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The Neoliberal Discourse in Latin American Higher Education: A Call for National Development and Tighter Government Control¹

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Abstract: Using critical discourse analysis (CDA), we explored how educational leaders and policymakers in Mexico, Peru, Chile, and Argentina address complex issues while responding to – and in fact, developing – broader understandings (discourses) on the role of higher education in Latin America. Fairclough’s (1993) theory of discourse underscores that language is a social practice, socially and historically situated, and encompassing social identities, relations, and systems of knowledge and beliefs. Therefore, discourses, which are represented by all kinds of texts, exercise power because they can produce, reproduce, and transform social structures, including education policy. This study uncovers the nuances of the tensions that globalized discourses such as neoliberalism in particular face when met with national and local needs in Latin American higher education. These tensions need to be addressed in order to design policies that could effectively close the equity gap in the region amidst massification and the uncontrolled proliferation of private

¹ This study uses data from a larger project sponsored by the Ford Foundation.

universities in many countries, offering access to underserved students to higher education but of questionable quality. This study suggests research like this is important in order to understand how discourses that are deemed global play out at national and local levels and possibly, to uncover alternatives to the status quo.

Keywords: Latin American higher education; university autonomy; neoliberalism; critical discourse analysis

El discurso neoliberal en la educación superior latinoamericana: Un llamado al desarrollo nacional y a un control gubernamental más estricto

Resumen: Utilizando análisis crítico del discurso (ACD), exploramos cómo líderes y formuladores de políticas en educación superior en México, Perú, Chile y Argentina abordan problemas complejos mientras responden - y de hecho, desarrollan - entendimientos amplios (discursos) sobre el papel de la educación superior en Latinoamérica. La teoría del discurso de Fairclough (1993) subraya que el lenguaje es una práctica social, situada social e históricamente, que abarca identidades sociales, relaciones y sistemas de conocimiento y creencias. Por tanto, los discursos, que están representados por todo tipo de textos, ejercen poder porque pueden producir, reproducir y transformar estructuras sociales, incluida la política educativa. Este estudio descubre los matices de las tensiones que los discursos globalizantes como el neoliberalismo en particular enfrentan cuando se encuentran con las necesidades nacionales y locales de la educación superior latinoamericana. Estas tensiones deben abordarse para diseñar políticas que efectivamente puedan cerrar la brecha de equidad en la región dada la masificación y la proliferación descontrolada de universidades privadas en muchos países, ofreciendo acceso a la educación superior a estudiantes marginalizados, pero de calidad cuestionable. Este estudio sugiere que una investigación como esta es importante para comprender cómo los discursos que se consideran globales se desarrollan a nivel nacional y local y, posiblemente, para descubrir alternativas al status quo.

Palabras-clave: educación superior latinoamericana; autonomía universitaria; neoliberalismo; análisis crítico del discurso

O discurso neoliberal na educação superior latino-americana: Uma chamada para o desenvolvimento nacional e um controle governamental mais forte

Resumo: Usando a análise crítica do discurso (CDA), exploramos como os líderes e formuladores de políticas no ensino superior no México, Peru, Chile e Argentina lidam com problemas complexos ao responder - e de fato desenvolver - entendimentos amplos (discursos) sobre o papel de ensino superior na América Latina. A teoria do discurso de Fairclough (1993) enfatiza que a linguagem é uma prática social, social e historicamente situada, abrangendo identidades sociais, relacionamentos e sistemas de conhecimento e crenças. Portanto, os discursos, representados por todos os tipos de textos, exercem poder porque podem produzir, reproduzir e transformar estruturas sociais, inclusive políticas educacionais. Este estudo desvenda as nuances das tensões que os discursos globalizantes, como o neoliberalismo, em particular, enfrentam quando atendem às necessidades nacionais e locais da educação superior latino-americana. Essas tensões devem ser enfrentadas para formular políticas que possam efetivamente fechar a lacuna de equidade na região, dada a superlotação e a proliferação descontrolada de universidades privadas em muitos países, oferecendo acesso ao ensino superior para estudantes marginalizados, mas de qualidade questionável. Este estudo sugere que pesquisas como essa são importantes

para compreender como os discursos considerados globais se desenvolvem em nível nacional e local e, possivelmente, para descobrir alternativas ao status quo.

Palavras-chave: ensino superior latino-americano; autonomia universitária; neoliberalismo; análise crítica do discurso

The Neoliberal Discourse in Latin American Higher Education: A Call for National Development and Tighter Government Control

Fairclough's (1993) theory of discourse underscores that language is a social practice, socially and historically situated, and encompassing social identities, relations, and systems of knowledge and beliefs. Therefore, discourses, which are represented by all kinds of texts, exercise power because they can produce, reproduce, and transform social structures. Some discourses, in fact, become institutionalized through policies and regulations, even while society and its institutions can have coexisting, contrasting, and even contradictory discourses that shift over time (Fairclough, 1993). In turn, it is critical to study the language and texts people use, as they provide a lens into the social values, identities, and cultural scripts that guide behavior and institutional decision-making (Martínez-Alemán, 2015). Studying the discourses that shape and are represented in educational policies, in particular, helps us to understand the values, ideologies, and national conversations that influence the resistance to various aspects of education (Lester, et al., 2017; Mattheis, 2016; Yanow, 2007). Lester et al. (2017) in the introduction of a special issue on the intersection of education policy and discourse underscore the importance of including discourse analysis in policy research in order to understand how national discourses and daily conversations among stakeholders construct and resist policymaking. As such, this paper explores how educational leaders and policymakers address complex issues while responding to – and in fact, developing – broader understandings (discourses) on the role of higher education in society, particularly in Latin America.

One important prevalent discourse around the world is neoliberalism, which is impacting all aspects of society, including higher education (Ayers, 2005; Harvey, 2005; Saunders & Blanco-Ramirez, 2017). Neoliberalism has been characterized as a theory and ideology behind economic and political practices such as deregulation, marketization, and privatization (Harvey, 2005). However, counter-discourses are also found as forms of resistance to this prevailing discourse. For example, the Incheon Declaration, adopted by over 100 top state representatives at the World Education Forum in May 2015 in South Korea (World Bank, 2015), represents a multinational discourse of education for sustainable development rooted in the notion that all levels of education are a public good and human right, and endorsing values of social justice, inclusion, shared responsibility, and cultural and linguistic diversity. Notably, the notion of education for economic development was not the central argument in this Declaration, even though such discourses, rooted in neoliberalism, have significantly shaped educational organizations around the globe over the recent past (Ayers, 2005).

Bravo (2020) has recently noted that Latin American higher education has not felt the pressures of neoliberalism and globalization as profoundly as other parts of the world. Moreover, there is evidence of counter-discourses such as the one in the *Incheon Declaration*. This study contributes to the understanding of the discourses among leaders of higher education in Latin America, leaders who have had a role in shaping policy both in the government and major higher education institutions. Specifically, using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the purpose of this study was to uncover the dominant discourses about higher education in interviews with 26 higher education chancellors, academics, and policymakers in Mexico, Peru, Chile, and Argentina. The overarching research questions for this study were: How do leaders in Mexico, Peru, Chile, and Argentina talk about the purpose and challenges of higher education in their respective countries?

What discourses do they reflect—and potentially create—especially in relation to the assumed prevalent discourse of global neoliberalism?

The Rise of Neoliberalism and Higher Education

For Olssen and Peters (2005), neoliberalism is a hegemonic politically imposed discourse in the West that emerged as a reaction to the classical liberalism of the 1970s, which was based on civil liberties and market freedoms under the rule of law (Robertson, 2008). Although both neoliberalism and liberalism are rooted in market fundamentalism, neoliberalism emerged in the 1980s when governments began to regulate equity markets, business practices, and protect labor through social programs amidst the global financial crisis at that time (Friedman, 1962; Harvey, 2005; Marginson & Rhoades, 2002; Torres Apablaza, 2017; Taylor, 2017). These measures were the result of the Post-Washington Consensus in the U.S. and propagated throughout the world, in which governments assumed the need to expand their role in order to ensure the proper functioning of the market (Robertson, 2008). During the liberalism era, the goal was economic growth, solely. Since the Post-Washington Consensus, this goal expanded to increase living standards, including improved health, education and sustainable development. It also embodied notions of democratic participation and equitable development (Stiglitz, 1998).

The central presuppositions of neoliberalism are: 1) individuals are entrepreneurs, risk-takers, and clients, who are economically self-interested capable of rational choices to maximize personal benefits; 2) the best mechanism to allocate resources is through the market; 3) self-regulation is better than government intervention, and so the role of the government should be limited; and 4) a commitment to free trade (Olssen & Peters, 2005). Under neoliberal principles, there are three main instruments for restructuring society: deregulation, competitiveness, and privatization (Harvey, 2005). In turn, these principles and related instruments have provided the climate for the legitimization of profit-making and the exploitation of labor as all institutions should fall within the market, including education. There are two important assumptions needed for the market to operate properly in this view. First, social capital as the glue that holds societies across the globe together culturally and socially (Boron, 2006; Robertson, 2008). This cohesiveness is fomented through the propagation of dominant discourses, which can be developed through coercion or instruments such as think tanks, policies, the media, and education (Fairclough, 2005; Harvey, 2005; Macrine, 2016). Second, individuals carry the burden of success or failure in their lives based on their own choices, which is the basis of the meritocracy (Harvey, 2005; Saunders, 2010). This last assumption is at the same time based on the notions that systemic differences are inexistent and that there is symmetry of information in the market. Ultimately, this emphasis on individualism can dismiss the public good and focus on benefitting those with already accumulated capital (Ayers, 2005; Saunders & Blanco-Ramirez, 2017; Taylor 2017).

Behind the rise of neoliberalism is the knowledge economy emerging in the 1990s, making knowledge the most valuable form of capital and putting universities, the producers of knowledge and trainers of the workforce, at the center of the economy (Altbach, 2016; Ayers, 2005; Boron, 2006; Mendoza, 2015; Saunders & Blanco-Ramirez, 2017). In all this, the advent of information technologies has facilitated the rapid propagation of the knowledge economy throughout the world, enabling the neoliberal project of globalization seeking social cohesiveness in the planet and led by the top economies and international organizations such as the World Bank, the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). These international organizations have shaped national policies in favor of the neoliberal project around the world through loan programs containing

specific conditions and benchmarks meant to alter internal national structures in favor of large corporations, open markets, and human development useful in the global market (Harvey, 2015; Pineda, 2015). Critics argue that these policies in favor of multinational corporations undermine national cultures and structures as well as political differences within and across nations (Stiglitz, 2002), creating ongoing tensions as localities face a neoliberal hegemony in relation to their own history, realities, and generational identities (Alcantara, 2013; Olssen & Peters, 2005).

Neoliberalism in the Academy

Proponents of neoliberalism generally view higher education as inefficient, costly, and slow responding to the market (Giroux, 2014). However, neoliberalism has been highly contested within academia by many who have argued about the detrimental implications to higher education's focus on serving the public good. The neoliberal state has resulted in significant changes in higher education. In the US, these changes include decreasing state support, competition, commercialization of research, positioning of students as consumers, adjunctification of faculty, outsourcing of services, corporatization of its government, and increased managerialism (e.g., Kezar et al 2019; Marginson, 2012; Mendoza, 2015; Metcalfe & Slaughter, 2008; Saunders & Blanco-Ramirez, 2017; Szelényi & Bresonis, 2014). Researchers find themselves in a competitive market that encourages pre-determined research agendas leading to knowledge that serves neoliberal states while suffocating disciplines in the basic sciences, social sciences, arts, and humanities (Mendoza, 2005; 2015; Slaughter & Cantwell, 2012). Students are seen as commodities or clients who invest in a higher education for future earnings prompting institutions to become "country club universities" with cozy amenities luring students and families (e.g.; Olssen & Peters, 2005, Pusser, 2016; Taylor, 2016).

The highly influential theory of academic capitalism explains the tensions in higher education between the market logic of neoliberalism and its historic mission to the public good (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). For example, higher education has changed from being considered a citizen's right to a service that must be purchased in the market (Boron, 2006) and academic research has become a commodity that can be patented and sold (Guzmán-Valenzuela, 2016; Mendoza, 2005). In the recent book *The Gig Academy: Mapping Labor in the Neoliberal University* (Kezar et al., 2019), the authors even go so far as to suggest that the tensions between being a public good versus a commodity are over: by now, we have experienced a takeover of neoliberalism in the academy, at least in the US. This book details how corporatization and managerialism, as key components of neoliberalism, have dismantled the core mission of universities, as 70% of the academic labor in the US are now contingent faculty earning less than fast food workers. One significant implication of these changes is the altered power balance in university governance, as full-time faculty are now a minority, which allows management the ability to exert corporate-style leadership based on neoliberal tenants and eroding the professionalization of the academic profession, impacting student learning and engagement and increasing structural discrimination (Kezar et al., 2019). In addition, neoliberalism has altered the notion of autonomy and collegial governmentality of higher education based on core academic values to a system based on inputs and outputs in an economic market. In the liberal governmentality, professions are self-governed autonomously based on trust and delegation. In the neoliberal governmentality, delegation, autonomy, and trust are replaced by hierarchical and authoritatively forms of governance competing in the market through accountability metrics. This shifts means a de-professionalization of the academy (Guzman-Valenzuela & Barnett, 2013; Mendoza et al., 2018; Olssen & Peters, 2005; Robertson, 2008).

Although we have these analyses on higher education in the US, much more research is needed to understand the implications of neoliberalism in developing countries. Drawing from the global literature, authors have theorized about the internationalization and globalization in higher

education. For instance, Kauppinen (2012) developed the notion of transnational academic capitalism (TAC) as the integration of the transnational dimension of global neoliberalism into the functions of higher education blurring the boundaries between the public and the private. In this perspective, actors in universities extend their agency internationally through their practices, networks, intermediating and interstitial organizations, funding mechanisms, and policies. A decade earlier, Marginson and Rhoades (2002) wrestled with how agents in higher education navigate the complex interplay of localities nested in national and international contexts, and developed a *glocanal agency heuristics* for internationalization in higher education. This heuristic deals with the complex intersections of non-linear simultaneous flows of interactions among various domains in higher education (institutional organizations, collective agencies) through three levels: local, national, and international. In these interplay, actors in local and national domains can undermine, redefine and challenge global discourses. In fact, the neoliberal globalization project, beyond higher education, has been uneven and vigorously contested across the globe (Harvey, 2006; Robertson, 2008). This article contributes to our understanding of how neoliberalism in higher education has been contested, redefined, and challenged in selected Latin American countries.

Neoliberalism and Latin American Higher Education

Since the historic *Grito de Córdoba* in 1918 and for the first half of the 20th century, public universities in the region have enjoyed a privileged status as state-builders, autonomous places for the flourishing of ideas and knowledge, the academic elite, ultimately, a public good treasured by society serving national needs, including preserving national cultural heritages. Examples include the Universidad Autónoma de México, Universidad de São Paulo, Universidad de Buenos Aires, and Universidad Nacional de Colombia (Bernasconi & Celis, 2017; Mendoza, 2020; Ordorika, 2013; Ordorika & Pusser, 2007; Rhoades & Torres, 2006). Due to the history of academia as state-builders, the leadership of these institutions is highly politicized and bureaucratic (Bernasconi, 2007).

Like other regions in the world, Latin America experienced a massification of higher education in the 1960 pushed largely by social movements and the business sector, which opened the door to the notion of workforce development needed under the neoliberal state in the decades to come. In the 1980s, The IMF and World Bank developed a series of structural programs for the neoliberalization of Latin American and Sub-Saharan Africa, both regions deeply affected by a recession (Robertson, 2008). Since the 1980s, discourses shaped by globalization and neoliberalism in Latin America have materialized in higher education through policy instruments leading to increased marketization, massive expansion, and privatization (Balan, 2006; Boron, 2006; Kaidesoja & Kauppinen, 2014; Montes & Mendoza, 2018; Rhoades & Torres, 2006; Slaughter & Cantwell, 2012). Chile was the first country in the region to fully embraced neoliberalism. In 1981, Pinochet allowed the unregulated growth of private universities, substantially cut state support to higher education, and instead financed private institutions (Fischman & Ott, 2018; Guzmán-Valenzuela, 2016).

In the 1990s, neoliberalism continued to proliferate in Latin America as exemplified by the creation of the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), the first trade organization of countries in the region advancing neoliberal agendas, followed by others such as the Andean Community (CAN) and the Latin American Integration Association (ALDI). During this decade, the role of higher education for economic development took root in contradiction to the universities' history of autonomy and service to the public good (Altbach, 2016; Bernasconi & Celis, 2017; Kaplan, 2009; CINDA, 2016; Montes & Mendoza, 2018; Perrota, 2013; Pineda, 2015). While each Latin American country has experienced neoliberalism with various degrees of intensity and areas of emphasis (Bruner & Villalobos, 2014; Kempner & Jurema, 2006; Pineda, 2015), tensions in higher education

are significant due to the historic roots of universities as state-builders and the advent of neoliberalism.

In the 21st century, despite the heterogeneity in the region, private universities continue to grow, demands for economic contributions of higher education pile up, and neoliberal globalization pushes institutions to compete worldwide based on metrics manifested in rankings emphasizing research outcomes (Altbach, 2016; Bernasconi, 2007; Fischman & Ott, 2018; Rhoads & Torres, 2006; Schugurensky, 2007). In effort to rescue the *raison d'être* of historic public universities amidst neoliberalism in Latin America, Pusser and Marginson (2013) proposed a ranking system for Mexican universities that considers democratic outputs for the societal good. Other current neoliberal trends in the region include the establishment of quality control mechanisms and reforms by governments as well as increases in public and private funding for neoliberal investments leading to new institutions and programs for human capital development and knowledge transfer to society (Benavides et al., 2019; Bravo, 2020; Brunner, 2017; Brunner & Villalobos, 2014).

Today, public universities in the region are still considered places for uncensored debate and critical for the preservation of national cultures and traditions despite neoliberalism (Fischman & Ott, 2018; Mendoza, 2020). Universities in countries like Bolivia, Argentina, Uruguay, Guatemala, Honduras, Peru, and Nicaragua enjoy substantial unrestricted state support and autonomy while universities in countries like Colombia, Chile, and Brazil are subject to more government regulations and accountability (Montes & Mendoza, 2018; Bernasconi, 2015; Brunner, 2005). These ongoing tensions have generated strong student movements in the region advocating for the public good of higher education, notably in Chile, Colombia and Brazil, and entangled with complex political dynamics including dictatorships and Marxist guerilla wars (Alcántara et al., 2013; Ordorika & Lloyd, 2015; Pineda, 2015; Rhoades & Slaughter, 2006; Rhoads & Torres, 2006; Vega Cantor, 2015). The most dramatic case of these ongoing tensions in the last decade is Chile, a country that experienced the most dramatic pro-public good movement in the region in the 21st century, representing a full swinging of the pendulum back from the Chicago Boys era of the 1980s (Fischman & Ott, 2018).

In sum, the imaginary of traditional public universities in Latin America as treasured historical places is still alive, and for the most part, these universities still enjoy of considerable university autonomy while enroll large shares of the student population. The public still expects from these traditional universities attention to local social problems while staying open as democratic spaces for its citizenry. However, the expectation of higher education for economic growth in the neoliberal state is also significant. Therefore, universities in Latin America are stretching thin, being asked to do more, in many ways with less state support, and losing the global ranking battle (Fischman & Ott, 2018).

Research Design

The overall research design of this study consisted of a CDA inspired thematic analysis following Norwell et al. (2017) and the CDA approach by Fairclough on neoliberal discourses (1993, 2015). We analyzed secondary data consisting of 27 transcripts of in-person interviews conducted in 2014-2015 with policymakers, academics and leaders of higher education institutions in Mexico, Peru, Chile, and Argentina. The interviews were conducted as part of a larger project funded by the Ford Foundation inquiring about the challenges and opportunities of higher education in Latin America. The semi-structured interview protocol inquired about the main issues, challenges, and barriers facing higher education in their countries as well as what suggestions they propose to address them. These countries were selected because of their relatively well-developed higher education systems, including high numbers of organizations, centers, journals, and academic

programs dedicated to higher education administration. Given that we were based in Colombia, we piloted this study conducting preliminary interviews with Colombian leaders.

The 27 participants were chosen because they have been top leaders in academic institutions, organization, and even in the government as illustrated in Table 1. Ultimately, we interviewed seven participants in Chile, Mexico, and Argentina and six in Peru. Nine participants are women. Most of the participants are academics who have had various top administrative roles during their careers (chancellors), and a few served as ministers of education, executives in international organizations, and leaders of grassroots influential organizations at some point throughout their careers. In order to preserve anonymity, this analysis does not identify participants' current positions given their very high profiles but also because most of them have held multiple positions in their careers as academics, policymakers, and administrators of higher education institutions and their views are impacted by their multiple roles.

Table 1
Summary of Positions Held by Participants

Positions Held by Participants in their Careers	Number of Participants
Ministers of education	2
Government directive roles in education-related branches	6
Leading roles in major international organizations such as UNESCO, World Bank and OECD in higher education divisions	5
Leading roles in major national organizations in higher education including influential grassroots organizations	7
Major advisory roles in higher education to the government	4
Chancellors of higher education institutions	2 (public) 1 (technical public) 1 (private)
Vice-chancellors and similar top leadership positions in higher education institutions	5 (private) 2 (public)
Prominent professors or researchers in prestigious research institutions and universities	9

Note: Most participants have had multiple roles, all of which are counted in this table (one person might be counted as chancellor and minister in this table, for example) except for the last category, which includes participants who have stayed in their academic roles throughout their careers.

Our identities as researchers give us an outsider/insider perspective in the interpretation of the data. Author1 is a Spanish native speaker from Colombia and who obtained her bachelor's degree in Colombia, graduate degrees in the U.S., and has worked as an academic in the U.S. for over 15 years. Meanwhile, Author2 is a U.S. academic, fluent in Spanish, and who has recently worked in Latin America, partnering with Colombian professors.

Data Analysis

Data analysis focused on uncovering participants' discourses and ways of talking about higher education in their respective countries. We started by looking for themes found throughout the interviews using these specific steps:

First, Author1 and Author2 read through the interviews, getting to know the data. Inspired by prior studies on discourses and policymaking in PK12 education (Author2), we developed two guiding questions to unearth the deep beliefs and assumptions about the role of higher education in society, thus providing a window into the ideological underpinnings sustaining those beliefs or

society's discourses. We then pulled out each area of the interviews that addressed these questions: (1) What is the purpose of higher education? (2) What is a good/not good higher education? In this process, we paid attention to alternatives of what was said and not said.

Second, Author1 then conducted thematic analysis (Norwell et al., 2017) of only these sections of the transcripts resulting from the first step. For question one, the themes found referring to the purpose of higher education were around the notions of 1) production of knowledge and 2) human capital development. The case of Chile stood apart with discourses about the purpose of higher education aligned with the Inchon Declaration. For question two, the themes included: governance; funding; markets; accreditation and quality assurance; relevance to the needs of the country; institutional stratification; student access and success; faculty qualifications and research productivity.

Third, wanting to look across the four countries, we next counted how many times each of these themes from question two were mentioned throughout the interviews. The most common themes were: 1) accreditation and quality assurance; and 2) relevance to the needs of the country. (See Table 2.)

Fourth, both Authors re-read all the excerpts coded in the second step related to 1) purpose, 2) accreditation and quality assurance, and 3) relevance to the needs of the country in order to uncovering meanings using Fairclough's (1993, 2015) guide to CDA and policy analysis. We included the purpose theme in this analysis because these excerpts directly spoke to the ideologies of what higher education should be for society. We grouped excerpts with similar discourses and selected representative quotes to illustrate our analysis. Our analysis was critical in the sense that we looked for contradictions or alternatives in meaning that might problematizing the discourses on neoliberalism in the literature.

Table 2

Number of Excerpts Responding to “what is a good/not good higher education” by Themes

	Argentina	Chile	Mexico	Peru	Uruguay	Total
Accreditation & Quality Assurance	16	28	23	29	10	106
Relevance & Autonomy	39	3	22	26	16	106
Governance	17	18	15	22	12	84
Student Access & Success	14	9	22	5	14	64
Faculty Qualifications & Research Productivity	12	7	11	10	8	48
Stratification	12	10	6	5	17	50
Funding	7	8	13	5	0	33
Markets	5	3	7	13	3	31
Total	122	86	119	115	80	522

As it is the case with any qualitative research, the results presented here are based on our personal interpretations of meaning. The trustworthiness of this analysis rests on three main

features: multiple sources of data by country and by position of interviewees (chancellor, academic, policymaker, executive of global organizations); building a detailed data and analysis trail; and multiple instances of peer debriefing between the co-authors, who took both insider and outsider perspectives throughout the process.

Results

In this section, we present results by the three themes: (1) the purpose of higher education, (2) accreditation and quality assurance and (3) relevance of higher education to the needs of the country. The quotes included are representative of the ideas found across our analyses.

The Purpose of Higher Education

Across the four countries in this study, two major neoliberal discourses emerged about the purpose of higher education—human capital development and knowledge production—but usually with a specific focus on the needs and development of one’s local country and peoples, rather than to meet global, economic competition. For example, a participant from Argentina listed eight attributes needed in human capital development reflecting a neoliberal discourse with its focus on production, the economy, and the labor market. However, this leader was speaking about what type of labor the nation needed making note of “our country” in the beginning of the quote:

Bueno, el mayor reto va a ser adaptarse a cómo va cambiando el escenario laboral en nuestro país, qué nuevos perfiles profesionales se requieren, qué nuevas competencias, qué nuevas capacidades, qué nuevas demandas, qué nuevos estilos de trabajo se van configurando y reconfigurando, cómo se va desarrollando la economía, cómo va respondiendo el sistema productivo a las economías, entonces hay que estar muy atento a eso para el sistema educativo poder brindar una respuesta.

Well, the major challenges will be adapting to how the labor scene in our country is changing, what new professional profiles are required, what new competencies, what new capacities, what new demands, what new work styles are being configured and reconfigured, how is the economy developing, how the economy is going to respond to the productive system. So, we must be very attentive to that for the educational system to be able to provide an answer.

Note: Participant from Argentina

Respondents from Peru, Argentina, and Mexico also centered human capital development in their responses about the challenges facing higher education, but in ways that positioned capital to empower individuals so they can have satisfying lives, instead of only serving the economy. Granted, this empowerment is still achieved through work reflecting a neoliberal discourse, but the idea of work is secondary. For example, in this next quote, work is mentioned after the point that education is about empowerment for satisfactory lives.

En primer lugar, la orientación, o, es decir, la educación en general tiene que estar orientada a potenciar a las personas para que puedan tener una vida activa satisfactoria, diga usted, sea cual fuere el nivel. Si yo estoy hablando a nivel educación

In the first place, the orientation, or that is, education in general must be oriented to empower people so that they can have a satisfactory active life, let’s say, no matter the level. If I am speaking about the higher education level, it must be a preparation so that

superior, tiene que ser una preparación para que toda persona pueda trabajar en algo, eso se expresa por ejemplo en el objetivo de hacer más capaces a las personas, más hábiles a las personas.

everyone can work on something, that is expressed, for example, in the goal of making people more capable, more skilled people.

Note: Participant from Peru

Besides discussing purpose of higher education as human capital development, participants of Argentina, Peru and Mexico claimed it is to produce knowledge transferrable to multiple settings in industry. While the transfer of knowledge to industry reflects a typical neoliberal discourse of higher education, in these countries, such discussion was similarly stated alongside the solving of local and national problems. For example, one of the leaders in Mexico talked about the need for both human capital development and the production of knowledge for industry that attended to local and national agendas:

Hoy la universidad no puede estar, sobre todo la universidad pública, solamente limitada a la formación, ¿verdad? Me refiero a que la producción de conocimientos tiene que tener salidas y vinculaciones en muchos terrenos a la industria ¿sí? A la atención de problemas locales, a la agenda nacional, eh, de desarrollo.

Today the university cannot be, especially the public university, only limited to training, right? That is, the production of knowledge must have outputs and links in many fields in industry, right? To the attention of local problems, to the national agenda, eh, of development.

Note: Participant from Mexico

Here, the term industry is general and undefined. Likewise, much of the literature on academic capitalism, which discusses the impact of neoliberalism in higher education, speaks about “transfer of knowledge to industry” vaguely, but in that literature, the term is often coupled with discourse about global competition (Cantwell & Kauppinen, 2014; Author1; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). This highlights an adaptation of neoliberalism to local circumstances where participants presented a discourse of local national development instead of global competition. Remarkably, the same participant in this next quote criticized university autonomy due to the need, in his view, for a new social contract between universities and society—a new covenant that overrides academic freedom and universities’ autonomy—by suggesting that society should impose, for example, research agendas in academia:

Pero también es una ida y vuelta, se necesita una nueva relación de la sociedad con la universidad...[que] la sociedad ... pueda imponer la agenda, por ejemplo, en la investigación.

But it is also a two way, it needs a new relationship between society and the university ... [that] society ... could impose the agenda, for example in research.

Note: Participant from Mexico

This discourse around the notion of development was common across the interviews, perhaps reflecting the fact that Latin American countries are considered “in development” or “developing” countries. While the idea of development is often understood as economic development (albeit national/local), most participants simply used the term “development.” A leader from Argentina portrayed the role of higher education in society to be that of social development.

Notice how the participant did not say economic development or simply development but chose the words social and strategic development instead and highlighted this as the most important purpose with the words “very big.”

Yo creo que el rol de la universidad en la sociedad es el desarrollo social, el desarrollo estratégico eso en cierto sentido es muy grande.

I believe that the role of the university in society is social development, strategic development that in a certain sense is very big.

Note: Participant from Argentina

Chile's Evolving Discourse

While the respondents from Argentina, Peru and Mexico suggested that there are some counter discourses or adaptations of neoliberalism in Latin America, Chilean leaders' depictions of the challenges facing their higher education system brought forth a strong and more explicit counter-discourse against neoliberalism. Specifically, they suggested that universities exist for citizenship and democracy development, which is in line with the *Incheon Declaration* (World Bank, 2015), rather than for economic, global competition and production:

La madre de todos los retos que se vienen es un cambio en los conceptos de la naturaleza y función de la educación superior en la sociedad. Durante mucho tiempo ... todo el país entendió, el país entero entendió la educación superior como lo entiende los economistas, en una cuestión de agregación del capital productivo a la gente y de investigación, investigación para la innovación, para la competitividad, para la productividad – educación de la gente para eso. Es decir, la educación superior era para el sistema económico; para la muestra de la competitividad del país. Y el día que tu llegases a decir algo así aquí en Chile te cuelgan, te queman y después te destrozan en pedacitos. Entonces, ¿no?, hoy, la educación superior es un bien que no puede ser considerado un bien del mercado, un bien de inversión, un bien de consumo, sino que tiene que ver con la construcción de una ciudadanía con las características que tú quieres ponerle, o sea, ciudadanía democrática, republicana, solidaria, inclusiva, participativa, lo cual por supuesto tiene una exageración. El péndulo se ha movido completamente hacia el lado de lo romántico-idealista, desde lo grueso materialista.

The mother of all changes that are coming is a change in the concepts of the nature and function of higher education in society. For a long time, the whole country understood that higher education as economists understand it, is a matter of aggregation of productive capital to people and of research, research for innovation, for competitiveness, for productivity – education of people for that. That is, higher education was for the economic system; for the competitiveness of the country. And the day you come to say something like that here in Chile, they hang you, burn you and then tear you to pieces. So, today, no?, today higher education is a good that cannot be considered a good of the market, an investment good, a consumer good, but it has to do with the construction of a citizenship with the characteristics that you want to add, that is, democratic, republican, solidary, inclusive, participative citizenship, which of course it has an exaggeration. The pendulum has swung completely towards the romantic idealist, from the gross materialistic.

Note: Participant from Chile

Here we see the premise that for a long time, there existed the discourse of neoliberalism in higher education in Chile, signaling a well-established view of higher education highlighting research for innovation, competitiveness, and productivity. Then, the excerpt suggests the “mother” of all changes, as it turns graphic and dramatic, by saying that this discourse is unacceptable today in Chile: “they hang you, burn you, and tear you to pieces if you say it.” This characterizes a new conversation in Chile in terms of death and survival. The new discourse being suggested here is that the purpose of higher education is to build citizenship. While there are various characterizations of citizenship (democratic, inclusive, participatory, solidary), and it is clear there has been a discursive pendulum swing, the participant continued by clarifying that the neoliberal discourse will still be part of the equation. This suggests that higher education in Latin America is currently adapting and reworking neoliberal discourses in its own ways.

Likewise, in this next quote, another Chilean respondent conveyed a similar message, mentioning the need for the state to control educational providers. However, he also suggested that a citizenship/social discourse might be too idealistic, mentioning deep interests that will not let the new discourse fully shape higher education in Chile.

La educación superior como un hecho social y no como un bien de consumo es el eslogan. Quien la ofrezca, la educación superior, tiene que ser gratuita, pública, estatal y no privada; y eso se expresa en que el estado tiene, tiene que tener un mucho mayor control sobre los proveedores educacionales... es una transición de un sistema de mercado a un sistema estatal, en la intención. Esto, esto no va a ocurrir, porque es un sistema en el cual no hay un derecho de tenerlo [ese control estatal] y porque hay intereses muy profundos en el statu quo. Entonces veremos cambios, sí, pero no va a ser un cambio radical como tal.

Higher education as a social fact and not as a consumer good is the slogan. Whoever offers higher education, it must be free, public, it must be state-owned and not private, and that is expressed in the fact that the state has, must have a much greater control over the educational providers... It is a transition from a market system to a state system, in the intention. This, this will not happen, but they intend this to happen. It will not happen because it is a system in which there is no right to have [such state control] and because there are very deep interests in the status quo. Thus, we will see changes, yes, but it's not going to be such a radical change.

Note: Participant from Chile

Relevance to the Needs of the Country

According to the participants in this study, a “good” higher education in Latin America is one that is relevant for the needs of each country and its people, a concept that was voiced through the analyses in the preceding section. Relevance, in turn, became one of the most mentioned themes when analyzing the data set for “what is a good/not good higher education.” For example, this next quote illustrates a theme common among participants, who portrayed a relevant higher education as one that develops productive citizens who not only contribute economically to the country and to society, but also have realized their individual potential at a personal level through employment:

La participación del sector empleador es clave porque con un empleo satisfactorio o sea un empleo de calidad, se benefician las personas porque tienen el principal medio de realización humana, de realización económica,

The participation of the employer sector is key because with a satisfactory job or, that is, a quality job, people benefit because they have the main means of human realization, economic realization, social fulfillment. That

de realización social. Me refiero con un empleo adecuado, con un empleo productivo, con un empleo digno, se benefician las personas, los trabajadores, también se beneficia el empleador, y se beneficia el país porque los ciudadanos productivos son más.	is, with an adequate job, with productive employment, with a decent job, the people benefit, the workers, the employer also benefits, and the country benefits because the productive citizens are more.
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Note: Participant from Peru

Clearly, for higher education to be relevant, and that is, to educate for employment, there needs to be a relationship between the two sectors. However, this next quote portrays the tensions we found about collaborations with industry rooted in ideological and epistemological barriers. Specifically, a Mexican participant talked about a barrier in the form of a moral imperative saying that universities should not work with industry. This ideological barrier is in contradiction with the neoliberal discourse saying that industry needs to work with academia (the human capital development model), although it appears that this discourse endorsing linkages with industry is up in the air, meaning, impractical. This participant also suggested that there is another moral barrier around the notion that universities should not generate their own funding working for industry but should be state supported instead, which reinforces the long tradition of state-supported higher education in Latin America:

Hay un tema de ideología diciendo que la universidad no tiene por qué generar recurso propio, no tiene por qué trabajar para la empresa, en fin, todavía ahí hay una barrera que se contradice con lo que en discurso te dicen: hay que, hay que colaborar con la empresa, pero en la práctica no, no siempre se aterriza.	There is an ideological theme saying that the university does not have to generate its own resources; it does not have to work for the company. Anyway, there is still a barrier that contradicts what they tell you in the discourse; you must, you must collaborate with industry, but in practice no, it does not always happen.
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Note: Participant from Mexico

Another leader from Argentina went a step further and talked about a divorce between academia and industry. Divorce is more severe than barrier, because barriers can be overcome, at least sometimes, but divorce has the connotation of a permanent divide, in line with the historical roots of university autonomy in Latin America.

El otro problema, que creo que eso pasa en muchos países de Latinoamérica, es este divorcio entre universidades o sistemas de educación superior con el mundo laboral y el mundo productivo, ¿verdad? ... Que no se educa específicamente para las funciones o para las competencias que hoy el mundo productivo requiere.	The other problem, which I think that happens in many Latin American countries, is this divorce between universities or higher education systems with the world of work and the productive world, right? . . . We are not specifically educating for the functions or for the competences that today's productive world requires"
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Note: Participant from Argentina

In this next quote, a participant from Argentina categorized this “barrier” or “divorce” as a problem. She talked about the universal problem that universities have everywhere: a lack of articulation with the private sector. This lack of articulation is not part of a “good” higher education,

because it makes universities irrelevant. To address this issue, or overcome this barrier, this leader called for planning in higher education. According to this participant, such planning is neglected in the current discourse on market logics. She uses the term “social rehabilitation” as the opposite from the “market logic,” perhaps because neoliberalism favors minimal government interventions and little state/controlled planning. By choosing the term “rehabilitation,” this participant was suggesting that society is sick or in need of repair. Therefore, we interpret this quote as “we can heal society by planning the expansion of higher education and articulating it with the productive sector.”

Y luego obtenemos los problemas que tienen las universidades en todas partes. Es lo que estábamos discutiendo, la articulación con el sector productivo, e incluso la planificación de la expansión de la educación superior es un tema que hoy está un poco en desatención entre la lógica del mercado, la lógica de la rehabilitación social.

And then we get the problems that universities have everywhere. It’s what we were discussing, the articulation with the productive sector, and even the planning of the expansion of higher education is a subject that today is a little neglected between the logic of the market, the logic of social rehabilitation.

Note: Participant from Argentina

However, this idea of planning higher education has a major challenge, and this is university autonomy. For example, this participant from Argentina talked about the irony of how autonomy forces universities into the market, limiting their ability to fulfill social needs by having to be too focused on competition, and so becoming irrelevant:

Curioso cómo la autonomía termina transformándose casi en un impositivo que coloca la universidad en el mercado y no en función de la planificación y satisfacción de necesidades sociales.

Curious how autonomy ends up becoming almost an imposition that places the university in the market and not according to the planning and satisfaction of social needs.

Note: Participant from Argentina

Finally, the issue of the lack of relevance of higher education is also due to the epistemological inability of academia to address social problems, according to this participant from Argentina, because higher education institutions do not have a solution, or they have contradictory solutions to problems:

En algunos casos, un mundo académico no tiene respuestas a los problemas o tiene respuestas muy contradictorias, en educación, ¿no? Si yo pregunto al mundo académico, bueno, ¿qué impacto tiene el uso de tecnologías de la información en la educación? Media biblioteca me dice una cosa y los de la otra media me dicen todo lo contrario. Y yo tengo que tomar la decisión.

In some cases, an academic world has no answers to problems or has very contradictory answers, in education, right? If I ask to the academic world, well, how, what impact does the use of information technology have on education? Half the library tells me one thing and the other half tells me totally the opposite. And I have to make the decision.

Note: Participant from Argentina

Accreditation and Quality Assurance

For participants in this study, government accreditation is extremely important; it was signified as a factor in creating “good” quality education. Like the CDA in the preceding two sections, analyzing the discourses around accreditation and quality assurance shows how leaders in these countries are re-working the neoliberal discourse to one that invests in people and in national needs. Participants in our study suggested that this should happen in a controlled manner via government accreditation rather than through pure market forces. Of concern to participants was the quality control of private universities. Thus, this section is divided in these three subthemes, accreditation as an investment, government-controlled accreditation, and quality assurance of private universities.

Accreditation as Investment

A Mexican participant used the metaphor of accreditation as the only pressure motor, as virtually the only means for institutional change. This implies that other mechanisms such as market forces and the invisible hand do not generate change and innovation. The role of standardization and quality control is one of the neoliberal governmental tools widespread around the world for governments to make better investments, just as this participant concludes the thought:

<p>Bueno, la acreditación de los programas es uno de, desde mi punto de vista, es extremadamente importante porque ha sido el empuje de, yo creo ha sido el único motor de presión que yo he podido identificar para que las instituciones tengan un genuino interés para modificar sus planes de estudio, para modificar su currículo, para mejorar su planta docente, para hacer mejores inversiones.</p>	<p>Well, the accreditation of the programs is one that, from my point of view, is extremely important because it has been the driving force of, I think that it has been the only pressure engine that I have been able to identify, so that the institutions have a genuine interest to modify their programs of studies, to modify their curriculum, to improve teaching staff, to make better investments.</p>
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Note: Participant from Mexico

Investment, then, should focus on people, in human resources (teaching staff). This next participant from Argentina alluded to the notion of investment in people by questioning the quality assurance mechanisms set by the government. She said that accountability might show to what degree objectives and goals have been met, but mere statistics cannot measure the actual impact of education on people’s lives and communities. Ultimately, like the earlier analysis on the purpose of education, this leader highlighted that the role of higher education is to impact people beyond economic terms and so, accreditation should also measure education’s effects on students’ cultures and families:

<p>Uno cuando desarrolla una política pública, marca objetivos y metas, entonces pueden ser que los objetivos se cumplan y que las metas se alcancen, por ejemplo, que dos millones de jóvenes se reciban en el secundario del año que viene, pero ¿Qué impacto tuvo en la vida de esas personas?... ¿les cambió algo por haber terminado el</p>	<p>When you develop public policy, set objectives and goals, then the objectives may be met and the goals may be reached, for example, that two million young people will be received in high school next year. But what impact did this have in those people's lives?... Did it change something, because they finished high school? Did they get better</p>
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bachillerato? ¿consiguieron mejores trabajos, ganan más plata, pudieron trasladar eso a su cultura, a su nido familiar? Yo cuando hablo de impacto hablo de impacto en la subjetividad y cambiar su actitud en la manera de ver.	jobs, earn more money, could they transfer that to their culture, to their family nest? When I talk about impact, I talk about impact on the subjectivity and on changing their attitudes in their views.
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Note: Participant from Argentina

State-controlled Accreditation

Many participants in our data called for accreditation systems to be controlled and planned. In this case, a “not good” accreditation system included one that was vague and subjective, as described in this next quote, where the leader illustrated the lack of rigor and implications of current quality assurance mechanisms in Chile, essentially portraying a desire for the opposite:

La ley chilena estableció criterios de acreditación y no estándares, y los criterios son sumamente amplios y el problema finalmente depende de la persona que te evalúa. No hay guías o manuales que traten de parametrizar todo esto; entonces te juzga quien te toca. Es muy aleatorio y muy ambiguo. Además, es un sistema inquisitivo. Nosotros tuvimos visitas de pares el año pasado; en 4 días visitaron 12 sedes: ¡maratónico!	The Chilean law established criteria of accreditation and not standards, and the criteria are extremely broad, and the problem finally depends on the person who evaluates you. There are no guides or manuals that try to parameterize all this; then you are judged based on who was assigned to you. It is very random and very ambiguous. It is also an inquisitive system. We had visits of peer evaluators last year; in 4 days they visited 12 campuses: marathonic!
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Note: Participant from Chile

This leader underscored the accreditation process as serendipitous with language such as there are no guidelines or manual and it is random, depending on who are the evaluators. The tone of this quote criticizing the accreditation system as inquisitive, serendipitous, and vague suggests a desire for a better accreditation system that is impartial, standardized, controlled, planned, specific. In other words, this alludes to a call for a tightly state-controlled system, which again, is a departure from a free market-based, “invisible hand” or the notion of autonomy.

The “control,” however, should not always be the state. In another turn of tables, this next participant from Peru said that employers should legitimize the education students receive. This leader did not support the role of the government in determining quality assurance, but instead, called upon employers to intervene and certify the education delivered by universities because, according to this participant, employers are the only ones who know what professions are needed:

[La] legitimidad de una formación para el trabajo, creemos nosotros y por experiencia lo decimos, la tiene que dar el empleador y no una institución pública o una institución que no conoce cuál es la demanda de profesionalización para trabajar.	[The] legitimacy of a training for work, we believe and from experience we say it, must be given by the employer and not by a public institution or an institution that does not know what is the demand of professionalization for work.
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Note: Participant from Peru

Either way, the ultimate quality indicator is employability, as a marker of a “good” higher education, underscoring the human capital development function of higher education in the neoliberal model.

Quality Assurance and Private Institutions

Privatization, including the proliferation of private higher education institutions, is one of the signatures of neoliberalism. However, participants from Peru, Chile and Mexico, countries with a strong private sector, critiqued private universities, especially when they are governed like any other business with little government control (note that, per the analysis above, “control” is “good”). For example, one leader (quoted below) talked about private universities using the term corporate government, a common term when referring to for-profit businesses; thus, when used in this context, it is implying that private universities are for-profit businesses. Aware that there is an ideological layer to the idea of “for-profit” in the educational world, this participant clarified that it can be very good that higher education includes private institutions.

Puede estar muy bien que los privados puedan participar en la creación y gestión de instituciones de educación superior, pero no me queda muy claro que lo puedan hacer y gestionar de la misma manera, como gestionan el boliche que está en la esquina o un supermercado.

It may be very good that private parties can participate in the creation and management of higher education institutions, but it is not very clear to me that they can do it and manage it the same way, as they bar in the corner of the street or a supermarket.

Note: Participant from Chile

However, and this is the important point, this participant recognized that although private institutions can be good, they should not be managed like a bar or the supermarket at the end of the street. This end of the street characterization signifies regular businesses. The quote finishes with the open-ended question, how do we make sure that the corporate government of private institutions is done the most adequate possible way and what happens if that is not the case? Here the participant distanced himself by saying we (society, perhaps) in opposition to them, the businesses. The quote implies that it can be fine to have higher education as a business (them) if it is adequate. Thus, running a higher education institution like an ordinary business is not adequate, which means, there are other special considerations when it comes to education.

In the same vein, another participant from Mexico talked about garage private universities as stands selling diplomas operating with just a functioning license that supposedly guarantees quality. It insinuates that these institutions are legal, but that’s about it. According to this participant, this is a serious problem in Mexico, which suggests that this type of institution is too common:

Hay otro problema serio en México con la educación superior privada. Por muchos años se dieron lo que es el registro de validez oficial es como la patente, la licencia, el permiso para impartir educación que no está ligado a la calidad, a los criterios, por ejemplo, de calidad de los docentes o al tipo de, incluso al tipo de infraestructura. Universidades de cochera, con seguridad, abrían en un local pequeño, y comenzaron

There is another serious problem in Mexico with private higher education. For many years, they gave what is the official functioning certificate, like an authorization, the license, the permission to impart education that is not linked to the quality, to the criteria, for example, of quality of teachers or the type of, even the type of infrastructure. Garage universities, it’s certain, would open in a tiny place, and

a dar títulos como pues un mero trámite de requisito.

began to give degrees like a pure administrative process.

Note: Participant from Mexico

Summary of Results

Overall, we found discourses that support the role of higher education for economic national development and in line with hegemonic neoliberal discourses of organizations such as the World Bank and OECD. In the minds of these leaders, higher education should serve individuals for satisfying lives through employment as well as other national needs based on economic metrics. However, they did not mention the need of higher education to assist the country in economic global competition, a point that Ayers (2005) underscores is central to neoliberalism, as it has moved from a commitment to living wages to global competitiveness. In this study, participants were still mainly committed to employability with living wages for a dignified life of its own citizens. Then, there was the case of participants from Chile, who were more likely to endorse a discourse along the lines of the *Incheon Declaration* with emphasis on social justice and equity by portraying higher education's purpose as one to build a citizenship with attributes such as democratic, inclusive (free for all), participatory, and solidarity.

For participants, the main barrier for higher education to serve their countries was the historical tradition of university autonomy (Bernasconi & Celis, 2017; Bravo, 2020; Brunner, 2017; Mendoza, 2020; Rhoads & Torres, 2006). For example, participants talked about historical, moral, and epistemological roadblocks in the way for higher education to work with industry, which would translate into higher education's relevance to national needs through the employability of their alumni. Participants went as far as to suggest that employability should be the yardstick for quality assurance and so, employers should have a critical role in shaping higher education, but again, in a controlled way rather than through pure market forces. One participant even suggested that industry should set the research agenda of academics.

Participants unanimously called for a tighter governmental control in accreditation and quality assurance favoring standardized metrics. Participants were particularly concerned with the proliferation of private institutions and the need to be regulated by the government. This demand for tighter regulation for quality assurance for both private and public institutions, has resulted in new data-driven systems and accountability reforms in the region (Bernasconi & Rojas, 2004; Brunner, 2017). However, participants were still not satisfied with these reforms and called for more reforms and accountability.

Discussion

Our CDA has revealed a neoliberal discourse in the minds of participating leaders of higher education, which reflects the local realities of their respective countries. While Chile's discourse actually counters the neoliberal discourse with its focus on higher education's public good, the others have more clearly adapted and localized neoliberalism to their contexts. In this way, our results are in line with the idea of "glocal agency," a concept coined by Marginson and Rhoades (2002) referring to the agency of actors who intertwine global, national, and local discourses. In this study of Latin America, the actors are chancellors of higher education institutions, academics, and policymakers in Mexico, Peru, Chile, and Argentina, who each mix the global neoliberal discourse with localized discourses to define the issues of higher education in their countries. Therefore, this study suggests research like this is important in order to understand how discourses that are deemed global play out at national and local levels and possibly, to uncover alternatives to the status quo. As

discourses create, recreate and perpetuate social structures by guiding the actions, decision-making process, and policy making of those in positions of power (Ayers, 2005; Fairclough, 1993; Martínez-Alemán, 2015; Matthies, 2016).

Although the goal of higher education for participants in this study is still workforce development and the generation of knowledge, as the neoliberal model of higher education suggests (Schugurensky, 2005), participants in our study favored national and local needs for the development of their countries void of notions around global competition. We did not find references to corporations, multinationals, and global markets, terms that are common in the neoliberalism writing centered on developed countries (Altbach, 2016; Ayers, 2005; Boron, 2006; Saunders & Blanco-Ramirez, 2017; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Moreover, we did not find a discourse around rankings of academic institutions, something that has been underscored in the literature on neoliberalism in Latin American higher education (Altbach, 2016). Similarly, participants in this study did not mention the idea of a higher education marketplace where actors in academia compete for students and resources, one of the notions that academic capitalism underscores (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2014). Therefore, the lack of these elements is an indication of an emphasis on the national and local aspects of the neoliberal discourse in the minds of these leaders. For example, in the globalized neoliberal discourse, students are depicted as rational thinkers who invest in education for future earnings and status in the global economy. In contrast, participants in this Latin America study portrayed students as individuals who need a higher education for a satisfying life through meaningful employment, in a national market and in line with national needs.

This study uncovered a discourse complicating the pinnacle representation of higher education in terms of academic freedom and autonomy, a hallmark of higher education in the region (Bernasconi & Celis, 2017; Rhoads & Torres, 2006). Minimizing government intervention is a hallmark of neoliberalism; however, unlike liberalism, the state in neoliberalism has an important role of regulating markets. The discourse we uncovered seems to indicate that participants desire government intervention, through standardized metrics as it is the case in neoliberalism, but not so much to guarantee the proper functioning of the market, as neoliberalism states, but to make higher education relevant to national needs. This is an important caveat of how the neoliberal discourse is adapted to the local and national circumstances of participants' countries. This tension between university autonomy and higher education relevance to the needs of these countries is also palpable in *The Declaration of Rio* (Universia, 2014), signed by more than 1000 leaders of higher education institutions in Ibero-America who met in Río de Janeiro in July 2014. In the report from this event, attendees endorsed the need to continue to protect the autonomy of universities while addressing the need of relevance in higher education. It is still not clear how to operationalize both autonomy and relevance in the region, which can be a topic of inquiry in future research. Given their influential role in their countries, participants' discourses are likely to be reflected in actual policies and leadership shaping higher education in these countries (Fairclough, 2015; Mattheis, 2006). Future research across various regions and areas of the world should deepen our understanding of how global discourses are adapted and adjusted to policies. Given that much of the research on neoliberalism is focused on developed countries, this study adds to the scarce literature of how discourses are adapted and adjusted to national and local contexts in developing countries in Latin America by those who are involved in state and institutional policymaking.

Conclusion

According to the World Bank, higher education in Latin America has important deficiencies in performance as measured by standardized tests such as PISA (the Program for International Student Assessment), high attrition rates, and significant inequities (World Bank 2018). A study from the OECD reports that about half of employers in the region have difficulties finding workers with the skills they need (OECD, 2018). Despite widespread efforts in most countries implementing quality assurance systems, these have not brought the needed changes addressing the gaps between higher education and labor productivity efficiencies (Kaplan, 2009). These are reports from major international organizations and published in top tier outlets based on global studies with standardized metrics and placing higher education as the engine of human capital development for economic development. In other words, these reports endorse the hegemonic neoliberal discourse and exert significant influence in policymaking worldwide (Bernasconi, 2015; Harvey, 2015; Pineda, 2015). This study contributes to concerns raised by critics about how these reports undermine national and local circumstances (Alcantara, 2013; Olssen & Peters, 2005; Stiglitz, 2002) as well as sustainable goals expressed in the *Incheon Declaration* (World Bank, 2015). In particular, this study uncovers the nuances of the tensions that globalized discourses face when met with national and local needs in Latin American higher education. These tensions need to be addressed in order to design policies that could effectively close the equity gap in the region amidst massification and the uncontrolled proliferation of private universities in many countries, offering access to underserved students to higher education but of questionable quality (Brunner & Villalobos, 2014; Ferreyra et al., 2017; Levy, 2006).

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