would have favored their interest in learning and self-confidence. The role of teaching assistants was also crucial in this period. The assistants were described in polar terms by interviewees. Some were described as conscious of the differences and capable of clarifying the most complex aspects of the subject, and others as more oriented towards progressing quickly and covering content without considering the gaps between students.

Moreover, the students interviewed described various strategies used to address stress in their first year. These included using academic support resources, appealing to their own strengths (typically, individual perseverance and effort were mentioned) and actively forming social networks, participating in academic, political, athletic or cultural events.

4. For some participants, they were the ones who had to take the initiative to become socially integrated: "you have to leave prejudices behind, because if you don't, you end up alone." In contrast, other

<sup>5</sup> Centro de Apoyo al Rendimiento Académico y Exploración Vocacional de la Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (Support Center for Academic Performance and Career Exploration of Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile).

interviewees reported choosing to participate peripherally in their undergraduate programs as a strategy to deal with the initial strangeness and academic difficulties, concentrating all their energy only on going to classes and to the library to pass the time, instead of going to events. The important thing would be remain in the university and persevere, more than interacting with peers.

Period of evaluation and continuity: at the end of their freshman year, interviewees reported seeing themselves differently from when they started, experiencing “a 180 degree change” in their lives — and in that of their families—. At this point, unlike their first months, they were able to view the overcoming of many initial stresses with satisfaction.

According to the students, after at least one year at the institution, they were able to more finely identify social relations in the university, slowly opening up to contact with different peers (the same thing occurred, in their opinion, in the perspective of their “peers” towards them), decreasing the initial prejudices and identifying nuances within a group initially perceived as homogeneous.

The general experience of having successfully completed the first academic year —whether having failed courses or not, whether with high or low stress— could be expressed by the phrase “I did it,” used by some students in the sense of having ‘passed the test’ and feeling able to face new challenges with better tools than when they started.

In evaluative terms, the best thing that the UC experience gave them, in their opinion, was the experience of achievement and the creation of new friendship networks, mainly with T+I program peers and other classmates:

In general it’s a lot of things, since you learn to discover another world. The best thing might be the knowledge and all the content learned in the courses, because that’s something that you apply in day to day life. And also the relationships generated with [T+I] peers who become your friends, like a second family (2013 admission student).

“[The first year] taught me that anything is possible with effort and our worth is not in what we have, but what we are. If I want something, I have to fight for it” (2013 admission student).

Finally, the interviewed students, in general, took on the duty of facilitating the transition of future university classmates admitted via T+I.

### Differences in academic culture as described by the students

Attributes valued in each undergraduate program were identified based on the interviewed students’ testimonies. These aspects that the interviewees described either promoted integration in the university or promoted the aforementioned feeling of strangeness, at the social or academic level.

The attributes of status that the students perceived when entering the institution, identified in their discourse, included aspects that were *controllable* by the students, that is, attainable with investment of time and effort and/or investment of economic resources, and *uncontrollable* aspects, described as impossible to attain or change, since they formed part of the students’ social and family background. In the analysis, the research team categorized these aspects as follows:<sup>6</sup>

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



Table 1

Categories of controllable and uncontrollable markers of status in the undergraduate programs, constructed from student testimonies

A. Controllable status markers	B. Uncontrollable status markers
At the social level: <i>consumption culture</i>	At the social level: <i>colonial culture</i>
At the academic level: <i>modern culture</i>	At the academic level: <i>educational inheritance culture</i>

Culture “encompasses all the *social processes of production, circulation and consumption of meaning in social life*”<sup>7</sup> (García Canclini, 2004, p. 34). The relations of meaning present in a given context organize social life. For example, the meaning in context of the type of school of origin (public schools, private schools funded with public resources, or private schools), is used to define oneself in the new college context and this is not merely a description of social position, but of the value that one origin or another has in the context. The culture of a specific context organizes, with a particular meaning, the social differences carried by the individual subjects. This paper presents the interpretation of the students’ descriptions of what was valued in their respective undergraduate programs.

#### **Status markers that are controllable by the interviewed students.**

- At the social level, *consumption culture*: the presence of cultures of *consumption* was perceived in student testimonials. That which offered social status could be acquired at a high price. Clothing, transportation used to get to campus (public transport, private transport) or consumption patterns (vacations, parties) offered a higher status for some over others and were elements of distinction.

According to the students, encountering this kind of culture had two specific effects. On one hand, it created distance between them and their peers who had more resources, given the difficulty (or their rejection) of catching up in terms of consumption. On the other hand, it promoted—in some—previously unthinkable consumer expectations: “(...) now I hope to have things that my parents don’t even have and it wouldn’t have occurred to me to have before, like a car” (2013 admission student).

- At the academic level, *modern culture*: in these cultures the possibility of being part of the undergraduate program and succeeding in it is transmitted to all students from the discourses and practices of members of the institution (mainly professors and peers). In these contexts, the perceived message is that academic success in college would depend on the effort and persistence of each student.

Where this kind of academic culture dominated, what interviewees perceived as signs of status were aspects related to the development of a kind of *university student role or function*: doing assistantships, doing research with professors, joining development work teams or getting good grades. Building one’s own academic path was in the hands of each student on the basis of work and individual effort, precisely the attributes that, according to the interviewees, enabled them to get to the university.

#### **Status markers that are uncontrollable by the students interviewed.**

- At the social level, *colonial culture*: the adjective *colonial* is used to describe contexts where there was perceived to be a greater valuing of the bonds of family heritage and social origin as regulators of relationships between members. These were perceived as unchangeable aspects that provided a higher status in context, such as having a specific surname, having prior family and social networks in the university or having contacts in the future job market. These attributes were unchangeable.

<sup>7</sup> Italics in the original.

A *colonial* academic culture is a context where, despite the inclusion discourse, there is a perception of the weight of tradition, family networks and social contacts as a means of access to positions of distinction in the undergraduate program. The positions and opportunities for students are defined by aspects different of academic performance.

- At the academic level, *educational inheritance culture*: in this area, what some interviewees saw as valued were aspects of inheritance from elementary and secondary education. The presence of prior knowledge related to the undergraduate program's content, proficiency in English or the importance given to PSU<sup>8</sup> score in the undergraduate program are aspects related to students' past schooling and are impossible to change.

This type of aspect comes to light in the experience of academic achievement gaps with peers. Overall, the interviewees perceive that regular admission peers have more knowledge and skills, can more easily learn new things and have different ways of coping with stressful situations. In some cases, they specified that this advantage was perceived in particular subjects related to knowledge in science or mathematics, for example.

The aforementioned perceived gap with peers was exacerbated in some undergraduate programs, according to the interviewees, because some professors ignored these differences, requiring and valuing the knowledge and use of English, for example, which was a disadvantageous situation for them.

Moreover, their entry route into the UC also proved to be an unchangeable aspect. This route of admission operated as a label for special admission students ("the talents"). Furthermore, in some cases, entering via regular admission status had a higher status than entering by T+I.

An *academic culture* where, in the opinion of the students, the things that provide status and internal value are uncontrollable or difficult to attain for them, whether at the academic or social level, is a culture that fails to generate a comprehensive inclusion proposal. This situation was seen in contexts where students described characteristics called *colonial*, *consumption* and *educational inheritance* in the analysis. Precisely what the students lacked (previous social networks in the university, high consumption capacity) was what would give them a better symbolic—and concrete— position in the undergraduate program and, therefore, its absence was evident in the entry period.

On the contrary, from the perspective of students, where a *modern* culture prevails, with respect to the valued attributes, there is room for the inclusion, since a sense of equal opportunity is generated in terms of involvement and progress in the program. What is valued is precisely what favored the selection of students for the university: effort, perseverance and individual work. The merit discourse as an explanation of achievement predominates in these contexts and easily fits with the view held by students of their exclusive presence in the institution and their privilege compared to unselected high school classmates. However, their personal virtues at UC prove to be things like effort and perseverance, and not specific academic skills or innate talents. Similarly, the differences with their university classmates are explained by unequally distributed social privilege, not genius or charisma.

It is worth mentioning that the different ways of generating distinction and hierarchy in each undergraduate program, the so-called *academic cultures*, could operate together, simultaneously in each program of study, as observed, despite the prevalence of some discourses over others.

<sup>8</sup> Prueba de Selección Universitaria (*University Selection Test*) is the selection system mainly used by universities of the CRUCH.

## Discussion

As with previous studies, the findings of this research show that the experience of entering the university involves high stress for students from “non-traditional” contexts (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2003; Carlino, 2005; Ezcurra, 2005; Lehmann, 2014; Roberts & Rosenwald, 2013; Zimmerman et al., 2008). Here, in varying degrees, where the students perceived stress was in their social identity (How valued is my origin here?), their personal identity (Who am I? Who am I here? Who will I be when I finish?) and developing a sense of belonging to the institution (Bourgeois, 2000).

While these tensions, as noted, may be tempered by systems of support and assistance, by institutional offering of useful symbolic resources for the transition (narratives of the process or integration testimonies, for example) (Zittoun, 2007) or by positive interaction with peers, staff and professors (Dixon, Robinson, & Arredondo, 2006), the specific *academic culture* of each undergraduate program, expressed in the discourse and everyday practices of its members, has an effect on the feeling of strangeness between the students’ social background and the new educational context (Carlino, 2005; Zittoun, 2008).

If previous contacts and social networks are strongly valued in the undergraduate program, it would be difficult for a student who lacks these attributes to be equally incorporated. However, if what is valued is academic performance, then there is at least one appropriate chance of inclusion and participation in the institution. Students expressed interest in this form of integration, given the unique opportunity that higher education represents for them, in terms of social mobility.

What this study has called *academic cultures* can be understood as the *habitus* of each undergraduate program. This system operates as a “generator and organizer scheme of both social practices and of perceptions and evaluations of one’s own practice and the practices of others” (Gutiérrez, 2010, p. 15). Each academic unit, throughout its history, has generated naturalized forms of relations among its members. Continuing with the metaphor, it is in these naturalized arrangements in each undergraduate program, which are transparent and normal to its members, where students perceive the “weight of the water” when they enter the university (Bourdieu y Wacquant, 2005).

The aforementioned effect of strangeness and stress, linked to the upward social movement of non-traditional students, has been referred in other contexts. In Europe, for example:

(...) when someone from a working class family is learning Medicine or Law at the university, he or she is confronted with new knowledge and skills, but by the same token, with a new social world, a new culture, a new language, new “habitus” (in Bourdieu’s sense), a new set of social relationships, which may question more or less deeply, both his or her current personal and social identity (Bourgeois, 2000, p. 166).

The testimonies given by the students, which have enabled to this research the description and categorization of different types of *academic culture* in each program of study (*colonial, educational inheritance, modern* and *consumption*), offers the opportunity to illuminate the blind spots of each program, where certain discourses and practices, that shape the identity of its members, have become naturalized. These practices are invisible to a native of the dominant culture, but not to new members (Carlino, 2005).

The point of view of the interviewed students, in this regard, offers a new mirror to observe institutional practices and discourses sedimented in the tradition of the university as social institution. It is interesting to observe the types of *academic cultures* described in this study from this perspective, and use this opportunity to put in question their contribution to the construction of an inclusive community, capable to offer to the new students the opportunity to build a strong sense of belonging with their university, and to create fair learning opportunities for all:

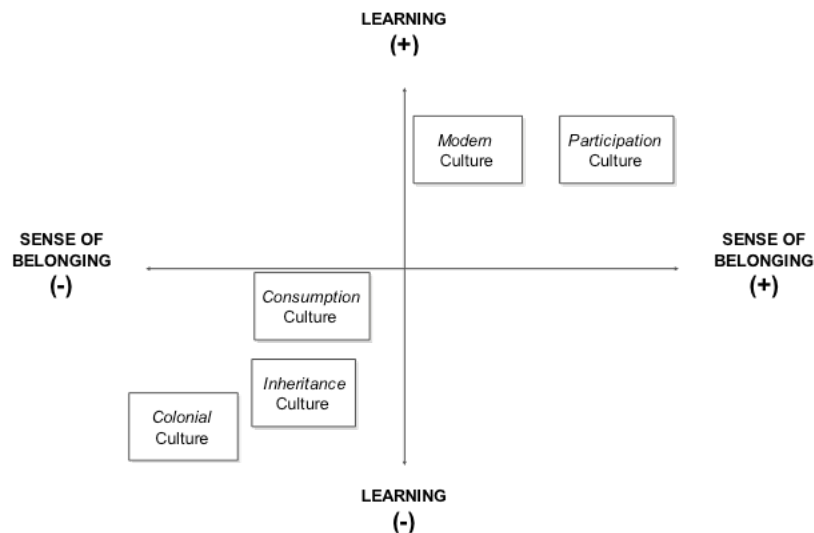


Figure 2. Academic culture and relation to the students' learning and sense of belonging.

As graphed in Figure 2, among the cultures identified, only the so-called *modern* promotes a sense of equality of opportunity for all members of the undergraduate program, favoring inclusion. Yet this culture does not necessarily promote a strong sense of belonging to the institution and its members, or internal cohesion, as merit is what is used as an individual explanation of performance, meaning the personal responsibility of each person, oriented so as to “assert their merit to optimize their chances. If succeeds, fine; if fails, bad for him or her” (Dubet, 2012, p. 47).

The aspects related to the *colonial*, *educational inheritance* or *consumption* cultures do not favor learning or a sense of belonging to the institution. Take this into account is important, especially when planning welcoming actions and in the evaluation of the messages that are sent to students.

Finally, with respect to Figure 2, an earlier study in the institution, which aimed at investigate in a retrospective way the transition from high school to the university with students of advanced years (Gallardo, Lafferte, & Montenegro, 2013), identified a type of academic culture that promotes cohesion, a strong sense of belonging and learning. Among other things, it identified the existence of rites of entry that promoted identification, a powerful undergraduate program identity and the presence of accessible peer groups organized by common interest (social, artistic, political and religious groups). This kind of aspect could be associated with a *culture of open participation*, where both in the undergraduate program and outside of it—although still within the university—students could appropriate discourses and practices that facilitate their belonging and future projections.

It is possible, as a hypothesis, to assume that the identification of a *culture of open participation* available in the institution is only visible after a longer exploration time in the university.

Furthermore, the description given by the students with respect to the role of prejudice in their entry experience is interesting. The students both perceive themselves as prejudiced towards their classmates, even before entry, and perceive their regular admission peers as prejudiced towards them.

From the students' description, prejudices—understood as “a particular form of attitude towards an object (be it a person, a group or a country, among others) resulting in positions favorable or unfavorable to them (González, 2005, p. 3)—mediate the initial peer relationships, especially in the first semester. Changes identified by the interviewees in this regard, perceived in themselves and in their peers throughout the first year, show how sustained contact over time among diverse peers favors the reduction of prejudice and a greater valuing of diversity.

This is supported by ample evidence that “confirms the positive effect produced by contact between

groups to promote the development of favorable intergroup attitudes (in terms of stereotypes, emotions and behaviors)” (González, 2005, p. 19). The increasing contact facilitates an opening up to new classmates.

However, it is important to note that having diverse students does not necessarily ensure positive contact between groups (Sebastián, 2007). Studies designed to explore levels of contact between diverse individuals in shared spaces (a university cafeteria, for example) show that sharing space does not necessarily reduce intergroup segregation (Clack, Dixon, & Tredoux, 2004). Moreover, any generation of *groups* that creates distinctions in a collective can lead to conflict and prejudice between groups (Páez, 2006). Here, even before entering the university, students already had the idea of an “us” versus “the others”, stressed by the formation of a cohesive group during the induction period. This aspect is a challenge that should be explored.

### Conclusions

The analyses offered here showed that, when observing the transition experiences from high school to university, it is not enough to look at the general characteristics of the receiving institution, but it is also essential to note the peculiarities of the *academic cultures* where the new students find themselves (Gallardo y Moretti, 2013). In this regard, the relational approach contributes to understanding this process.

The students’ perspective on their insertion process enables the identification of times of greatest tension and challenges, which were mainly in the first semester. In order to guarantee the highest retention possible, this period should receive the major institutional support, offering continuity to it over time (an aspect valued by the participants and described as fundamental in their continuity and satisfaction with the transition process). Since the UC Inclusion Program is aimed at institutional responsibility for supporting new students, it is important to understand the inclusion practices as a whole, that is, as a commitment of every member of the university. This makes sense when noting that, in evaluating their university experience, the interviewees viewed all relationships and experiences as part of the process, including classmates, representatives, staff and professors. Aspiring to inclusion in higher education, is crucial to denaturalize everyday practices and discourses present in each undergraduate program.

Following these lines, the role of professors turned out to be fundamental. The power of the teachers’ words to illuminate or to darken a learning process must be carefully considered. It is important to address non-inclusive practices present in the classroom, as described in this study, as well as the invisibility of diversity. In turn, the pro-inclusion actions available in each academic unit, which are valued by students, should be reinforced and disseminated (Gallardo & Morales, 2011). In words of Bain (2004), if one wants to improve some aspect of teaching, there is no better way than to consult the students themselves.

The role of peer tutors and assistants was valued by interviewees, in the same sense as that of their professors: their interventions could bring them closer or push them away from university learning. However, a limitation of these roles previously studied in other contexts must be considered: as long as academic spaces offered are not conceived from a *universal design* that enables everyone to be attended on equal terms, the impact of pro-inclusion actions of tutors and assistants will be limited (Allouch & Van Zanten, 2008).

Professors, assistants and tutors require training to effectively support these ongoing social opening processes. At UC, together with other actors, the CDDoc and CARA have made progress in this regard. The pro-inclusion task of universities is not to help their new students change and conform to traditional structures, but to open up to new welcoming and teaching practices where everyone has a place, allowing members to learn and develop in the institution (Unicef, 2005, 2006).

With respect to the study’s limitations, given its exploratory nature, it is necessary to deepen the aforementioned phenomena with new research. While the findings are consistent with other studies, these results are not automatically transferable to contexts that do not share the characteristics of the institution being researched. In addition, these results correspond to a specific historical time and place, and in future years there may be other difficulties and tensions to explore in the transition to the university. Likewise,

although it was decided to present the findings without differentiating between undergraduate programs—protecting the confidentiality of the participants— and this reduced the level of detail as reported in each academic unit, it is possible that, insofar as increases the adoption of this admission program, this limitation may be overcome by further research.

As future research, it is crucial to investigate the experience of others involved in the processes of inclusion in higher education—regular admission students, professors and directors—in order to discover their experiences and beliefs within increasingly heterogeneous learning contexts. In relation to the above, and given the importance for the transition process of what are here defined as *academic cultures*, it is essential to move towards a more complete definition of the concept, focusing on its relationship with the transition and inclusion process in higher education. On the other hand, it is important to extend the outlook to the consolidation and completion stages of tertiary education of non-traditional students and to investigate the impact that university pro-inclusion actions can have on the educational institutions from which these alternative admission students came.

To conclude, considering that “improving the quality of schooling in disadvantaged areas [is not the same as] helping those with greater merit among disadvantaged students have the opportunity to join the academic and social elite” (Dubet, 2012, p. 48), it is assumed that affirmative action such as T+I has limits in terms of addressing structural inequality in the education system. Nonetheless, it must be stated that these initiatives (a) offer benefits in the present for participating students and their families, (b) provide universities with important organizational learning ideas on how to include, retain and support non-traditional students and (c) contribute social diversity to each undergraduate program, potential opportunities for development and learning for all students (Sebastián, 2007).

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