

## **David against Goliath? A Critical Discourse Analysis of newspaper articles on a policy that removed tuition fees in the highly marketised Chilean society**

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### **Research Domains**

Higher Education policy (HEP)

### **Abstract**

As market-oriented policies influence Higher Education (HE) systems across the world, the meaning of HE as a public good or a private commodity and its impact in promoting a more equal society is still a matter of debate. This paper discusses media representations of a policy that removed tuition fees (*Gratuidad* in Spanish) in a HE system deeply rooted in a neoliberal society. A critical discourse analysis of newspaper articles evidenced the hegemonic neoliberal discourse trying to maintain the social order in the long-standing marketised Chilean HE. *Gratuidad* is represented as hasty, absurd, and as an obstacle to a more equal society. Also, notions of change emerge with discourses of collectivism and representations of *Gratuidad* as a social revolution for the future of Chilean society. Furthermore, *Gratuidad* is exposed as a counter-movement to the market forces in HE and in an effort to bring back the state to HE.

### **Full paper**

Market-oriented policies have impacted Higher Education (HE)

systems across the world, arguably changing the meaning of HE in society. As policies are reformed and implemented, extant scholarship has suggested that HE, as a private good, has to be privately funded through tuition fees. In effect, in marketised HE systems, tuition fees keep increasing to cover the costs of the massification of HE and the increasing presence of private HE institutions. However, whether HE is a private good for the individual benefit or a public benefit for the common good of society, is still a matter of great debate. Moreover, it has been claimed that the effects of marketization in HE and the implementation of tuition fees can be devastating. Scholars have argued that market-oriented reforms have promoted educational inequities, fostered social and academic segregation, and increased social inequality in society.

The aim of this paper is to identify and critically assess the discursive representations of a public policy that removed tuition fees in a highly marketised society.

As context serves Chile's neoliberal society in which the HE sector has gone through a controversial reform that removed tuition fees in HE, known as Gratuidad (Free in Spanish). After years of discussions, triggered by intense social movements, in order to increase the quality of HEIs and to tackle inequalities in HE, the socialist government of Michelle Bachelet approved a HE policy reform in 2016 which removed tuition fees for a group of economically less privileged students. These students can now attend any public and some eligible private HEIs, fully funded by the state. This policy was discursively promoted as the "return of the state" in HE.

In a culture of marketization, the implementation of Gratuidad can not only be considered a phenomenon that counters worldwide trends in the HE sector but also, it might evidence that, in neoliberal contexts, any assumptions about HE as a public good or a private commodity, and its impact in promoting a more equal society in general, is uncertain. Moreover, greater government involvement in HE can be a course of action to reduce the impact of marketization, an approach to promote a more equal society and an effort to dismantle marketization in HE.

Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) three-dimensional approach was conducted to identify representations of Gratuidad in media. The corpus is a balanced collection of articles from the

conservative newspaper El Mercurio and the left-leaning newspaper El Mostrador. The articles were published during the parliamentary debate on the policy between 2014 and 2019 when Gratuidad was fully implemented. 14 articles from each source were selected. 28 articles were analysed.

The findings reveal a neoliberal discourse that is still hegemonic in the media, evidencing the disembeddedness of the market from society. The analysis discloses a variety of representations including a robust rejection of the reform of free public HE by representing Gratuidad as a hasty and absurd policy. Furthermore, the media contextualises Gratuidad as an obstacle to reaching a more equal society. The analysis also exposes representations of Gratuidad as a social revolution directed at the future of Chilean children. This representation can be interpreted as a change in the social order with Gratuidad as a counter-movement to the disembedded market forces and as an opportunity to potentially re-embed the market in society.

This paper contributes to current bodies of literature on marketization in HE and the identification of media representations of policies that go against marketisation and intend to promote HE as a public good yet in the so-far neglected neoliberal societies from the Global South. Moreover, due to the recent approval of the policy, little empirical evidence seems to be available about representations of a policy that removes tuition fees in a highly marketised society.

**Keywords:** Critical Discourse Analysis, Higher Education Policies, Marketization, Newspaper Discourses,

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