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Climbing the Ladder

*Determinants of Access to and Returns from
Higher Education in Chile and Peru*

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Universities and Social Inequalities in the Global South

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Introduction to Working Papers on Universities and Social Inequalities in the Global South

This paper is part of a project which explores what role universities play in overcoming persistent and rising inequalities. Participation in tertiary education has increased significantly across the globe, in parallel with heightened social aspirations and the expectation of better labour market opportunities stemming from a university degree. However, these assumptions rely on certain economic and social conditions being fulfilled, some of which have worsened in the age of jobless growth. The project asks: What potential does higher education have today to increase social mobility, reduce inequality and contribute to the advancement of society through the production of knowledge and skills? Are institutions of higher education contributing to inequality rather than equality, and if so, through what specific actions and mechanisms? How can the transformative potential of such institutions be fully harnessed for overcoming inequality?

Working Papers on Universities and Social Inequalities in the Global South

Climbing the Ladder: Determinants of Access to and Returns from Higher Education in Chile and Peru

Anja Gaentzsch and Gabriela Zapata-Román, April 2020

“A Public and a Private University in One”: Equity in University Attendance in Kenya Since the Liberalization Reforms of the 1990s

Rebecca Simson and J. Andrew Harris, March 2020

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Acronyms

CAE	Credit with a state guarantee (Crédito con aval del estado)
CASEN	Chilean household survey (Caracterización Socioeconómica Nacional)
CFT	Technical training centres
ENAHU	Peruvian household survey (Encuesta Nacional de Hogares)
IOp	Inequality of opportunity
IP	Professional institutes
INEI	Institute of National Statistics and Informatics, Peru (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas e Informática)
INE	Institute of National Statistics, Chile (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas)
MINEDU	Ministry of Education, Perú (Ministerio de Educación)
MINEDUC	Ministry of Education, Chile (Ministerio de Educación)
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PRONABEC	National Scholarship and Educational Credit Programme
VET	Vocational education and training

Abstract

In spite of large structural expansions in higher education in Chile and Peru during the 1980s and 1990s, and a favourable growth context, levels of inequality are still very high in both countries and inequities in higher education persist. This paper investigates the role that higher education has played for social mobility in Chile and Peru. In particular, to what extent circumstances determined at birth are associated with educational achievement, and how these circumstances have affected the access and returns to higher education, both vocational and university studies.

Grounded in two conceptual approaches, human capital and equality of opportunity theories, the paper adopts a methodology of analysing secondary data sources from household surveys and administrative statistics in the two countries in order to present the picture of educational attainment in Chile and Peru, distribution of students to different types of tertiary education (public/private; vocational and technical/university) and differentiated by groups (male/female; indigenous/non-indigenous; rural/urban), as well as labour market returns.

The paper finds that (i) circumstances that are beyond the control of individuals including parental education, ethnic background and geography are strong predictors for access to higher education; (ii) for those who do enter higher education, there are differential patterns of entry into public versus private institutions, and different streams of higher education; and (iii) returns to higher education are generally high, but differ strongly between groups and type of institution attended.

Keywords

Access to higher education; returns of higher education; social mobility; equality of opportunity

Bios

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Introduction

Education is a key channel for social mobility within and between generations. The role of higher education is particularly crucial as labour markets are becoming increasingly technology-intensive and pay high productivity premiums. Unequal access to education reinforces inequalities also in other dimensions of wellbeing such as income and wealth. Providing broad access to university and vocational education is hence important to foster equality of opportunities and economic development.

Latin America is a region that is characterized by very high levels of income inequality and low social mobility (Gasparini et al. 2017; Torche 2014). The intergenerational transmission of educational achievement is a main driver of low mobility and becomes apparent in the form of self-reproducing educational elites and limited chances of upward mobility for children of poorly educated parents (Gaentzsch and Zapata Roman 2018; Neidhöfer et al. 2018). Peru and Chile have both experienced a large structural expansion in education since the 1980s to 1990s, a trend from which higher education has also profited strongly, as evident from the rising number of university graduates. This was one among several factors to contribute to the decline in income inequality and poverty that both countries have experienced since the early 2000s, albeit Peru to a larger extent than Chile. The great reduction in the share of people without any formal education and the decreasing returns to skills were driven by both the expansion of education and the patterns of growth which were fuelled by favourable terms of trade and high commodity prices. This created relatively more growth in demand for low-and medium-skilled labour in export industries and services rather than highly skilled labour. Especially in Peru, this greatly contributed to the reduction in poverty that occurred between the early 2000s and 2014 (World Bank 2016).

Notwithstanding this decline, levels of inequality are still very high in both countries. Unequal access to a stratified education system that is characterized by large differences in quality and prestige between institutions is one of the main drivers behind persisting inequalities.¹ Higher education stands out in particular: while it seems to hold the prospects of wider opportunities and social mobility, this potential is realized only for

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