

## **‘Becoming someone’: Experiences of first-generation students transitioning to higher education in Chile**

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### **Research Domains**

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

### **Abstract**

This work in progress study explores the experiences of 9 prospective first-generation students (i.e., first in family aspiring to go to university) transitioning from secondary school to higher education (HE) in Chile. It also examines the school mechanisms in place to support these students during their transition. The study draws on the application of the Capabilities Approach in the field of HE access to identify the factors that influence students’ educational opportunities and post-secondary trajectories. The study follows a case study design, collecting data from a questionnaire (N=164), semi-structured interviews to students and school staff (N=41), and available school documents over 7 months. Preliminary findings reveal that first-generation students are more likely to experience emotional distress and uncertainty due to the lack of complete HE information. Findings also suggest that certain sets of students’ attitudes may either ‘enable’ or ‘constrain’ HE opportunities, directly impacting students’ ability to navigate the transition.

### **Full paper**

#### **Introduction and literature review**

Interest in students’ transition into higher education (HE) has grown in importance in the last decades due to the rapid expansion of the sector worldwide and the increased participation of non-traditional students (Amundsen, 2022; Briggs et al., 2012; Gale & Parker, 2014; Webb, 2019). However, despite the growing body of literature, there has been limited interest in, firstly, the experiences of students *before* their first year in HE (Gale & Parker, 2014) and, secondly, the experiences of first-generation students (i.e., first in family who aspire to go to university) transitioning to HE (Hope, 2017). In Chile, where the present study is situated, the study of first-generation students remains understudied (Santelices et al., 2020). This work in progress study draws on the application of the Capabilities Approach (CA) in the field of HE access (Walker, 2006; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007; Wilson-Strydom, 2016) and the transition from secondary education to HE of first-generation students in the context of Chile.

The study

This paper builds on a recently completed doctoral fieldwork study (July 2023 – January 2024) that explores the experiences of 9 first-generation students transitioning to HE in Chile from a capabilities lens. The study also analyses existing – or lack of – school mechanisms to support these students during their transition. The study adopted a longitudinal approach, collecting data over a period of 7 months, which covered the time span between the students' final academic semester in secondary school and the point in which they enrolled – or not – at a higher education institution (HEI). This has been identified as a critical period since students' more active search of an HEI begins in their last school semester and a final decision is more likely to be reached once they receive their university admissions test scores (Santelices et al., 2020). The study followed a case study design, collecting data from a questionnaire (N=164 students), semi-structured interviews to students and school staff (N=41 between students and staff), and available school documents. Each student was interviewed in three distinct points over a timeframe of seven months. Participants were recruited from two different secondary schools, one public and one subsidised, with a high vulnerability index (official index used by the Chilean Ministry of Education to measure the risk of school dropout through an evaluation of the student's socioeconomic level) in the Metropolitan Region of Chile. The CA was operationalized at two stages of the study: research instruments design and as an analytical framework.

### Preliminary findings

The preliminary findings of this study show that first-generation students experience the transition from secondary education to HE as an emotionally intense and demanding process. These students are more likely to experience emotional distress and uncertainty due to the lack of complete HE information (i.e., information about application deadlines, financial aid forms, HEI and subject choice, among the most significant aspects). The findings also suggest that certain sets of students' attitudes may either '*enable HE opportunities*' (i.e., self-awareness, willingness to learn, the ability to prioritise, and using family as a driving force) or '*constrain HE opportunities*' (i.e., self-doubt, experiencing mental strain, detaching themselves from the process and having a passive attitude), which, in turn, directly impact students' ability to navigate the transition.

Considering the schools' support mechanisms, the study shows that both schools provide either academic or career counselling to students during their academic transition. These mechanisms can take the form of providing HE information, developing career skills, and/or setting up academic interventions either organised by the schools or externally. However, these initiatives tend to be tardy in the transition, resulting in '*missed opportunities*' for the schools. In this context, a '*missed opportunity*' can be understood as not generating the conditions that enable students to achieve the academic goals they value and have reason to value.

### Conclusion

By examining the experiences of first-generation students through a capabilities lens we may be better able to understand the enabling and constraining contextual factors that influence their transition from school to university and, therefore, their post-secondary educational opportunities. Furthermore, by focusing on actual lives and on the everyday experiences of underrepresented students we

may create meaningful educational opportunities, enabling these students to experience a more equitable transition to university. This study may also shed light on opportunities for HEIs to set up interventions that enable first-generation students to better navigate pre-entry and access challenges.

## References

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