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Regional Inequalities among State Universities in Chile: Perspectives on Centralization and Neoliberal Development¹

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Abstract: Drawing on perspectives from top state-regional universities' authorities (known as *rectors*) and public statistics on higher education, we discuss the sources of regional inequality in the Chilean university system. While there is scarce research on regional inequality for Chilean higher education,

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it is a well-recognized concern within global debates. In this study, the testimonies of rectors link perceptions of regional inequality to the historic, political, and managerial dimensions that have determined their institutions' development. As the problem of regional inequality stems from a tradition of political centralization, the neoliberal transformations, imposed since 1981, were singled out by the rectors for institutionalizing patterns of marketization that reinforced "inequalities of origin" for state-regional universities. Since the 2000s, trends of massification, regulation, and student protests reshaped higher education, leading to sectorial reform in 2018. However, competitive disadvantages are seen to continue to hinder the public role of state-regional universities. Institutional development strategies emerged, under the direction of rectors, to compensate for such inequalities, differentiating between winners and losers of neoliberal higher education. This article characterizes the modes of reproduction and overcoming of regional inequalities among state universities under neoliberal policy.

Keywords: state-regional universities; regional inequalities; neoliberal higher education; centralization; marketization

Desigualdades regionales en las universidades estatales en Chile: Perspectivas sobre centralización y desarrollo neoliberal

Resumen: Considerando las perspectivas de las mayores autoridades de universidades estatales-regionales (llamados *rectores*) y utilizando estadísticas públicas en educación superior, discutimos las fuentes de desigualdad regional en el sistema universitario chileno. A pesar de que hay escasa investigación sobre desigualdad regional en la educación superior chilena, este es un tema reconocido en debates globales. En este estudio, los testimonios de los rectores vinculan sus percepciones de desigualdad con las dimensiones históricas, políticas y administrativas que determinan el desarrollo de sus instituciones. Mientras el problema de la desigualdad regional viene de una tradición de centralización política, las transformaciones neoliberales que se imponen desde 1981 fueron señaladas por los rectores por institucionalizar patrones de mercadización que reforzaron "desigualdades de origen" para las universidades estatales-regionales. Desde los 2000, tendencias de masificación, regulación y protestas estudiantiles transformaron la educación superior, conduciendo a una reforma sectorial en 2018. Sin embargo, se observan desventajas competitivas que continúan limitando el rol público de las universidades estatales-regionales. Estrategias de desarrollo institucional emergen para compensar por estas desigualdades, diferenciando entre ganadores y perdedores de la educación superior neoliberal. Este artículo caracteriza los modos de reproducción y superación de desigualdades regionales entre universidades estatales bajo la política neoliberal.

Palabras-clave: universidades estatales-regionales; desigualdades regionales; educación superior neoliberal; centralización; mercadización

Desigualdades regionais nas universidades estaduais no Chile: Perspectivas sobre centralização e desenvolvimento neoliberal

Resumo: Considerando as perspectivas das mais altas autoridades das universidades estaduais-regionais (chamados *reitores*) e utilizando estatísticas públicas no ensino superior, discutimos as fontes da desigualdade regional no sistema universitário chileno. Apesar de haver poucas pesquisas sobre desigualdade regional na educação superior chilena, este é um tema bastante conhecido no debate global. No presente estudo, os depoimentos dos reitores relacionam suas percepções de desigualdade com das dimensões históricas, políticas e administrativas que determinaram o desenvolvimento de suas instituições. Enquanto o problema da desigualdade regional remonta a uma tradição de centralização política, as transformações neoliberais que se impõem desde 1981 foram apontadas pelos reitores por institucionalizarem padrões de mercantilização que reforçaram estas

“desigualdades de origem” em detrimento das universidades estaduais-regionais. Desde os anos 2000, tendências de massificação, regulação e protestos estudantis transformam a ensino superior, conduzindo a uma reforma no setor em 2018. Apesar destas mudanças, observase que desvantagens competitivas continuam limitando o papel público das universidades estaduais-regionais. Estratégias de desenvolvimento institucional emergem para compensar estas desigualdades, diferenciando entre ganhadores e perdedores da educação superior neoliberal. Este artigo aborda os modos de reprodução e superação de desigualdades regionais entre universidades estaduais sob a política neoliberal.

Palavras-chave: universidades estaduais-regionais; desigualdades regionais; educação superior neoliberal; centralização; mercantilização

State Universities between Regional Inequality and Neoliberal Policy

Chilean higher education has received much scholarly attention in recent years due to the crisis of its neoliberal direction (Fleet et al., 2020). During the last decade, Chilean higher education reached the peak of a cycle of marketization and massification of enrollment, which led to massive student protests in 2011 that were the largest social mobilization since the restoration of democracy in the country in 1990. As predicted in literature on the massification of higher education (Trow, 2007), this student movement contested neoliberal policy with a claim for public, free, and quality higher education—that is, higher education as a social right, rather than as a privilege or private investment. This demand was subsequently institutionalized as a comprehensive legal reform for higher education, implemented in 2018. But, as we will see in this study, while this reform was originally motivated to recover a sense of public higher education and restore the relation of the state universities with their owner, that is, with the state itself, it was eventually contained within the neoliberal framework, reinforcing market competition as a driver of the higher education system.

In this context of transformation, the state universities, which are at the center of public higher education, have played an active role. Our focus lies on the state-regional universities, comprising the state universities that are located outside the capital of Santiago and throughout the national territory. These universities have not been studied as institutional actors inscribed in such processes of crisis and reform, with their own grievances derived from different situations of regional inequality. The state-regional universities were actually created as autonomous institutions—separated from the national state universities—with the imposition, by a military dictatorship, of the neoliberal framework for higher education in 1981. Within this framework, they have had to compete to recruit students and capture state funding bearing diverse handicaps of regional inequality. Along these lines, students from the state-regional universities were actively mobilized in 2011 to demand free public higher education as a social right in a stage of universalization of access (Fleet & Guzmán-Concha, 2017). In turn, the authorities of the state-regional universities, through their associations², have claimed for a *preferential* relation with the state and for the compensation of the *regional inequalities* that affect their institutions in sectorial policy. Consequently, the 2018 higher education reform also brought about a new and unprecedented law for *state universities*.

In this study, we explore the situation of the state-regional universities through the voices of their top authorities, called *rectors*, a title that is the equivalent to a North American university president and an English vice-chancellor. There are no previous studies on the Chilean case that address the problems of regional inequality affecting the subsystem of state universities, and the

² The Council of Rectors of Chilean Universities, CRUCH; the Council of State Universities, CUECH, and the Association of Regional Universities, AUR.

strategies adopted to compensate for them, from the perspective of their top authorities. In this manner, we articulate a first-person account of the challenges faced by the state-regional universities, which comes together with a grounded critique of the recent changes to higher education policy in Chile. We hope that the insights from this exploration will contribute not only to illustrate the transformations and contradictions of Chilean higher education from a regional perspective, but also to situate the challenges of regional higher education within the limitations of neoliberal policy in general.

The problem of regional inequality certainly transcends concrete social formations. Framed within the center-periphery binomial (Cardoso & Faletto, 1979), the problem of regional inequality results from the centralization of power and resources that situates the regions as underdeveloped territories, but with specific attributes and potentialities that shape patterns of regional development under relations of subordination or dependency to the center. Therefore, the problem of regional inequality is not static, but dynamic. Specific patterns of development of regional territories and institutions, including state-regional universities, unfold in relation to the center. Along these lines, global discussions have often focused on the role of regional universities as crucial developmental agents. They are seen contributing, among other effects, to retaining population (Theodora, 2008), generating employment opportunities and demanding services (Boucher et al., 2003), making infrastructure, culture, and specialized knowledge available (Benneworth & Sanderson, 2009; McLendon, 1999), producing social, technical, and political leadership (Drucker & Goldstein, 2007), and sustaining social integration and competitiveness for the regions (Guerrero et al., 2014). In Chile, the state-regional universities are seen also as decisive agents of regional development, adding contributions to the building of democratic polity and environmental sustainability (Consorcio de Universidades del Estado de Chile, 2009; Gaete, 2010).

However, the problem of regional inequality might be reproduced via regional universities as well. While the peripheral regions “tend to suffer from a multiplicity of socio-economic issues, such as deindustrialisation, unemployment, brain drain, and high levels of social exclusion and, thus, are often stigmatised as ‘places to avoid’” (Pinheiro et al., 2018, p. 2), universities there might face multiple disadvantages. In Chile we found the generalized perception that regional universities are tasked with responding to larger developmental challenges, while capturing less resources and recognition than the metropolitan ones. There remains a lack of scholarly discussion on how regional inequality takes place within the universities, conditioning specific patterns of institutional development. Thus, this article seeks to elaborate a new focus on the ways that state universities experience and confront such inequalities.

Situated in the intersection between regional inequality and neoliberal policy, our research looks at the specific manifestations of such a double determination in the development of the state-regional universities in Chile. Historically, Chile has been a centralized country (Ferrada, 2001) with multidimensional inequality taking place in its regions (United Nations Development Programme, 2018). But the imposition of neoliberal policy since 1981 institutionalized new constraints that reinforced the preexistent regional inequalities among state universities. The long-lasting effect of the neoliberal framework stems from the reduction and uneven distribution of public resources, making the state universities’ funding dependent on the recruitment of students, which therefore constitutes a competitive limitation for universities located in regions with reduced populations and smaller higher education markets. As we will see, within the neoliberal framework different regional inequalities transform into competitive disadvantages that affect the performance of state-regional universities in various levels, such as academic offer, faculty and, research productivity (Donoso et al., 2012; Fernández-Labra, 2008; Rivera et al., 2018).

The neoliberal reforms of the dictatorship marked the birth of the state-regional universities in Chile. Before 1981, there were eight universities—two state owned and six private—which, for the effects of state funding, were all regarded as public universities (Brunner, 1986). The two state universities, located in the capital, had branch campuses throughout the country, serving as professional schools for the regions (Ortiz-Salgado & García-Carmona, 2018). Then, in 1981, the regional branch campuses were separated from the metropolitan (hitherto national) state universities (Consejo de Rectores de las Universidades Chilenas, 1981), turning the two existing state universities into 15. Counting the three new state universities created after the dictatorship, between 1992 and 2015, today there are 18 state universities in total³. Therefore, today there are four state national universities in Santiago and 14 state-regional universities outside the capital city.

Within the process of regionalization carried out by the dictatorship—in which the current regional division of the country was instituted—the separation of the state-regional universities from the metropolitan universities was welcomed in the regions at the time—as it was considered an advance in decentralization (Boisier, 2000; Pinedo-Castro, 2012). However, the neoliberal project of the dictatorship followed other interests, and had other implications, far beyond a regional outlook. On the one hand, these reforms obeyed to the economic interest in the marketization of social services and public institutions. On the other hand, it also responded to the conservative interest in breaking affiliations between popular movements and public institutions. Certainly, public universities had suffered the repression of the dictatorship to a brutal extent, with the objective of disarticulating the politicization of the academic communities (Mönckeberg, 2005). In this fashion, within such a constellation of market and conservative interests—expressive of the dominant bloc of the dictatorship (Silva, 1996)—the neoliberal reforms privatized and commodified higher education, whereas the separation of the state-regional universities sought to disarticulate the presence of state higher education throughout the country in order to prevent the politicization of students on national concerns (Fleet, 2021). Both the interests in the marketization of the state universities and the conservative bias against public institutions proved detrimental to the then newly created state-regional universities.

Thereby, the higher education system was then *re-founded* upon the market. The neoliberal reforms created new private universities and higher education institutions, which ended up constituting the predominant sector in the higher education market. In turn, the state universities were defunded. Their direct state funding decreased—to a half in 1981—and they had to charge student fees. Other regressive incentives then enacted included a subsidy for *selectivity*, paid to the universities via the recruitment of the best 27,500 students from the state-wide admission's test (Consejo de Rectores de Universidades Chilenas, 1981). Therefore, the state universities were forced to compete among themselves and with the private universities for student recruitment to ensure their economic sustainability, while the state-regional universities, located far from the main higher education markets, were in disadvantage in these conditions. By this token, the concept of “inequalities of origin” was coined to show how the neoliberal reforms reinforced inequalities among state universities, as market and financial handicaps correlated with other indicators of institutional funding affecting the state-regional universities within his framework (Améstica et al., 2014), configuring a *Matthew effect* in higher education (Flores & Fleet, 2018).

After the end of the dictatorship in 1990, there was a need to update the neoliberal framework to respond more effectively to the demands of the new democratic society. *Second*

³ The remainder six private universities that existed before the 1981 reforms (that conform, with the state universities, the group of *traditional universities*), include the most prestigious regional and Catholic universities, from which the main Catholic university located in the capital also rid itself of most of its regional branches at the beginning of the 1990s.

generation reforms were then implemented in different fields of policy, including higher education, to balance privatization and marketization with stronger regulation. As noted, since the 2000s, Chilean higher education initiated a cycle of unprecedented massification, which was paired with stronger quality control (Salazar & Leihy, 2013). Accreditation processes were legally institutionalized in 2006 to be applied in all levels of institutional performance. Also, new mechanisms of performance-based funding were implemented for public universities. Last, the expansion of enrolment was boosted by the universalization of student loans made available for all accredited higher education institutions, both private and public. As these loans were granted by private banks—and guaranteed by the state—a new business was attached to the expanding higher education market, which eventually sparked the systemic crisis of 2011, once student indebtedness was widespread.

In total, the *second-generation reforms* enforced the fact that no longer market competition alone, but also compliance with state regulation, became determinant of the universities' development. However, as such regulatory frameworks neither differentiate their responses for the specific needs of regional higher education nor provide incentives to buttress the public mission of the state universities in the regions (Rivera et al., 2018; Silva-Peña & Peña-Sandoval, 2019), these institutions have had to implement developmental strategies to align themselves to general regulatory frameworks and compensate for their own competitive disadvantages.

In the wake of the 2011 student protests, the higher education reform of 2018 granted the demand for free higher education as a social entitlement for the poorest 60% of the population (Ministerio de Educación, 2018a), instituting a significant departure for one of the most marketized and expensive systems in the OECD (OECD & World Bank, 2009). However, as free higher education took the form of a tuition *voucher*, to be used in both private and state universities—as long as they are accredited for a minimum of four years⁴—it added a new incentive to compete for student recruitment, reinforcing competitive disadvantages for the state-regional universities within the neoliberal framework. In turn, the first law for state universities (Ministerio de Educación, 2018b) came as a side product of the parliamentary discussion of the 2018 higher education reform, as it proved impossible to include specific norms for the state universities within the main law for all higher education institutions. So, this new law for state universities was awaited with the expectation that the state would retrieve its role as owner of its universities, establishing a *preferential relation* with its higher education institutions. However, according to the rectors interviewed for this research, such hopes were disappointed, since the new law did not change the funding scheme for the state universities, and so their operation remains dependent on the market—with the competitive disadvantages attached to the regional peripheries.

Therefore, what we have here referred to as a crisis of neoliberal higher education did not imply the overcoming of such policy framework. The state universities were not brought closer to the state and away from the market. Neither the state-regional universities were recognized and funded in accordance with the regional needs and challenges. Instead, a crisis of neoliberal policy followed from the preservation of the centrality of market competition in juxtaposition to the values of free public education and equality. The typical expression of such contradiction, as one of the main motives of the new legal framework, was more regulation, which according to the narratives of rectors, implied a heavier burden of democratic legitimization and bureaucratic administration for the state universities in comparison to the private ones.

In this study, we seek to comprehend the development of the state-regional universities both in relation to different regional inequalities and in response to the incentives of neoliberal regulation.

⁴ Institutional accreditation is granted for periods ranging between three and seven years. Hence, years of accreditation constitute an official ranking of quality of higher education, that is used to differentiate tiers of tuition fees—i.e. higher quality institutions are allowed to charge larger fees than lower quality ones.

By bringing the voices of rectors to the fore, we also add the first scholarly first-hand perspective about the challenges faced by these institutions, which sheds light on the regional dimensions often overlooked by the existing literature on the current changes of Chilean higher education.

This paper proceeds in six sections beginning with the methodological framework of the research. The following three sections present the empirical results based on interviews with state-regional university authorities, addressing their views on regional inequality, the universities' models of development, and the new law for state universities. The fifth section discusses our results, pointing out to the opaque effects of *university politics*. Then, we conclude summarizing the main findings and outlining future research on the subject.

Methods

This is a mixed-method study, in which the qualitative data collected from interviews with state-regional universities' rectors is contrasted with quantitative data, in order to bolster the validity of perceptions of regional inequality and differentiate the trajectories of these institutions in such conditions.

The primary source of information comes from the rectors' testimonies. We focused on their perceptions about how regional inequality impacted on their universities' operation, the institutional strategies undertaken to face such inequalities, and their assessment of sectorial policy changes in the country. These dimensions constitute the axles of our analysis. The testimonies were compared against each other to differentiate narratives for each dimension, from which we could represent different trajectories of state-regional universities.

Coming from the position of top authority of state-regional universities, the testimonies represent particular perceptions and elaborations. Indeed, as elected authorities, the rectors are political actors within their academic communities, and so they might present their own views and agendas. But this is precisely what this research is looking for: to bring to the fore narratives that are grounded in the experience of the state universities in the regions, while also sustaining a political critique of sectorial policy from that position, which enable us to inscribe different types of state-regional university within the neoliberal policy framework.

In turn, using secondary data from public statistics we triangulated the issues raised in the interviews with quantitative indicators, wherever information was available. Thereby, we sought not only to increase the reliability of the testimonies included in this study, but also to achieve a first comprehensive panorama of the state-regional universities as *institutional actors*, with statistics informing about the structure of inequality in which such *actors* are placed.

We conducted nine anonymous semi-structured interviews, of one to two hours of duration, with universities' authorities, of which eight were present and former rectors, and one was a vice-rector. Eight interviews were carried out in person in 2019, whereas the last one was conducted in 2020 online during a COVID-19 lockdown. The sample includes five state-regional universities distributed into four zones throughout the country, in accordance with the same labels used by the rectors in their accounts, namely: extreme north, center-north, center-south, and extreme south regions. The fifth zone corresponds to the metropolitan region, that is, the capital city of Santiago, which is not considered in the interviews, but it is represented in the quantitative data for comparative purposes. The statistics were sourced from two public data sets available on Chilean higher education, namely: Ministry of Education (2021) and National Council of Education (2021).

Perceptions of Regional Inequality

The testimonies of rectors outline their perceptions of regional inequality, using their own examples to represent the way such inequalities take place within their institutions, constituting various forms of competitive disadvantages in relation to the center. As noted, we use quantitative indicators to illustrate and contrast these impressions.

In general, the sense of the subordinate status of the state-regional universities with respect to the center is inscribed, according to one former rector, into a *tradition* of discrimination that affects the regions, certainly preceding the neoliberal reforms.

The unequal treatment within a highly centralized higher education system also has to do with an institutional culture, conscious or unconscious, of treating the regions and its regional institutions. (Interview 6, center-south, 2020)

But, at the same time, all interviewees agreed that the imposition of a neoliberal framework reinforced the pre-existing regional inequalities affecting their universities. As expressed in the following testimony, the neoliberal framework contained the political intention, not only to commodify higher education, but to devalue the state universities as well:

Since 1980 onwards, the ideologists of education didn't favor the state university.

Actually, one can say that there's been a deliberate policy to make the universities fail given the different measures adopted. (Interview 2, center-north, 2019)

Endorsing this impression, one rector candidly suggested that before the neoliberal reforms it was the public that “was the starlet”, but “now the starlets are the private” (Interview 3, extreme-south, 2019).

In another testimony, the idea of “inequalities of origin” is further documented. With the very birth of the state-regional universities as autonomous institutions in 1981, their investment budgets were long underfinanced:

The new autonomous [state-regional] universities were born with less budget than what they used to have when they were branch campuses. That was unilateral expropriation, vertical, authoritarian, centralist, of these [metropolitan] universities. (Interview 6, central-south, 2020)

Furthermore, this informant adds a rather awkward insight on how regional inequalities were reinforced during the dictatorship that imposed the neoliberal reforms: as the military took over the direction of the state universities since the 1970s, officials of the highest ranks were assigned as rectors of the metropolitan state universities, whereas military of lowest rank led the branch campuses (later state-regional universities), implying that the allocation of resources systematically benefited the metropolitan universities according to military rank, to the extent that there was: “a real dispossession that I witnessed, of equipment, patrimony, and budget of the branch campuses”(ibid).

As argued, neoliberal policy forced the state-regional universities to depend on the respective regional markets to fund themselves, so the reduced size and relative remoteness of such regional markets configure the main competitive disadvantage for these universities. The interviewees provided various insights of how regional inequalities turn into competitive disadvantages, starting with this very idea: remoteness from the largest higher education market. As the following testimony sustains, many state-regional universities eventually chose to establish themselves with branch campuses in the capital:

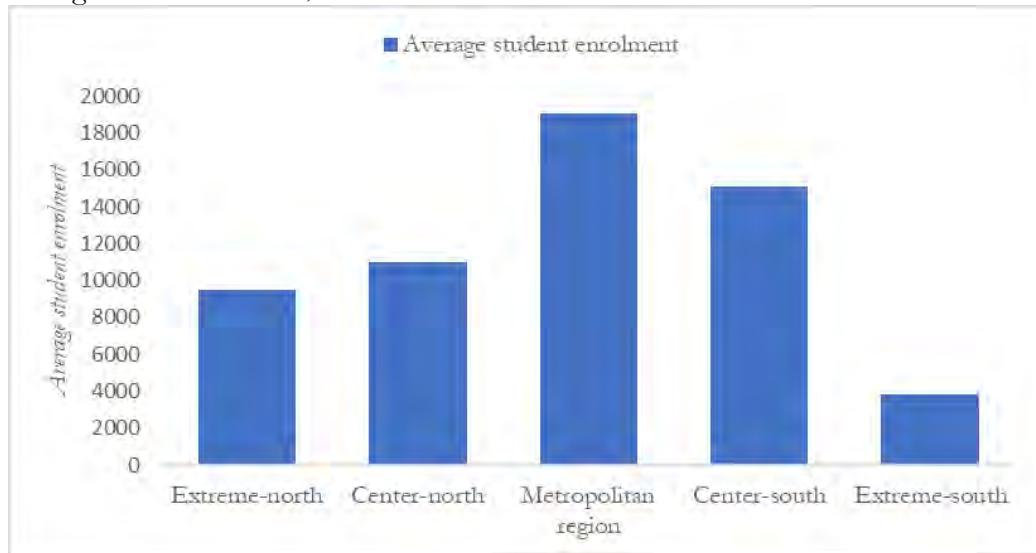
The sole fact of being placed in the Metropolitan Region not only gives them access to a series of resources... but also puts them in proximity to the market of students that generate resources and gives them relevance. Not by chance, the Universidad Técnica Federico Santa María, the [Universidad] Católica de Valparaíso, the Universidad del Desarrollo, the Universidad de Talca, have all opened branch campuses in Santiago... because that's where the great market is, the best opportunities of the higher education market. (Interview 6, center-south, 2020)

All other perceptions of regional inequality singled out by the rectors are derived from this peripheral condition. In the remainder of this section, these are organized as inequalities of student recruitment, attraction of academic faculty and institutional prestige.

Student Recruitment

The capacities to recruit students in the regions are from the outset limited by the size of the regional markets. Thus, differences on this regard are directly observable as the size of student enrolment in each zone progressively reduces as the distance from the center increases, as shown in Figure 1. However, this is not a problem of inequality as such, considering that the Metropolitan Region represents almost 40% of the national population, with the two original state universities located in the capital concentrating the largest student populations within the system of state universities. Such demographic distribution only counts as a source of inequality inasmuch as the number of students recruited by each institution constitutes the most important source of income for universities, especially since the state funds students with the abovementioned *gratuity* voucher. As we will see, the triangle shape of Figure 1 anticipates the patterns of regional inequality among state universities⁵.

Figure 1
Average Student Enrolment, State Universities



Source: Ministerio de Educación, 2021.

⁵ The state-regional universities' share of higher education enrolment in each zone follows an inverse pattern than the figure above: the further a state-university is from the center, the larger their share on the regional market is. While the average share of the state university on total higher education enrolment is 16%, for the state universities in the Metropolitan Region is 14,1%, whereas in the extreme regions goes from 35% to 49%.

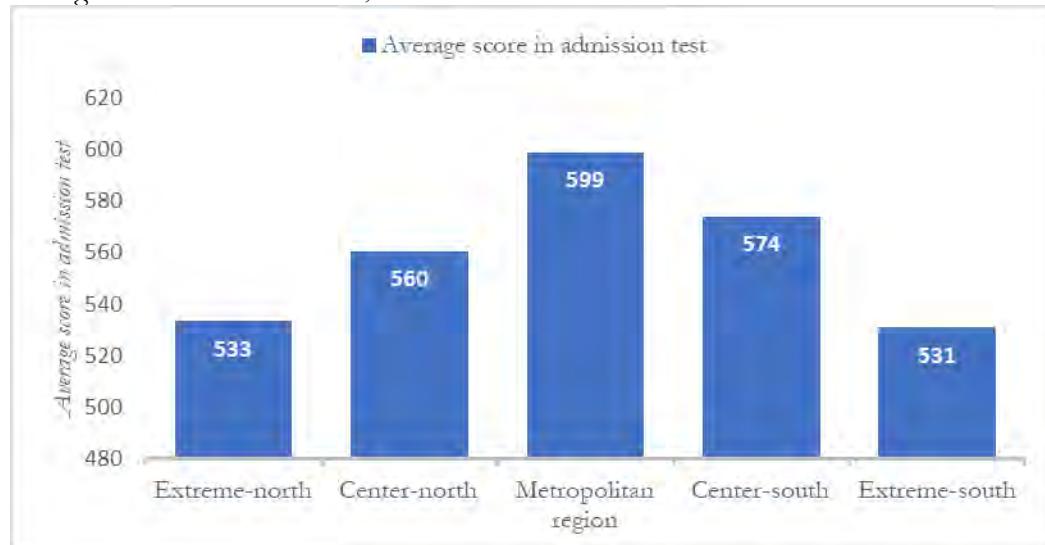
Among the implications attached to the limitations of student recruitment, the literature has considered its potential impact on curtailing the scope of the academic offer beforehand, inhibiting programs that recruit few students, but have large social utility, such as science education (Donoso et al., 2012). Furthermore, as market competition led to the expansion of both private and state universities to the regions (Zapata et al., 2003), although only offering the cheapest and most demanded programs (Silva-Peña & Peña-Sandoval, 2019), the financial dependence on the student demand seems to have jeopardized the pertinence of regional higher education altogether.

Following the testimonies, the limitations for student recruitment are further complicated by the regional segmentation of the students' scores in the national admission test. State-regional universities received a smaller share of the abovementioned financial subsidy of selectiveness, showing a characteristic pattern of regional inequality in which the most prestigious state universities in the center specialize in providing elite higher education, while most of the state-regional universities specialize in mass higher education, more likely to recruit students from lower socio-economic status (Fleet, 2021):

Everything's harder... if I have to educate engineers with 500 points [in the admission test], it's not the same as forming the same engineer with 700 points... it forces one to make larger efforts... everything's harder than if one is located in the center, where there are more options to choose, to select... but I achieve nothing by crying about it. (Interview 7, center-south, 2020)

As noted, the lower admission scores recruited in the regions imply greater labor incurred in the teaching process to meet the expected professional competences. As this extra burden is not recognized within the current funding scheme, it does accrue as regional inequality. Figure 2 confirms the regional segmentation of the admission scores, also suggesting a *brain drain* effect towards the center, which has already been documented (United Nations Development Programme, 2018).

Figure 2
Average Score in Admission Test, State Universities



Source: Ministerio de Educación, 2021.

The interviews also showed connections between the social segregation of the regional student populations and the politicized environment of the state-regional universities with the relative radicalization of the student mobilizations, which, from time to time, have further compromised the already limited capacity to recruit and retain sufficient students to ensure the sustainable operation of these institutions:

We have had a reduction of students... because of competition and also because of the *students' occupations*. The occupations have harmed us. (Interview 3, extreme-south, 2019)

Academic Faculty

Another crucial disadvantage voiced in the interviews referred to the difficulties of attracting quality academics. Table 1 confirms this, showing significant regional asymmetries in the ratio of academics with PhD in relation to student enrolment: in 2020, while the metropolitan state universities have almost 32 students for each fulltime academic with PhD, in the extreme-north the numbers duplicate, with almost 63 students for each academic.

Table 1

Number of Students for each Fulltime Academic (PhD), State Universities 2016–2020

Zones/years	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Extreme-north	70.6	64.8	67.6	67.0	62.8
Center-north	72.7	67.5	65.1	58.8	54.5
Metropolitan	36.9	36.1	34.0	32.8	31.8
Center-south	44.3	42.8	41.1	39.0	37.6
Extreme-south	69.6	65.5	57.7	49.6	38.6

Source: Consejo Nacional de Educación, 2021.

Now, while such inequalities in the allocation of academic faculty seem to be dissipating in time—thanks to the recent massive public investment in graduate studies—for the rectors this is still one of their most felt grievances:

If one asks any rector of a regional university: *what would you like the most?* To be able to pay advanced human capital well, to retain them to make the university more prestigious and make a greater contribution to development. (Interview 2, center-north, 2019)

The neoliberal framework implies that regardless of the different institutional missions, all universities must compete for their share of resources and prestige, and retaining academic faculty is essential to that end. As we will see, research productivity and the need to expand the scope of institutional functions beyond undergraduate teaching became fundamental for increasing state funding. Attracting and retaining academic faculty is a critical inequality that is directly related to distance from the center.

The rectors link this disadvantage to the difficulty of establishing graduate programs, since accreditation standards demand a certain number of academics and research productivity to constitute an *academic cloister*, that is, the academic core of each graduate program.

It's not the same to form a "cloister" [here] than in the center... the alliance [with other universities] is the only means we can deploy to tackle this need of attracting

human capital... we run with many disadvantages, not only economic, but also the remoteness. (Interview 9, extreme-north, 2020)

In another view:

It's hard because we don't have the number of academics to constitute *cloisters*... you cannot compare a PhD program with five academics in a cloister with a program with 30—some of them *national prize* winners—like in the Universidad de Chile. Competition is very unequal. At the end of the day, when you don't have graduate programs pertinent for your students, they are forced to leave for Santiago.
(Interview 4, extreme-south, 2019)

This last interviewee suggested that the state should generate a program to encourage academics to work in the regions part time, allowing them to remain in the capital city while combining periods of residency in a region, so “they don't think they come to die” in the regions. Therefore, as the interviews suggest, the problem with attracting academic faculty is not derived from unattractive material conditions—as some state-regional universities can offer very competitive salaries—but from reluctance of many qualified academics to relocate in the regions.

While the inequalities in the quantity of academic personnel is in the process of being overcome, the geographic segmentation of research productivity remains. With data from Consejo de Educación (2021), we count the number of academics it takes to obtain one national research grant (known as *Fondecyt*) to find that in the metropolitan state universities there are 18.6 researchers for each research grant awarded, whereas in the extreme-south the indicator is 33, almost half of the relative productivity. Yet, in the extreme-north researchers are the most productive, with 16.8 academics for each *Fondecyt* awarded.

The concentration of such *academic capital* also entails political consequences derived from the possession of informal networks with public institutions and funding sources, leading to “a strong asymmetry in the access to power, which obviously affects us” (Interview 8, center-south, 2020).

Symbolic Capital

Other disadvantages put forward in the interviews stem from the measurements of *symbolic capital*, such as rankings, that typically reward the well-known metropolitan universities to the detriment of peripheral ones:

University rankings are made in Santiago and don't ask the opinion of people in each region. So, what does some guy in the [Santiago] Metro know about the quality of an engineering program [in this university]? It cannot be that these surveys, often paid by the private institutions, will end up killing us. (Interview 4, extreme-south, 2019)

To illustrate this point, we checked different national rankings of the perception of quality and prestige. Some are not consistent over time as they do not include all state-regional universities regularly. The America Economía ranking (2020), which used to have most circulation, shows a geographical bias, with the state-regional universities of the extreme-north ranked, in average, in the 24th place, the center-north in the 19th place; and metropolitan and center-south universities in the 12th place—while the state universities of the extreme-south do not even appear in this ranking. In turn, as institutional accreditation provides an official ranking of higher education institutions—fulfilling the role of the state as the central bank of *symbolic capital* (Orellana, 2018)—its results also suggest a certain geographic distribution, with the top accreditations only granted to the two original state universities from the Metropolitan Region. Nevertheless, there are also state universities in the Metropolitan Region with similar levels of accreditation as some of the less prestigious state-regional

universities, whereas some state-regional universities have attained high performance in state regulation, resulting in excellent accreditation.

To confirm the *reputational* inequalities among state universities we analyzed the employability rates of the most popular undergraduate programs: administration, psychology, law, pedagogy and nursing. As shown in Figure 3, the rates are lower towards the extremes.

Figure 3
Employability after One Year from Graduation, State Universities



Source: Ministerio de Educación, 2021.

While the size of the labor markets in each region is surely relevant, the numbers include the employability of alumni of state universities beyond the region where they studied, as they could be employed anywhere in the country, suggesting a relative devaluation of the credentials in the periphery in relation to the center, at least after the first year of graduation.

Models of Development

The perceptions about regional inequality are not the end of the story. The rectors also narrated the link from the situations of regional disadvantage to *self-compensatory* management as *additional efforts* are mobilized to develop the public role of the state universities in the regions. This is where different models of development emerge in the narratives. In this context, two limiting conditions of the state universities were singled out by the rectors. On the one hand, the bureaucratic burden of the state universities constitutes a competitive disadvantage in relation to the private universities:

That's the situation in which a state university... carries the name of the state but behaves as an institution that must compete in the market with all the limitations of the state bureaucracy. Therefore, competition is unequal. (Interview 2, center-north, 2019)

On the other hand, the state does not compensate for the surplus work that is required for the state-regional universities to operate in situations of disadvantage:

The fact of being in regions doesn't [impede] that these must be good universities, capable of teaching universal knowledge and having a reasonable, competitive, serious, solid level and on top of that, the [regional] condition and compromise is added... which is a burden, an additional cost, for which there is no funding, rewards or additional recognition whatsoever. (Interview 6, center-south, 2020)

Another perspective wraps the same idea of the additional burden within the need of extra managerial capacities for the public universities operating far from the center.

We're working alone as an institution, with the few resources that exist, and working on things that are important for the country... We do this with an overwhelming effort and with the understanding and support of no one... One begins to see what we have to deliver as universities in *extreme zones*... These are responsibilities that the rest of universities don't have... and the resources aren't there, so we then enter the *affairs of management*. (Interview 4, extreme-south, 2019)

In this sense, *affairs of management* refer to what we have called as *models of development*, that is, the active self-compensation for the conditions of regional inequality. Such models respond to particular regional situations, including the predominant industries and occupations, and the way these are expressed within the universities, by means of predominant academic cultures (Ortiz-Salgado & García-Carmona, 2018). In a higher degree of formalization, the models of development also take the form of strategic plans, that project the universities as institutional actors (Brown, 2016; Uyarra, 2010) capable of turning the regional competitive advantages and disadvantages into resilient capacities for constant improvement of institutional performance—measured through increasing indicators. Furthermore, the models of development of the state-regional universities must balance the regional mission with the preservation of the standard of the university as institution (Atria, 2015).

Beyond the specificities of the different models, the neoliberal framework remains determinant. We can distinguish between models that are aligned with the *neoliberal* state incentives from those that actively pursue *neoliberal* market expansion. It is models of the first kind, defined by the internalization of the state incentives, that eventually became prevalent, that is, hegemonic among state-regional universities. The words of a former rector exemplify this, “to do the right work is the responsibility of each rector”, and furthermore:

Us rectors must think about how we survive in this system... nobody's going to give anything away... everything's planning, strategic definitions... just because we're regional doesn't mean someone is going to throw us a bone. (Interview 7, center-south, 2020)

In this context, strategic planning entails prioritizing academic areas that sustain competitive advantages; as put by the interviewee above, this demands universities “to be good in few things, and not bad in many things.” However, the technocratic rationale of such a *governmentality* might be at odds with the traditional academic values:

The state universities also have to attain efficiency... without harming the character of the university as institution...and so there's also the risk of turning the university into a kind of efficient service provider (Interview 1, center-north, 2019).

To which we ask, what are the strategic choices that define this hegemonic model of development? The answer lies, foremost, in prioritizing the advance of institutional complexity, that is, developing

research productivity beyond the teaching function. Within strategic plans, this implies increasing performance in research indicators that can capture more institutional funding within the current state incentives. In the stark vision of one former rector, this means: “to assume the model”, that is, to assume the *neoliberal model*:

I listened to what President Lagos said in 2001: that there were going to be teaching universities and complex universities... that teaching universities were going to receive this, and complex universities receive that... and I said: *I want to be there* [i.e. among the complex and well-funded universities]. (Interview 7, center-south, 2020)

To “be there” describes the meaning of the hegemonic model: linking research productivity with state funding. The perceived difficulty in attracting researchers acquires new strategic importance in this light, as another authority added:

We’re tremendously rigorous in the hiring... for 15 years we haven’t hired anyone without a PhD. Now, they must be part of a *graduate cloister*. (Interview 8, center-south, 2020)

The same interviewee also emphasized the *strategic value* bestowed by certain disciplines that are most productive in terms of scientific publications, to the extent that the universities’ strategic decisions should be oriented towards acquiring such disciplines in accordance with a cost/benefit rationale—rather than an academic or regional one.

I’d love to have a center of astrophysics, besides the cost-effectiveness in publications is very good, but if it’s not in my strategic plan, I cannot push it forward. (Interview 8, center-south, 2020)

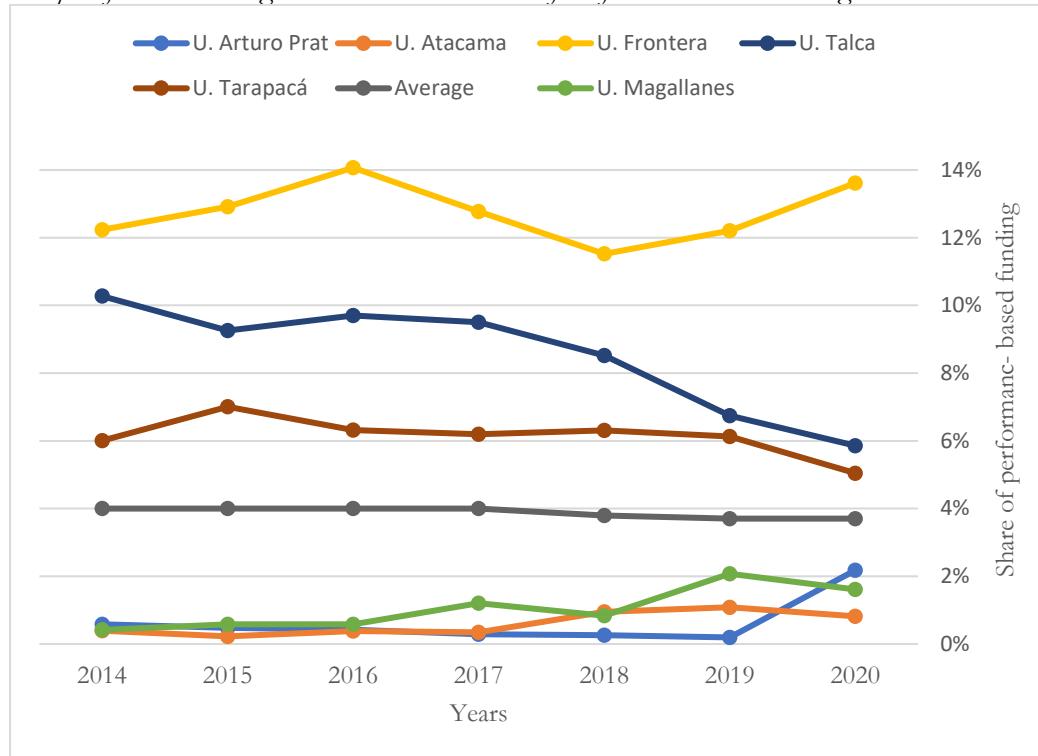
Since 2012, the hegemonic model is reinforced by the state with performance funding corresponding to 5% of total direct funding available to all *traditional universities* (state universities and private universities created before 1981). Universities compete for a *zero-sum* pool of money granted in accordance with their number of scientific publications, research grants (*Fondecyt*) and PhDs in faculty, among other indicators (Araneda, 2018). Since state-regional universities have only recently advanced into a complexity of functions—as noted—only a handful of them have been able to increase their share in this funding at the expense of “teaching” universities.

For comparison purposes, Figure 4 shows a sample of six state-regional universities, three with good performance and three with poor performance in capturing this performance funding, including a central line with the average share for all universities. The series shows that while the shares may change in time, this depends on research capacities that are not built overnight, institutionalizing long-term asymmetries among state-regional universities.

The direct state funding also has large inequalities among state universities, that are reproduced each year in accordance with historic criteria. As we will see, most state-regional universities that engaged in unregulated market expansion also present low direct funding. Moreover, direct historic funding correlates with the capacity to attract performance funding. With data from the Ministry of Education (2021), we did a bivariate correlation between direct historic funding and competitive funding, obtaining a significant (<0,01) Pearson’s coefficient of 0,608, which is an obvious result, considering that the capacities to sustain a strong academic faculty, as required to perform well in indicators of research productivity, depend on overall economic solvency. Still, with independence of the historic direct funding, the strategy towards increasing research productivity remains as one of the few knobs that can be adjusted by the state-regional universities to sustain competitiveness within the current policy framework.

Figure 4

Sample of Six State-Regional Universities' Share of Performance-based Funding 2014–2020



Source: Ministerio de Educación, 2021.

In turn, the alternative model of development is defined by the lack of research productivity, as universities remain limited to the teaching function. In time, the focus of some state-regional universities on responding to the demand for credentials proved a strategic failure. But, as expressed in this testimony, it is from a *regionalist* outlook that the incentives to research productivity are still looked at with disdain:

They [the state] put the incentives perhaps in inadequate places... in the area of research funding it's placed precisely in productivity... and it's there where the link with the territory is lost [as] it's expected that the [regional] universities play another role. (Interview 9, extreme-north, 2020)

Within this alternative model, some of the ‘teaching’ state-regional universities operated like private universities, engaging in unregulated expansion. Two state-regional universities in particular extended their teaching services throughout the country, far beyond their regional constituencies (Leihy & Salazar, 2022), to the point that they served as negative examples to justify the legal institutionalization of the accreditation system in 2006. As these state-regional universities held some of the smallest shares of direct state funding, their options were limited from the outset. In turn, as regional markets were taken over by the increasing competition of private institutions, there was mounting pressure for the state-regional universities within the alternative model to seek students beyond their regions. According to the following testimony, such conditions—summed up in the idea of *abandonment from the state*—had to be compensated by the mobilization of links with regional professional guilds and their demands for credentials. In this way, it seems paradoxical that it was the

regional embeddedness of these universities that, in affinity with their economic needs, led them to abandon their regional mission:

In the wake of invitations from the community... miners' unions, the accountant's guild, they asked us for continuing studies programs... and that's how these programs were born with accelerated growth... It started from there, from the situation in which the state wasn't taking responsibility for its own universities.
(Interview 9, extreme-north, 2020)

At the end of the day, these universities had to correct the course. Bad accreditation results, with negative impact on institutional funding, forced them to close their branch campuses, while assuming the cost of keeping them open until the last student graduated. Hence, the alternative model was underfinanced and rendered inviable. According to a former rector that looked at this crisis from the perspective of a successful state-regional university:

I've never approved of a public university, our sister, that came to train teachers on Saturday afternoons... with the concept of earning money... universities that grew to have forty branches... and the question is: how much of that money did that university retain? (Interview 7, center-south, 2020)

New Legislation for State-Regional Universities

As discussed, the sectorial reform of 2018 included a free higher education policy, implemented in response to the students' demands, and an unprecedented new law for state universities, that followed from the rectors' demands for preferential status for their institutions before the state. Therefore, expectations were high that such a new law for state universities would finally reinstate their public role, whereas the state would recognize its responsibility as owner and patron of its universities, particularly with regards to direct funding. Nevertheless, our interviewees tell us such expectations were not fulfilled. As the sustainability of the state universities remained dependent on market competition and specifically on their capacity for student recruitment, the opportunity to redefine the system of state universities was seen as lost, thereby entrenching the neoliberal framework.

This new law for state universities seeks to institutionalize a number principles that define what a state university is about; among these: a principle of cooperation among state universities and state agencies, a preferential relation with one region in which each state university is officially located—admittedly with the purpose of preventing inorganic expansion beyond the respective regions—, the promotion of indigenous knowledge corresponding to each region, the need to educate the students' awareness of the regional challenges, the internalization of accreditation standards as functional imperatives for the universities, and—last but not least—the democratization of governance with the participation of academics, students and functionaries. A fund of 480 million dollars for institutional strengthening of all state universities was also granted within this law. However, this money was perceived as insufficient by the rectors to compensate for historic funding inequalities. In fact, the *less successful* state universities that followed the *alternative model of development* tried to capture a larger share of this funding, claiming that it should be granted in inverse relation to the *direct state funding*. But eventually, the successful universities, expressive of the *hegemonic model of development*, imposed their terms:

Some "intellectuals" thought of "reversed state funding". But why are they going to punish us? We did things responsibly; we didn't waste ourselves. Some universities had 20, 25 branch campuses, total nonsense. (Interview 8, center-south, 2020)

As the new law did not change the funding scheme, the expectations about overcoming the regional disadvantages and retrieving the *system* of state universities were disappointed:

Because the new law doesn't establish an institutional funding scheme, and by not establishing an institutional funding scheme, eventually it's left to competition among universities. Because what matters here is how many students you have, because that's the money you'll receive, so there's competition on the number of students and, obviously, from the regional point of view it's very difficult. (Interview 2, center-north, 2019)

As argued, the free higher education policy implemented with this new legislation was criticized by the rectors for being granted as a *voucher* to demand, since it reinforces competition among public and private universities to attract students with the “gratuity” subsidy, whereas the regional universities with smaller markets, particularly in the extreme regions, are handicapped for competition. Gratuity also came with fixed fees and a 2.7% limit of annual growth in the first-year cohort, all of which eventually alienated the rectors from this policy: “When [gratuity] appeared, we cheered, but we're now cheering in a rather cold way, because gratuity is harming us” (Interview 3, extreme-south, 2019). In another view:

‘Gratuity’ and the new law didn't solve the problem at all. It's true that certain concepts were created... on a theoretical level, *we're now all brothers*, we're going to work in collaborative networks and all that stuff, but we're all competing and it's very difficult. (Interview 7, center-south, 2020)

While agreeing with the statement above, as the principle of collaboration among state universities is inscribed in the competitive neoliberal framework, it still represents an incipient orientation of reciprocity among universities, which development has been, so far, mostly focused on the level of management and professional staff (González et al., 2018).

Still, the assessment of the rectors about the new legal framework was that it did not compensate for the disadvantages of the state-regional universities:

Standards are national, there'll never be regional standards, because it's part of a Law of the Republic and the law defined only one concept of the university. (Interview 7, center-south, 2020)

Therefore, in accordance with the tradition of the centralized state of not making special concessions to the regions⁶, and the tendency of the neoliberal state to prioritize market competition, the recognition of the status of a state university—and specifically of a state-regional university—did not produce relevant institutional transformations in the new law, representing an *ideological* or merely *symbolic* recognition by the state.

To conclude, the assessment of the democratization of governance is also bleak. The new law demanded the redefinition of state universities' statutes in a participatory process with the board of collegial representation (University Council) institutionalizing the threefold participation of

⁶ In 2019, the state universities from the extreme regions claimed for a larger percentage of the student intake exempted from the requirement of taking the national admission test. While the rest of the universities were allowed 15% of students in this special admission track, the universities of the extreme regions asked for 25%. While this concession was attained eventually—making an exceptional precedent—it was not accepted at first by the other traditional universities, as told by one rector: “... the plenary of the Council of Rectors rejected it so loudly that it was heard in Antarctica” (Interview 3, extreme-south, 2019).

academics, students, and functionaries. Indeed, the democratization of governance represents a felt demand of the student movements since the restoration of democracy and, to significant extent, it represents the whole academic communities—somewhat humiliated by being forced to operate under the statutes inherited from the dictatorship. Still, some authorities regarded the new conditions of university governance as a complication, constituting a new disadvantage vis-à-vis their private counterparts within the neoliberal framework:

This forces us to have threefold participation now, which is an obsolete model in the whole world. Does the new legality benefit the universities? Obviously not... The state universities ended up in a more complicated position, an absolute own goal.
(Interview 7, center-south, 2020)

Discussion

We have sought to document how regional inequalities take place within the state-regional universities in Chile, according to the managerial and political perspectives of their highest authorities—which were complemented with quantitative illustrations. In this way, the problem of regional inequality was not only elaborated as a narrative, but also as an objective structure that reproduces various disadvantages for the state-regional universities. Still, the problem of regional inequality is often naturalized. It is rarely studied in an encompassing manner and not effectively mobilized as policy agenda. There are not special laws or accreditation standards for regional-state universities, as public policy does not make distinctions to compensate for regional situations. Nevertheless, as voiced in the interviews, the regional particularities continue to exert gravitational force, demanding specialized university missions that might even be in tension with the very idea of the university as an institution. Expressed in all interviews, the condition of state-regional universities entails an additional effort, both elusive and imperative, that must be autonomously mobilized by these institutions to meet their public mission in the peripheries.

The model of development that emerged from the interviews is a type of self-compensatory management tensioned between state incentives and the different regional situations. As mentioned by one former rector: “I achieve nothing by crying” and “everything’s planning, strategic definitions”. Along these narratives, we comprehend the way the state-regional universities see themselves as institutional actors, with different trajectories of neoliberal development.

Despite the different contexts, the *hegemonic model* evolves into a single and isomorphic recipe of development, that attaches strategic advance to futures of increased performance in the indicators financed within the neoliberal framework. Therefore, in this model, decisions become strategic as they aim to capture more resources from the state and to overcome performance gaps in research productivity, funding, and prestige. And while today most state-regional universities are inscribed in this model, the moment when it was adopted by each institution explain different outcomes, distinguishing between winners and losers of neoliberal higher education.

Before the hegemonic model consolidated as the only legitimate recipe of institutional development available, some state-universities followed an *alternative model*, that sought to expand their sources of funding by multiplying the number of branch campuses that led them to increase the number of students recruited in abridged undergraduate programs. But the disastrous experience, and the effect of reactive regulation, eventually rendered this model of market expansion of teaching services nonviable, with the universities that followed this path teaching a painful lesson.

The interviews described the adoption of the hegemonic model as the result of decisions of the rectors, in explicit opposition to the irresponsible expansion of the alternative model. In its turn, discourses from the perspective of the alternative model complained about the unfulfilled responsibility of the state, raising valid questions about how well-aligned the state incentives truly are

to the regional mission of the state universities. As discussed, strategic decisions taken within the hegemonic model to increase research productivity and state funds might be uncoupled from the regional needs and challenges.

A latent dimension of the universities' development stems from the political role that rectors assume in relation to the internal configuration of academic politics and to the regional and national governments in the outer front. A simple observation of the profile of rectors of state-regional universities finds that, in most cases, they are alumni of their own institutions, following a trajectory of managerial leadership before becoming the highest authority. In some cases, they also are prominent public figures in their regions. The rectors' discourses situate them as fundamental actors in driving their institutions, while also often adopting critical positions with regards to state policy. Some of this is evident in the testimonies, as the universities' fate appears attached to the rectors' responsibility and decision making. In the same vein, the hegemonic model goes hand-in-hand with the strengthening of managerial capacities, within more or less rigid strategic plans. But we are left with questions about the political roles rectors assume and the power resources they mobilize within their universities in relation to both regional and national governments.

Previous research acknowledges the importance of the universities' informal links with key actors in the capital and regions (Goldstein & Glaser, 2012). For our interviewees, the state-regional universities should actively display links with key regional and national actors to secure their negotiations with the state and finance projects with *regional impact*. However, not all state-regional universities develop common agendas with their regional governments. As noted by Boucher et al. (2003) "even if universities are funded by regional governments, this does not guarantee that the orientation of the university is to the region" (p. 889). In effect, some testimonies alleged mutual distrust with the regional governments, particularly during changes of national government.

When we have a change of government, we have to persuade the regional council and authorities. We have had *governors* that simply don't care or don't understand, because that's another problem, the capacities installed in the regional governments.

(Interview 4, extreme-south, 2019)

There is much to know about the networks and practices that reproduce links with the regional and national governments, explaining different performances in securing resources. The leadership of rectors seems crucial here (Bernaconi & Clasing, 2015). Nevertheless, rectors also accumulate power that might be dysfunctional for university governance. Precisely, in the new law for state universities, the period of rectors is limited to four years with one re-election allowed, seeking to counteract potential dysfunctionalities of such crucial effect that rectors might exert on different outcomes of institutional development.

Conclusion

Using testimonies and indicators we explored structures of regional inequality that limit the performance of the state-regional universities, particularly in the dimensions of student recruitment, academic faculty, research productivity, prestige, and funding. While all these crucial dimensions indicate clear patterns of inequality, the generalized perception of difficulties to attract academic faculty is less marked in the numbers than in the testimonies. Still, asymmetries on research productivity remain, explaining competitive funding inequalities among state-regional universities.

We captured emergent explanations about the way these inequalities take place within the universities, where neoliberal policy entrenches certain pathways and hinders others. On the one hand, regional inequalities are internally processed as competitive disadvantages since the remoteness from the center limits the capacity for market competition.

On the other hand, the universities generate strategic responses to confront the situations of regional inequality. The notion of *model of development* emerges from the interviews to represent the lessons learned that explain different institutional trajectories. The testimonies show that after decades of different responses to the “regional problem”, only one model prevailed by the internalization of neoliberal incentives. While the universities see themselves as self-sufficient institutional actors within such *hegemonic model* of neoliberal development, it also comes with the generalization of *isomorphic* practices to increase research productivity and state funding in competitive fashion. Variations might depend on the different regional situations, academic cultures, and links with regional governments.

Future research can follow the implementation of models of developments closely, linking strategic advance to the overcoming of situations of regional inequality. The focus on the predominant disciplines—and their links to regional industries and occupations, and to cultural and natural heritage—might lead to understand the *knowledge* and *interests* pushing the directions of institutional development beyond isomorphic neoliberal frameworks. Other complementary research agendas include the need to study the political role of rectors and its effect on the attraction of resources from regional and national governments, as well as the unknown practices universities adopt to compete for research productivity.

How does the neoliberal framework determine the patterns of development of the state-regional universities? First, as different situations of regional inequality are internalized as competitive disadvantages by these institutions. Competitive disadvantages mean that regional conditions which could be a source of identity and competitive advantages in each region, turn into handicaps for nationwide market competition, that is dominated by the center. Second, the neoliberal framework generalizes incentives that determine the trajectories of the state universities, particularly the incentives to research productivity—measured in number of projects and papers—that fix one path to sustain competitiveness for state funding. An observed consequence is the *disembedding* of regional institutions from their utility in achieving goals of regional development. And thirdly, the neoliberal framework also implies that the status of the state universities becomes ideological, since their development depends, at the end of the day, on their competitive performance before the market and the state.

The context of policy transformation that underpinned our conversations is unfolding and will also require future research to assess its impact. The rectors sustained critical positions regarding state policy—which they find chronically insufficient for their institutions. They demanded the recent policy changes, but were disappointed by its outcomes, as the new legal framework failed to provide direct institutional funding to overcome market disadvantages. Instead, the *voucher* in the free higher education policy brought new contradictions, while extra administrative and political burden was added. In turn, current incentives to formal indicators of research productivity might compromise the regional mission of the state-regional universities. Thus, policy changes in the direction of reinforcing the public role of the state-regional universities should focus on changing the incentives, from competition to direct funding oriented to goals of regional development. Amidst scenarios of policy change and stagnant student enrolment, the neoliberal framework has shown limited efficacy in counteracting regional inequalities through higher education.

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