

## **Navigating challenges and enhancing success on onsite evening students: an exploratory case study of tertiary vocational training students in Chile**

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### **Research Domains**

Technical, Professional and Vocational Higher Education (TPV)

### **Abstract**

The present study focuses on onsite evening students in Tertiary Technical Education in Chile. Despite high enrollment, there's limited understanding of evening students' profiles and challenges. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the characteristics and barriers faced by these students. Using an exploratory case study approach at INACAP, a TTE institution that represents 18% of the total enrollment, a mixed methodology was employed. Qualitative data from focus groups and interviews, supplemented by quantitative surveys and academic indicators, revealed key insights. Findings indicate these students are typically older adults, predominantly male, balancing work and family responsibilities. Challenges include time constraints, transportation issues, and perceived exhaustion exacerbated by compressed academic schedules. These challenges contribute to higher dropout rates and delayed graduation compared to daytime students. Addressing these issues requires tailored curriculum designs and support services to enhance success for evening students, ultimately promoting equity in TTE.

### **Full paper**

Chile has defined Tertiary Technical Education (hereafter TTE) as oriented to give the necessary capacities and knowledge to perform as a professional in different areas of the labor market (Ley 21.091, 2018). In turn, the law published in 2018 has emphasized tertiary technical education as an opportunity to enhance successful trajectories, especially for the population that has been historically excluded from higher education and skilled jobs. In this sense, admission and completion of professional careers is seen as an instrument of social mobility that seeks to reduce inequality (Brunner et al., 2022; Torres-Vallejos et al., 2019).

TTE institutions in Chile are open to any student who has completed compulsory secondary education (grade 12), regardless of whether they come from general education or vocational education and training (VET). National data shows that the participation of adult students over the age of 22 is high and has increased by almost 40 percentage points between 1990 and 2023 (Bravo et al., 2023). In accordance, students from these institutions are more likely to be employed while studying, with almost 40% active in the labor market, while universities historically do not exceed 25% (Bravo et al., 2023).

In this regard, to provide entry and graduation options for adult working students, TTE institutions have developed onsite and online programs with evening class offerings reaching an enrollment of about the 32% of the total enrollment (SIES, 2023). However, no studies have been conducted to better understand the profile of these students, nor how the evening coursework effectively caters to their learning and training needs in the VETNET context. Therefore, the present study aims to answer the following questions: who are the onsite evening students? And what are the critical barriers these students face toward graduation?

The objective is to offer a comprehensive description of the profile of onsite evening students in TTE in Chile, with the aim of contributing to the development of curriculum designs and academic supports specifically tailored to meet the needs of these students.

In pursuit of this objective, an exploratory case study was conducted (Makri & Neely, 2021). INACAP, a Chilean TTE institution, was selected as the case study given that represents 18% of the total system enrollment and maintains a nationwide presence, providing evening offerings in all urban centers across the 16 regions of the country.

For this purpose, a mixed methodology (qualitative and quantitative) was implemented. The qualitative section was developed through focus groups and semi-structured interviews to students, academic and student support personnel, reaching a total of 181 informants in 12 campuses located in the four geographical zones of the country (north, metropolitan region, south, and far south). The corpus was analyzed using content analysis methodology (Cáceres, 2003; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), employing NVIVO14 software.

The quantitative approach included two surveys applied to all enrolled students by INACAP (cohorts 2017-2023) and data from enrollment and academic progression indicators (retention, subject approval, attendance, graduation, and on-time graduation) reported by the institution to the education system for the same cohorts.

The results indicate that the predominant profile of an evening tertiary education student is typically an adult aged 25 or older, predominantly male (in a proportion of 8:2), and often working part-time or full-time (70%) (not necessarily in their field of study). They bear family financial responsibilities, and are typically first-generation higher education attendees (77%). These students strongly value professional certification and curricular progress as a means to enhance their social status through higher income and access to more qualified jobs.

Three overarching challenges specific to the evening students' context were identified: limited time to study outside of class hours and access institutional support mechanisms, high rates of absenteeism and lateness due to work and transportation constraints, and elevated levels of perceived exhaustion.

Furthermore, INACAP exacerbates these challenges by contributing to students' perception of fatigue and time scarcity through a highly compressed schedule. The academic design features five consecutive

days of classes from 6:30 to 10:30 p.m. Pedagogical blocks are also 5 minutes shorter than those in the daytime schedule expecting the same curriculum implementation.

In conclusion, evening students confront significant challenges, leading to higher dropout rates and lower rates of on-time graduation compared to their daytime counterparts (Venegas-Muggli, 2020). These challenges stem from both the personal contexts of the students and deficiencies in the design and support mechanisms tailored to their needs. To effectively address these comprehensive challenges, it is crucial to prioritize curriculum design and support services that are specifically adapted to the profile of evening students (UNESCO, 2023).

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