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More Ideational than Material: Exploring the Contemporary Role of Student Voices in Chilean Universities

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Abstract: A key promise of neoliberalist ideologies in higher education is the valorization of student choice as a means of (re)shaping practices and improving the responsiveness of institutions. The power of this neoliberal imaginary (Ball, 2012) was grounded in market-like policies that demanded institutional accountability to both afford competition and maximizing prospects of student satisfaction. A key consequence of this imperative has been burgeoning institutional and system-level investment in metric-based instruments designed to measure and compare student experiences, engagement or satisfaction. However, how effective of these neoliberal policies been in empowering student choice and in producing more reflexive institutions? The research reported here investigated the influence of student voices in one of the earliest adopters of this neoliberal imaginary: the Chilean higher education system. This qualitative study explored the contemporary institutional role and function of student voices using a university typology, with data developed through artefact analyses and interviews with educational leaders. The findings suggest that institutions have heterogeneous orientations ranging from pseudo-democratic to instrumental forms of engagement, reflecting the distinctive sociocultural histories of institutions. However, the outcomes suggest that student voices are not a substantial presence in quality assurance or improvement practices.

Keywords: higher education; student voice; Chile

Más ideacional que material: Explorando la función contemporánea de las voces estudiantiles en las universidades chilenas

Resumen: Una promesa clave de las ideologías neoliberales en la educación superior fue la valorización de la elección de los estudiantes como medio para (re)configurar las prácticas y mejorar la capacidad de respuesta de las instituciones. El poder de este imaginario neoliberal (Ball, 2012) se basa en políticas de tipo mercantil que exigen la responsabilidad institucional tanto para permitir la competencia como para maximizar las perspectivas de satisfacción de los estudiantes. Una consecuencia clave de este imperativo ha sido la floreciente inversión institucional y a nivel de sistema en instrumentos basados en métricas diseñados para medir y comparar las experiencias, el compromiso o la satisfacción de los estudiantes. Sin embargo, ¿hasta qué punto han sido eficaces estas políticas neoliberales a la hora de potenciar la elección de los estudiantes y de crear instituciones más reflexivas? La investigación que aquí se presenta indaga la influencia de las voces de los estudiantes en uno de los primeros contextos que adoptaron este imaginario neoliberal: el sistema de educación superior chileno. Este estudio cualitativo exploró el rol institucional contemporáneo y la función de las voces estudiantiles utilizando una tipología universitaria, con datos desarrollados a través de análisis de artefactos y entrevistas con líderes educativos. Los resultados sugieren que las instituciones tienen orientaciones heterogéneas que van desde formas *pseudodemocráticas* hasta formas instrumentales de compromiso, reflejando las historias socioculturales distintivas de las instituciones. Sin embargo, los resultados sugieren que las voces de los estudiantes no tienen una presencia sustancial en las prácticas de aseguramiento de calidad o de mejora.

Palabras-clave: educación superior; voz de estudiante; Chile

Mais idéias do que material: Explorando o papel contemporâneo das vozes estudantis nas universidades chilenas

Resumo: Uma promessa chave das ideologias neoliberalistas no ensino superior foi a valorização da escolha do estudante como meio de (re)moldar práticas e melhorar a capacidade de resposta das instituições. O poder desse imaginário neoliberal (Ball, 2012) foi fundamentado em políticas de mercado que exigiam responsabilidade institucional tanto para permitir a concorrência quanto para maximizar as perspectivas de satisfação dos estudantes. Uma consequência chave deste imperativo tem sido o crescente investimento institucional e sistêmico em instrumentos baseados em métricas, projetados para medir e comparar experiências, engajamento ou satisfação dos estudantes. Entretanto, qual tem sido a eficácia dessas políticas neoliberais na capacitação da escolha dos estudantes e na produção de instituições mais reflexivas? A pesquisa aqui relatada investigou a influência das vozes estudantis em um dos primeiros adotantes deste imaginário neoliberal: o sistema de ensino superior chileno. Este estudo qualitativo explorou o papel institucional contemporâneo e a função das vozes estudantis usando uma tipologia universitária, com dados desenvolvidos através de análises de artefatos e entrevistas com líderes educacionais. Os resultados sugerem que as instituições têm orientações heterogêneas que vão desde formas pseudo-democráticas até formas instrumentais de engajamento, refletindo as distintas histórias socioculturais das instituições. Entretanto, os resultados sugerem que as vozes dos estudantes não são uma presença substancial na garantia de qualidade ou na prática de melhoria.

Palavras-chave: ensino superior; voz do aluno; Chile

More Ideational than Material: Exploring the Contemporary Role of Student Voices in Chilean Universities

There is a broad consensus that improving student learning in higher education requires institutions to more effectively understand and respond to student perspectives on their education-related experiences (Berk, 2019; Healey et al., 2016; Tight, 2019). Equally, it has been recognised that effectively responding to student perspectives on their learning can be a productive means of enhancing student engagement and retention (Seale, 2010; Seale et al., 2015; Zepke, 2017). However, there is less agreement on how to most effectively harness the perspectives of students toward these potential outcomes, or what the specific focus of such efforts should be (e.g., quality assurance, pedagogical improvement or student satisfaction). Reflecting this, approaches to the engagement of the “student voice” are eclectic in form: from narrow to the expansive, from the formal to the informal and from system-wide to local initiatives (Seale et al., 2015; H. Young & Jerome, 2020). Equally, it is a mistake to assume that students speak with a singular monolithic voice, instead possessing both agreement and discord, privilege and disadvantage, and loud and silent (Cook-Sather, 2006; Lygo-Baker et al., 2019).

However, the predominant tendency in higher education globally is toward a narrowing and homogenizing of student voices, driven by the mounting authority of quantitative student surveys to comparatively measure the student experience, levels of student engagement or student satisfaction with teachers, programs and institutions (Darwin, 2020a; Klemenčič & Chirikov, 2015). The popularity of ratings-based student surveys has developed as they have been progressively normalized as useful metrics with which to fuel contemporary policy demands related to institutional quality assurance, system-level rankings and “league tables” (to facilitate student comparison) and as a means of critically evaluating academic performativity (Hornstein, 2017; Vasey & Carroll, 2016). However, significant ambiguity remains around the actual validity of student ratings-based survey outcomes as a proxy measure for teaching quality, with a range of studies raising questions as to how effective such necessarily reductive metrics are in harnessing heterogeneous student voices (Blackmore, 2009; Muller, 2018). Similarly, substantial concerns have also been raised about how effective student rating models are in providing a meaningful, fair or credible assessment of teaching and learning (Darwin, 2016; Fan et al., 2019; Kornell & Hausman, 2016; Stark & Freishtat, 2014; Stark et al., 2016; Uttl et al., 2017).

One of the critical facilitators of this narrowing of conceptions of the student voice has been the seemingly irresistible hegemony of neoliberalist ideologies in global higher education (H. Young & Jerome, 2020; Zepke, 2017). From their origins in the 1980s, such ideologies have dominated policy framing, paradoxically imposing the adoption of open market-like mechanisms on universities whilst simultaneously strengthening levels of institutional regulation, accountability and transparency (Lorenz, 2012). These moves—broadly designed under the unifying discourse of *New Public Management* normalized across the public sector—coincided with receding public funding and the government facilitation of mechanisms for expanded private funding of institutions (and their future growth). As Peters and Jandric (2018) identify, this fundamental transformation effectively displaced the preceding *public university* model as the dominant institutional form globally, transforming a broadly social-democratic formation “into a consumer-driven system where freedom was defined as consumer sovereignty” (p. 554). According to Ball (2012), this phenomenon is part of what he describes as a broader “neoliberal imaginary” in education that privileges accountability and individual student satisfaction over the broader public good. This imperative has only been accelerated by the global rankings ‘arms race’, which has reified student rating metrics as a legitimate proxy to grade institutional quality (Hazelkorn, 2015; Muller, 2018). These developments have

broadly reframed the relationship between students, teachers and institutions, with the seminal mediating function of student opinion in higher education settings increasingly supplanted by this more deterministic form of retrospective assessment.

In this paper, the four-decade promises of neoliberalist ideologies for the enhanced development of higher education are critically examined, based on an analysis of the form in which the voices of students are articulated in a contemporary university system. This analysis is grounded in research undertaken in one of the world's earliest sites of neoliberal imaginary: the Chilean higher education model. Firstly, the paper considers the global and Chilean contexts for neoliberal higher education policies. Following this, the outcomes of a qualitative study that investigated the system-wide and institutional positioning and influence of student voices in Chilean higher education is presented. Finally, the implications of these outcomes are considered in the light of neoliberal aspirations for the influence of student choice for shaping the nature of higher education provision, and what this may mean for future policy setting.

The Promises of Neoliberalism in Higher Education

The rise of neoliberalism was as an expedient ideology that legitimized government retreat from funding universities from the 1980s on, displacing the prevailing conception of the public good with the economic imperatives of private benefit (Marginson, 2014). By insisting on the adoption of pseudo-market-based approaches drawn from the managerialist logic of the private sector, universities were expected to operate with heightened economic efficiency and in an environment of elevated inter-institutional competition, to produce more responsive actions. Moreover, institutions were expected to operate with lessened autonomy resulting from heightened accountability to government (as the market regulator) and in response to rational choices made by more informed students-as-consumer (Lorenz, 2012). According to Peters and Jandric (2018), this resulted in universities making “a switch in emphasis from policy formulation to management and institutional design, a shift from process controls to output controls, a move from integration to differentiation and from statism to subsidiarity” (p. 555). The rising hegemony of neoliberalist thinking was to have profound impacts on how institutions related to both academics and students. For academics, earlier normative notions that had guided conceptions of teaching quality were progressively supplanted by generic, outcomes-focused performance standards (Peters & Jandric, 2018). Students were reformed as consumers engendered with the ability to make rational judgments on the quality or otherwise of services they were paying increasingly more to access (Maringe, 2010).

This reconstruction essentially sought to redefine the originating student voice that had emerged as part of the democratizing effects of the post-1960s era (itself a response to the preceding elite formation) into one that cast students more as discriminating consumers, and comparable learning outcomes as a ‘rateable’ commodity of market value (Carey, 2013; Maringe, 2010). This neoliberalist transformation effectively repositioned the student in relation to the institution, fundamentally disrupting how and when student voices were understood as legitimate (Seale et al., 2015). Instead of students being afforded formative opportunities to influence and collaborate in the learning process, their voice was progressively redefined toward more deterministic, reductive and retrospective assessments of experiences (Darwin, 2016). This commodification of the student learning experience would provide the foundation for various forms of performance appraisal, including making academics individually responsible for outcomes in environments often characterized by diminishing resources (Blackmore, 2009).

The Neoliberalist Experiment in Chilean Higher Education

Although neoliberalism is generally considered to be a product of the global north, in a practical sense its earliest adherents had a greater connection to Latin American economies where,

from the 1960s, it took root among conservative economists and business leaders as an alternative development strategy (Dados & Connell, 2018). The desire to attract capital from the global north drove a nascent neoliberal belief system that prophesied that economic growth would come from the adoption of radical deregulation of markets and unencumbered movement of international capital. However, in a portent with what was to follow globally, neoliberalism in Latin America provided largely a useful ideological rationale for broadscale privatization of public assets, dramatic reductions in levels of public expenditure and the ceding of state control to domestic and international private sector elites (Margheritis & Pereira, 2007).

Significantly, what this did not lead to was a broad liberalizing of economies, with governments maintaining a critical role in economically supporting and regulating for private-sector economic expansion (Kingstone, 2018). This paradox, characterized by Harvey (2005) as *market enforcement*, meaning in governance that private interests must inevitably prevail over the public good. For higher education in Latin America, neoliberalism meant “a wave of government plans, acts, regulations and recommendations...hoisting universities into the marketplace, proposing radical changes to all aspects of academic life, from finances to curricula” (Torres & Schugurensky, 2002, p. 440). Importantly, although under these policies a significant expansion of higher education places did indeed occur, far less attention was given to assuring the claimed benefits of neoliberal markets, such as improved educational quality or enhanced student choice of—and influence in—their institutions (Guzmán-Valenzuela, 2016).

The core structure of the contemporary Chilean higher education model¹ can be directly traced to the model forced by the Pinochet military dictatorship (1973-1990). Being largely hostile to the existing public and traditional private universities (and wishing to expend as little possible), the Pinochet regime was easily attracted to the claimed potential of neoliberalist educational ideologies. In the case of higher education, these approaches meant the simultaneous weakening of the public system and the incitement of new private entrants with the promise of desultory expectations and oversight (Bernasconi, 2015). Rhetoric framed by the equity of access and equality of opportunity accompanied these reforms, however over time it became evident that expanding fee-driven private provision—rather than educational quality—was the overriding imperative (Espinoza & González, 2013). A critically associated imposition was the introduction of tuition fees for all students, which forced the fragmenting public university system to compete for student funding with the range of new private institutions that rapidly emerged in the 1980s and 1990s as government support effectively evaporated (Bernasconi, 2011).

Even after the return to democracy in 1990, democratic governments have opted to continue neo-liberal approaches to higher education, embracing subsidized student loans schemes to effectively institutionalized the need for universities to compete for students to survive, while simultaneously pushing students into OECD-leading levels of relative indebtedness (Bellei et al., 2014; Guzman-Valenzuela, 2017). Critically, this has directed the bulk of state support toward subsidizing private student loans, with limited direct support available to institutions. This has meant the sustainability of universities—consistent with seminal neo-liberalist principles—has remained essential dependent on competing for students (Salazar & Leihy, 2017). Simbürger and Donoso (2020) contend that these arrangements have been effectively institutionalized in the post-democracy

¹ Post-secondary education in Chile is made up of three distinct sectors: vocational education (*Centro de Formación Técnicas*), professional education (*Institutos Profesionales*) and higher education (*Universidades*). This research focuses solely on the higher education sector primarily given its dominant sectoral presence (59.6% of the 1.22m post-secondary students enrolled in 2020 [SIES, 2020]), greater institutional scale and coherence, and more evidence of traditional integration of student perspectives (Bernasconi, 2015).

era by what they describe as a “naturalization” of neoliberal discourses. They identify three critical drivers for this: the silencing of the dictatorship origins of the model, the adoption of a neutral stance regarding the public and private provision and conflating private sector motives with the public good. Guzmán-Valenzuela & Barnett (2013) argue that this imposed two significant fragilities in the Chilean higher education model: an ontological and reputational fragility—generally experienced by public universities where the social mission was distilled by an imposed market logic—and a contractual and branding fragility that private universities experienced in balancing commercial and demands for educational quality in a new and volatile higher education marketplace.

However, although there has been considerable interest in broader-level system impacts, there has been less attention on the effect this neoliberalist imaginary has been on everyday institutional practices within Chilean higher education institutions. Despite analysis of the drivers of systemic renovation, there is has been limited research on how Chilean universities engage with student voices on their learning experiences (Bernasconi, 2015), and whether the neoliberalist promise of the shaping power of the ‘student-as-consumer’ on higher education quality has been realized 30 years post the launching of this imaginary. To understand the contemporary positioning of student voices in Chilean higher education, a research study was designed to investigate the following research questions:

- a) How are student voices articulated and institutionally situated in Chilean higher education (i.e., student governance, evaluation, institutional artefacts or similar)?
- b) What function do student voices perform to influence the quality of institutional pedagogical practices (i.e., pedagogies adopted by programs and teaching academics)?

These research questions were designed to enhance the understanding of what specific role and function student voices were seen to possess in Chilean universities, how they were variously articulated in different institutional settings (i.e., traditional private, public or new private) and what actual influence in practice they exercised on pedagogies-in-use (i.e., the methods and practices of teaching) in institutions, programs or classroom teaching. Finally, for the design of the research, student voices were understood as to what extent institutions were:

listening to and valuing the views that students express regarding their learning experiences; communicating student views to people who are in a position to influence change, and treating students as equal partners in the evaluation of teaching and learning, thus empowering them to take a more active role in shaping or changing their education (Seale, 2010 p. 995)

Theoretical Framework

The design of the study was conceptually grounded in a cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) framework, which provided a potent heuristic device with which to understand how student voices are articulated, situated and influence across different institutional contexts. Emerging from the seminal work of Vygotsky (1978) on cultural mediation and higher psychological functions, CHAT in its contemporary manifestation provides a useful means of understanding multileveled forms of social activity. Through his work in developing a third-generation activity theory, Engeström (1999, 2014) offers researchers a useful explanatory structure with which to investigate and analyze culturally-mediated activity: that is, with a focus on activity that is object-orientated and mediated by shared cultural tools that are used to collectively understand and intentionally undertake actions. In this way, CHAT-based research places less emphasis on individual perspectives and more on the social contexts of meaning which mediate how individuals act and systems develop.

Reflecting this utility, CHAT approaches are broadly employed to conceptual frame educational research, including as a useful heuristic with which to analyze activity systems in higher education (Darwin, 2011; Wells & Claxton, 2002). For these reasons, CHAT offered a range of useful conceptual tools with which to develop the study and to analyze its outcomes. Specifically, these tools allowed the:

- a) analysis of seemingly disparate social practices that framed the use of the student voice both at a system-wide and institutional level, providing a robust interdisciplinary framework with which to explore how such practices shape the 'social mind' regarding the role of student voices in understanding the quality of teaching and student learning;
- b) making explicit the potential tensions and contradictory imperatives around the institutional positioning of student voices, and the implications of these for academic practices; and
- c) identification of the expansive potential of student voices to influence prospective academic practices. (Adapted from Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006; M. Young, 2001, as cited in Darwin, 2020b)

Methodology

Given the research focus, a qualitative methodology was adopted for the study as it provided an interpretative and interconnected framework that could make visible the material realities of student voices in situated contexts of higher education practice. The research was conducted over an 18-month period and was based on a data collection strategy that sought to develop data most relevant to building a comprehensive picture of the nature of contemporary forms of engagement with—and influences of—student voices in Chilean higher education. This strategy was based on a sequential explanatory method designed to elicit multi-voiced data that could provide a complex understanding of the articulation and function of student voices, starting at the system-wide level and moving into situated contexts of practice. As Creswell & Plano Clark (2017) explain, this method is grounded in cascading phases of qualitative data collection designed to progressively deepen the analytical focus of identified cases. This approach allowed the design of an interpretive form of inquiry within the stratified and diffuse institutional contexts of Chilean higher education, facilitating the identification of both convergence and variance through multiple sources of triangulated evidence, particularly where the boundaries of a phenomenon are not clearly established (Yin, 1994). This method was deemed most suitable for the design of this study as the boundaries of what constitutes the role and function of student voices in institutions were understood to be contested and porous. This assessment meant that the negotiation of differing perspectives and contexts was an essential means of developing a more sophisticated understanding of this phenomenon through a more complex multi-levelled form of data collection.

Reflecting this intent, the four distinct sources of data were used to develop the study—one orientated to eliciting system-level data, and the remaining three directed to the institutional level. Data for the three institutional-level tools involving artefact analyses and semi-structured interviews were generated using a purposive sample based on an institutional typology. Although the unique evolution of the Chilean higher education model means it is challenging to effectively develop this form of purposive sample (Bernasconi, 2006; Brunner, 2013), the study used a range of criteria to develop a typology that demarcated public-private, traditional-new, larger-smaller and urban-regional institutions. The sample generated by this typology for the artefact analysis ($n=28$) and interviews ($n=10$) is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1
Institutional Typology²

Institutional Type	Artefact analyses (n=28)	Interviews (n=10)
Traditional Public	Larger urban (n=2), Smaller urban (n=1), Larger regional (n=2), Smaller regional (n=5)	Larger urban (n=1), Larger regional (n=1), Smaller regional (n=1)
Traditional Private	Larger urban (n=1), Larger multi-regional (n=1), Larger regional (n=1), Smaller regional (n=1)	Larger urban (n=1), Larger regional (n=1)
Post-1990 Private (CRUCH*)	Larger urban (n=1), Smaller urban (n=1)	Larger urban (n=1), Smaller urban (n=1)
Post-1990 Private (non-CRUCH)	Larger urban (n=3), Larger multi-regional (n=3), Smaller urban (n=6)	Larger urban (n=1), Larger multi-regional (n=1), Smaller urban (n=1)

* CRUCH is the acronym in Spanish for *Consejo de Rectores de las Universidades Chilenas*, the peak body representing traditional universities in Chile (though having expanded in recent years to include several newer post-1990 universities).

Specifically, the four data collection tools were:

- a) an artefact analysis of the current and proposed accreditation documentation and associated standards for post-secondary institutions issued by the Chilean National Accreditation Commission (*Comisión Nacional de Acreditación* in Spanish). This analysis was based on an investigative protocol designed to identify specific references to the integration of student voices or student perspectives (this source provided system-level data);
- b) an artefact analysis of publicly available materials published on university websites related to the use of the student voice. For the study, artefacts were defined as explicit, direct references to the institutional use of student voices (i.e., student evaluation, student representation in governance, student fora or other references to student influence in institutional practices). This systematic analysis was based on an investigative protocol designed to identify and analyse references to students and student perspectives (providing institutional-level data);
- c) semi-structured interviews with ten senior academic leaders (primarily at *Vicerrector Académico* level) from ten of selected institutions purposively drawn from a purposive sample based on an institutional typology (as detailed in Table

² This typology was based on an analysis of the range of Chilean higher education institutions operating in 2019. Of the 59 universities, 18 were traditional public (with 28% of students); eight were traditional private-CRUCH and three post-1990 private-CRUCH (25%), and 30 were post-1990 private (47%). In addition, 34 were based in metropolitan Santiago, while 25 were based in regional cities (MINEDUC, 2019; SIES, 2020). This typology proved broadly effective in providing a generally representative range of data across a highly diversified and stratified sectoral landscape.

- 1) to establish a more complex understanding of the forms of engagement with student voices at the everyday university level (providing institutional and classroom influence data); and
- d) analysis of institutional artefacts within these selected institutions that demonstrated forms of engagement with student voices, including policies on the integration of student perspectives, student evaluation systems, surveys or other related documents (providing data on classroom influence).

The data collection tools were designed using the conceptual tools offered by third-generation activity theory (Engeström, 2014), which meant foregrounding the identification of those factors that culturally mediated the relationship between student voices and institutional practices, including the regulatory mechanisms (i.e., rules), assumed roles (i.e., division of labor) and forms of interaction (i.e., community) that framed identified actions. This use of these conceptual tools provided a potent means with which to identify (and subsequently analyze) those factors shaping and mediating the understandings of the contemporary role and function of student voices, as well as their perceived relationship with enhancing teaching quality and student learning (reflecting the two research questions that framed the study).

The range of data collected (i.e., the three artefact analyses and interviews) was thematically analyzed using the conceptual tools afforded by CHAT, most notably through the interpretive framework afforded by the understandings of collective activity systems developed as part of *third-generation activity theory*. This meant identifying how student voices mediated everyday pedagogical practices in institutions, what tools mediated this relationship, and how this mediation was framed by the systematic and institutional rules, institutional communities and defined divisions of labor (see Figure 1 for how this acted to frame research outcomes). In practical terms, consistent with qualitative methodology this process of analysis involved considering the range of data collected as a whole and engaging in an initial round of theoretical coding to establish categories around mediation, rules, communities and division of labor that could be interpreted from the data. This form of theoretical coding provided a means of triangulating and establishing more complex forms of relationships across the data, with the data analysis framed by the underpinning conceptual logic offered by key analytical tools generated by theory (Cohen et al., 2018). Once this initial phase was complete, more complex themes were established based on evidence in the data to further deepen this analysis. This final stage formed the foundation for the development of the findings that are presented below. All data in the study were collected and analyzed in Spanish, and excerpts from the data cited in the paper have therefore been translated into English.

Findings

This study was designed to understand how student voices are articulated and institutionally situated in contemporary Chilean higher education settings; as well as what function they perform in influencing the quality of institutional pedagogical practices. In this section, the outcomes of the research offer specific responses to these two questions. In triangulating the data across the range of data sources, a range of significant commonalities emerged in response to the research questions as an outcome of the CHAT-framed analysis. Firstly, the nature and positioning of student voices—both systematically and institutionally—is explored, and then its identified function is detailed.

Nature and Positioning of Student Voices

One of the primary outcomes of the research was the generally limited value that was placed on the legitimacy of student voices as a mediator of institutional or teaching quality. This was manifested at a range of different levels. At the macro level, the powerful national accreditation system—which determines years of accreditation for institutions (which carries significant symbolic and practical power)—has traditionally not recognized the value of student perspectives in assessments of university teaching quality. The current institutional accreditation guidelines—as well as those proposal drafted to replace them in 2021—do not create any specific expectations for institutions to use student evaluation systems, engage students in governance or consider student voices in other forms. At an institutional level, this absence was reflected in the similarly limited value placed on the legitimate value of student voices. Even though there were some significant differences in institutional orientations (discussed further below), in essence, student voices were largely relegated to either a “taken for granted” status related to ritualistic end-of-semester surveys or seen as of considerably lesser value than diagnostic or remedial strategies used in some institutions to gauge (and remediate) student progress. This absence of a national accreditation standard—in tandem with the comparatively minor role occupied by student evaluation outcomes in most international rankings tables (Hazelkorn, 2015) that are increasing in significance in Chilean higher education—meant that the significance of student voices was seen as essentially ancillary across the sector.

In traditional, more established institutions, comparatively greater value was placed on encouraging student involvement, particularly as it accorded with the ambition for civic engagement these institutions aspired to for their graduate students. Characteristically, this voice was manifested through representation on local and institutional governance forums and via end-of-semester student experience surveys. However, in these institutions, interviews revealed considerable ingrained skepticism about the levels of student commitment, insight and continuity, which was seen as undermining the potential value of the student voice. For instance, as one *Vicerrector* observed:

The truth is that the students contribute very little, they usually do not say anything substantial in these surveys or meetings. It is not that they are afraid, but later when (student) demands come, when they strike to demand things, we always tell them, “how could you not tell us before that you feel this?” That is, sometimes we simply do not get their opinions. (Tr3-3a)

Similarly, another respondent highlighted what were seen as the lassitude of students and the inherently short-term perspectives offered by students, that contrasted to broader, longitudinal perspective on educational development required by institutions:

We believe that student participation and contribution...is fundamental, but sometimes we feel that students do not take advantage of all the channels to contribute... one of the difficulties that exist is that there is no continuity, and educational processes are long-term (Tr1-6b)

Differences in Emerging and Private Institutions

In newer, emerging CRUCH-aligned institutions, the learning challenges facing students—most notably often limited preparation students gained in schooling for academic study and limited social capital—tended to encourage more determined efforts to engage the student voice, primarily in terms of more determined course evaluation measures and student representative forums. To some extent in the cases included in this study, this had also a direct relationship with the omnipresent pressures of institutional accreditation, where issues of student retention and

progression were of considerable import. This tended to motivate these types of institutions toward identifying the most useful means of improving the student learning support. Such responses were largely focused on institutional and academic improvement, such as improving teacher performance (or replacing teachers) where students retention or progress was an issue, initiating curriculum improvement or enhancing the broad conditions for student learning (such as through intervention or support programs). These motives created a greater imperative than in more established institutions to more actively seek to engage with student voices to identify problems quickly and act (given the lesser accreditation period these institutions were characteristically granted). As a *Vicerrector* from an emerging institution commented:

We have established many opportunities for students to contribute, from their ability to initially provide feedback on semester curriculum—where changes can be made—and through various evaluations and in separate program forums. (Em-6-7a)

However, in these instances, limited evidence emerged around the tangible influence these student voices had on environments of learning they experienced. In addition, there was also some evidence of institutional frustration with the level of student commitment to using these avenues, compared to the broadscale student protest actions that have been a frequent occurrence over the last decade since the so-called “Penguin Revolution” in 2011 that demanded improved quality and access to higher education in Chile. For instance, it was observed that while internal avenues of representation existed, the pervasive effect of broader social unrest against the effect of neoliberal policies in Chile in recent years had tended to externally channel student voices toward more substantive, system-based demands. This meant that:

The interest of the students is spasmodic, and it is triggered by conflict...it is reactive, and I would say, this is understandable given the levels of outside involvement of students. (Em-6-3b)

In the case of private universities—in which 47% of higher education students were enrolled at the time of the study (SIES, 2020)—much more stake was invested in student analytics (data generated by initial testing and ongoing diagnostic assessments used to assess student capabilities). This mechanism was identified as the most legitimate means of ensuring student learning needs were met, especially where students were not progressing against the required profile and needed remedial support. Although most institutions in this element of the sample conducted some form of end-of-semester student surveys, these tended to be orientated toward investigating levels of satisfaction with teachers and institutional services, to correct deficiencies identified by students. This was sentiment effectively captured by one private institution representative, who noted that:

...our primary concern is to improve services, so that the student comes to the university, receives the academic training they deserve, supported by an appropriate, highly qualified teaching body, but also that all the support services for the training process are of quality so that for the student to study here it becomes an experience of university life, pleasant, satisfactory, that is where higher education in the world is oriented today, the experience is essentially provided by the quality of services. (Pr10-3b)

Rather than use student representation on governance mechanisms, these institutions also tended to foreground a so-called “open door policy,” where students were encouraged to directly approach management individually or via occasional forums.

We are a very open-door institution, our students have straightforward access to authorities in general and particularly in their programs, that is, the possibility of

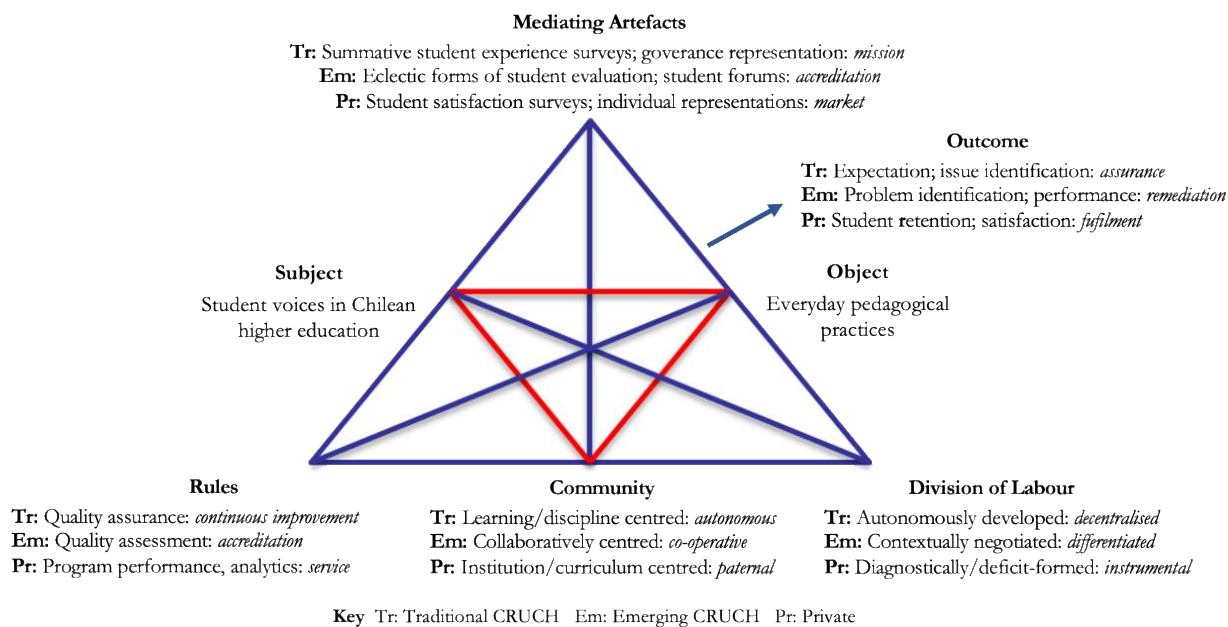
meeting with the program director, which is something that occurs frequently...so they have plenty of opportunities to their concerns, for instance, if a teacher may not be working (Pr8-7c)

Divergences

However, whilst there were some broad commonalities identified (e.g., use of student evaluation and types of student forums), a closer analysis of institutional-based data demonstrated that there were also significant divergences in the discursive positioning of the student voice. In CHAT terms, these divergences are framed around differing conceptions of the relationship between the institution and students (communities), between teachers and students (division of labor) and understandings of the institutional responsibilities to students (rules). All of these elements are essential to understanding the divergent relationships of student voices with different types of institutions investigated in this study. In Figure 1, these divergent characteristics identified in the data are summarized using the explanatory representation of an activity system. Although these characteristics are not meant to be defining of all institutions within the identified typology (i.e., traditional, emerging and private) or necessarily absolute in form, they were broadly reflected through the analysis of institutional artefacts and interview outcomes.

Figure 1

A CHAT-framed Analysis of the Divergences in Outcomes



As demonstrated in this representation, the data suggested that differing institutional motives meant that student voices were mediated in significantly divergent forms. In the case of traditional institutions, there was greater evidence of approaches associated with quality assurance discourses characteristic of international higher education. These included different types of student experience surveys, as well as direct student representation in local and institutional governance

forums. The overarching framework for this activity was the continuous improvement of institutional practices: identifying problems, addressing specific concerns and generally benchmarking quality. Consistent with this approach, engagement with the student voice tended to be decentralized to the faculty and program level, with a deferral to the autonomous histories and cultures of disciplines within institutions (and the strengthening of these). As one respondent observed:

Every semester, students receive the student experience survey, and they have a reasonable response rate. That information is sent to Faculty Deans and Directors of Teaching and it is information that is used locally in assessing academic performance, in academic promotion, and in perfecting or improving their teaching when it is necessary. (Tr1-3a)

For emerging institutions, the primary function identified for the student voice was as a potent means of identifying and strategically targeting performance issues to ensure that levels of teaching quality and student progress were sustained. This reflected the broader motive of accreditation, which was of more significant presence in this category as most universities were subject to comparatively shorter periods of accreditation, and generally aspired to more extended periods to match the perceived status of traditional institutions. This anxiety—and aspiration—led to a keen focus on using forms of student evaluation and forums as a means of assessing quality to ensure problems were rapidly identified and remediated. For this reason, institutional approaches tended to be coordinated centrally and resolved locally, with an emphasis on teacher development (or removal) and program reform. For instance, as was observed in one of these institutions:

Each teacher receives their evaluation individually and the program or department director, and it is mandated that there is a face-to-face discussion with the teacher. The starting point of the conversation is the subject evaluation. It is generally considered that a teacher who was been badly evaluated on two occasions by students may not continue to teach the course. (EM6-9b)

However, from the evidence of artefacts and interviews, the imperative for improving pedagogical practices themselves was less systematized. The primary focus (as suggested by this previous observation) was primarily centred on the actions of teachers, who became the locus of primary remediation where negative issues emerged in student evaluation.

Differing Institutional Motives for Harnessing Student Voices

Alternatively, private institutions tended to have a strongly centralized approach to harnessing the student voice, but with a motive of heightening levels of student satisfaction with services provided by the institution. As was noted earlier, given the predominant role of diagnostic metrics as a means of assessing student progress, the student voice was positioned more as a mechanism to ensure the fulfilment of expectations. Reflecting this reality, students were encouraged to raise their concerns individually rather than collectively, rendering the broader student voice as essentially instrumental and the institution paternal. As one respondent from a private institution summarized:

We effectively take into consideration the opinion of the students, because many times based on this opinion, a professor (who is negatively evaluated) can remain in the university, receive support if he/she requires it, and if not improving after two teaching periods, be dismissed. And the students also recognize this, as they—being very responsible in their responses—understand that decisions are made based on their

evaluations. Similarly, we also conduct satisfaction surveys regarding services, and we are also seeking to improve these. (Pr8-6b)

However, it was significant that—despite the divergences in these approaches to capturing the student voice—across all institutions the relationship between these perspectives and everyday pedagogical practices remained essentially ambiguous and indirect. In the case of traditional institutions, student experience survey data and student representations in governance forums primarily carried limited credibility compared to the ‘harder data’ of retention and progression. As one *Vicerrector* from a traditional institution succinctly observed:

We understand the student's learning experience—or the student's university experience—precisely in the achievement of their learning results (Tr5-1b)

Underpinning this were issues with levels of student participation and the limited credibility given to student perspectives. Its only real resonance came in broader exposure: such as a means of benchmarking comparative performance or as evidence of teacher performance problems. In the case of emerging institutions, although more deliberate attempts to engage with student perspectives were evident, this tended to be understood through the prism of student progress and retention. As was noted earlier, this meant that student evaluation, rather than directly influencing pedagogies, acted more as a means of identifying the need for teacher development or replacement. Equally, considerable skepticism was again evident as to the motivation and value of student voices as a credible mediator of teaching effectiveness. However, given the critical pressures of prospective accreditation years, the necessity for engaging student perspectives was understood. As one respondent in an emerging institution observed:

In each re-accreditation process, in our self-evaluation and the accreditation assessment itself, we need to engage the student experience. Obviously, we want them to be advocates for their programs and the institution, so we therefore need to be giving their perspectives reasonable attention through dealing with the concerns they raise...however problematic they may be in practical terms. (Em6-5c)

Finally, in the case of private institutions, characteristically there was more credibility given to diagnostic tools as a means of assessing pedagogical effectiveness. In particular, teaching performativity was a critical indicator of interest, and this was evaluated through the metrics of student progress and retention. Therefore, the primary motivation for student surveys was to understand levels of progress, as well as levels of satisfaction with the services provided (with teaching being just one of these dimensions). As one respondent framed this relationship:

We monitor success and failure levels in subjects, a series of harder indicators. Most critical for us is the subject of retention, of the permanence of the student with us. In addition, of course, there is also a teacher evaluation. This adds to our understanding of how the subject is doing and this contributes to the understanding of these indicators. (Pr10-2b)

Therefore, the relationship between student voices and everyday pedagogical practices remained strongly mediated through diagnostic metrics and satisfaction with expectations being met. These realities can be further understood by a closer analysis of the institutional representations demonstrated in the data. In Table 2, a consolidation of the analysis of institutional artefacts across the three institutional domains is summarized.

Table 2*Analysis of Institutional artefacts: student voice (n=28)*

Institutional Type	Stated Mission	Primary avenues of student voice	Primary motives	Primary focus
Traditional CRUCH Universities (part state-funded) (n=8)	Student-centred: allowing students to reach their potential in professional and social domains	Summative surveys of the student experience; contribution to institutional/faculty governance forums	Continuous improvement of programs; quality assurance to maintain teacher performance/ curriculum quality	Strengthened academic and administrative practice; identification of deficits; teacher development
Emerging universities (public/private CRUCH) (n=8)	Socially focussed: Enhancing the capacity of students to contribute to social and economic development	Both conventional/ innovative forms of student evaluation; relationship with student representatives	Institutional/faculty quality evaluation (related to institutional accreditation); ensuring teacher/ teaching quality	Improving the quality of teaching; teacher development; Student retention; Reaching expected standards for accreditation
Post-1990 Private (non-CRUCH) (n=12)	Occupational drive: preparing students for the expectations of (future) professional work	Student satisfaction surveys (teaching/ facilities); 'open door' policy toward students	Teacher performance; Student progress and retention; quality of facilities in supporting student experience	Reaching graduate profile; student satisfaction; identifying the need for remedial actions

What is significant is how institutional motives (here derived from overarching missions) shaped how the student voice is engaged, and for what purposes it is deployed. This analysis further reinforced the notion of an indirect relationship between this voice and everyday pedagogy. Instead, the distinctive discourses of quality assurance, institutional remediation or service fulfilment in different institutional formations tended to more directly occupy the primary mediating role in understanding the significance—or otherwise—of student perspectives.

Implications

The evidence presented in this study challenges some of the conventional characterizations of the Chilean higher education model, with the affordances of the student voice suggesting that the system is inherently fragmented. As Bellei et al. (2014) suggest, the 1981 dictatorship-era reforms produced a two-tiered system: partly state-subsided traditional universities and new fully fee-funded

institutions. Following the return of democracy in 1990, additional direct state support was provided to both sectors in the form of interest rate subsidies for student loans. This change also encouraged the emergence of less commercially oriented private providers. The data presented in this study suggests these sociocultural histories of differing forms of institutions has generated fundamentally different approaches in how institutions relate to their students. At a macro level, accreditation standards have to this point (in 2020) not encouraged any specific orientation toward students: instead encouraging more generic forms of institutional assessment. This has allowed universities to develop approaches that reflect their primary motives: from quality assurance (in the case of traditional institutions) to remediation (emerging institutions) and satisfaction (for private institutions). These differing orientations tend to abstract student voices from everyday teaching but in fundamentally divergent forms. Zepke (2017) suggests that this lack of a real voice acts to limit student engagement, discouraging students from exercising 'active citizenship' in their learning and institutional life. This also has been identified as encouraging the identification of 'student-as-consumer', where students are effectively alienated from the learning experiences they are at the centre of, instead tending to mechanistically rating the quality of a commodified product (Maringe, 2010).

Traditional institutions—seemingly reflecting their social history and international orientation—generally adopt measures familiar in international higher education, most notably regularized student surveys and forms of representation in governance forums (either at the faculty or program level). This led to responses familiar to North American and European higher education systems: such as encouraging comparative benchmarking of evaluative metrics, responsive remedial actions (e.g., teacher or curriculum development) and specific actions to address particular problems. Yet, the broad skepticism expressed in these institutions as to the validity and credibility of student perspectives suggests it carries more a symbolic value than pedagogical weight in practical terms. In the case of emerging institutions, evidence suggested more implicit imperatives around student voices. The powerful currency of accreditation years for this part of the sector motivated the rapid attempt to remediate problems identified through student evaluation, to ensure subsequent appraisal in accreditation processes was as positive as possible. In these institutions, student voices are primarily understood for their instrumental value in identifying and acting on deficits in practice. Finally, for private institutions, the articulation of the student voice was more centered on satisfaction with services, of which teaching and curriculum was just a part. Much more stake was placed in the diagnostic outcomes of learning analytics, meaning student voices themselves tended to be relegated to a means of assessing the value identified by the student-as-consumer. Significantly, these distinct approaches across the sector suggest the emergence of a three-tiered system, with each using fundamentally different artefacts to mediate the student voice. These produce substantially different discursive orientations toward the voices of students and in how institutions engage with these evaluative perspectives.

However, at a broader level, despite the powerful 'neoliberalist imaginary' (Ball, 2012) underpinning the Chilean higher education model, there is little evidence that contemporary student voices carry any significant weight in influencing institutional practices across these different contours of the system. A core rationale for this reformation of higher education was the axiom that if universities were exposed to greater competitive pressures driven by student choice—particularly through heightened accountability and transparency of achieved outcomes—the quality of the student learning experience would be enhanced through (forced) responsiveness of the market. In this construction, the student voice could not only be relied upon to be rational, but if effectively quantified, was also a powerful force in (re)shaping prospective learning practices. As Dougherty and Natow (2019) highlight, this also meant downplaying notions of any forms of shared governance or collaboration with students, instead foregrounding the more abstracted power of

competitive accountability. In essence, the promise of the neoliberalist imaginary was market-responsive institutions—driven inexorably by the need for private funding—that would be instinctively responsive to the demands of their students-as-consumers (Lorenz, 2012). Despite this intent, both the overarching regulation of the system and the demonstrable practices across the system reflect a quite different evolution. With no explicit regulatory drive, the different types of institutions have developed ‘non-market’ mechanisms, such as student governance roles in traditional institutions, forms of collaborative evaluation in emerging universities and perhaps most significantly, the use of generic forms of diagnostic analytics in private (more market-driven) institutions. Consistent with other recent studies (e.g., Mintz, 2021; Peters & Jandric, 2018; Zepke, 2017), this research suggests that there is little evidence of the type of competitive, demand-based shaping envisaged in the persuasive ideological constructions of neoliberalist higher education, nor substantive evidence of students performing an active function in shaping the nature of their learning.

Finally, despite the demonstrable value identified in elevating student experiences of their learning as a catalyst for pedagogical improvement, again there was limited evidence that student voices had any systematic influence on the nature of everyday teaching practices (outside the deficit discourses of teacher performance management). There was evidence of broad skepticism about the credibility of the student voice: be it questions about student engagement, levels of insight, continuity, outside agitation or its weakness, especially also when compared to ‘harder’ empirical data generated by student assessment outcomes, retention levels or learning analytics. Therefore, the findings in this study suggested there is only a fragile link between student perspectives and improving the quality of teaching and learning outcomes, and that most often pedagogical change was a result of factors other than student evaluative data or voices.

The highly stratified approach and essentially abstract approach toward engaging student voices have significant policy implications for assuring learning quality across the system. In a model that is widely recognized as having considerable variations in educational quality, there remains a persistent policy objective to produce institutional accreditation models to produce more homogenous outcomes (Bernasconi, 2017; Salazar & Leihy, 2017). However, as was noted in the introduction, both existing and prospective standards essentially disregard the value of student voices as a means of improving the quality of learning, continuing to rely more on institutional management and curriculum as assurance mechanisms. It is therefore a paradox that, in a seminal example of a system formed around the core neoliberal educational orthodoxy of market reflexivity driven by student-as-consumer choice, student voices are largely absent as a formal mediator of quality. Ironically, as noted earlier, this has meant the change driven in the system has come from student agitation outside the walls of universities, in mass protest movements that over the last decade have pressured policymakers into fundamental change—most notably in the cost and greater regulation around the quality of higher education. However, the outcomes of this study suggest that broad structural change not produced a similar internal realignment where student voices are performing a shaping role in understanding and reforming learning quality. Although some institutions are making use of the imperfect tools of student ratings or learnings analytics, more substantial responses that respond to the growing recognition of the value of engaging students more directly as to their experiences of learning seems essential. A useful starting point would be in the current debate about new system-wide accreditation standards, where an expectation to heighten responsiveness to (diverse) student voices may create more incentives for universities to act and to drive the search for improved methods to do so.

Limitations

This research was necessarily limited in its scope and was orientated to a more macro-level analysis of the relationship between student voices and institutional practices. Despite the typology used to generate data proving broadly effective in exposing differing orientations toward the use of student voices in the stratified contexts of Chilean higher education, it was not comprehensive in its scope. Although the level of depth generated through rigorous artefact analysis and semi-structured interviews ten senior educators generated what Glense (2006) describes as ‘rich and thick’ data for the research foci, the outcomes necessarily reflect primarily the histories and cultures of the institutions included in the study. Therefore, broadening this sample further would potentially provide more robust assurance (as well as depth and nuance) for the findings. In addition, the study necessarily relied on publicly available artefacts and the stated intention of regulators and institutions. This meant the study relied on stated intentions and less on actual practices (particularly those more local or informal) in engaging student voices.

At a practical level, given the study essentially relied on largely overt expressions of the teaching-student relationship, it would also be useful to further explore the internal environments of institutions—through direct engagement with teaching academics and everyday practices—to develop a more sophisticated understanding of those practices-in-use that draw on student perspectives, as opposed to relying on stated practices alone. For instance, would there be evidence of collaborative or partnership models of curriculum or pedagogical development in specific discipline or program contexts—such as those identified by Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten (2014)—or responses more aligned to the relentless neoliberal expectations of teaching performativity (Ball, 2016)? Therefore, research that more directly investigates the more implicit or less formal relationships between academic teaching and student perspectives would be useful in further developing the outcomes of this research. Such insights would provide a more substantial foundation on which to reach more significant outcomes.

Finally, data for this study were collected before the outbreak of widespread social unrest in Chile from October 2019 and the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic across the country from March 2020. These two events have fundamentally disrupted the higher education system, meaning institutional closures, remote learning and other significant realignments. It has also worked to delay changes in the development of higher education policy changes related to accreditation and institutional quality. For this reason, the findings of this study need to be considered in the context of the period preceding these disruptions, which may have changed the nature of student-institutional relationships in ways that cannot yet be understood.

Conclusion

The outcomes of this study reinforce what has been identified as the under-research disjuncture between the expansive theoretical claims of neo-liberalism and their actual enactment in higher education settings (Dougherty & Natow, 2019). The conception of ‘*nearly neoliberalism*’ (Cahill, 2014; Harvey, 2005) suggests that this ideology provided a highly useful discursive frame to justify broadscale privatization and the withdrawal of the social role of the state, rather than a coherent or viable series of policy prescriptions. Despite the Chilean dictatorship imposing a radical neoliberal agenda, the idealized *student-as-consumer* was never clearly formed. Instead, persistent state regulation and loan subsidies have effectively scaffolded both traditional and emerging institutions, meaning that marketing has become more significant than driving demand. Perhaps, for this reason, much of the substantial change in the Chilean higher education model over the last decade has not come from within institutions, but outside them through large scale social protest.

The implications of these findings are manifold for higher education policymakers. Based on the experience of a highly marketized model such as that in place in Chile, it is apparent that it is insufficient to rely on market mechanisms (such as student choice and loan vouchering) as a means of harnessing student voices and thereby improving institutional quality. Moreover, it is also a mistake to assume a commonality of how institutions engage with student perspectives, with evidence in this study demonstrating a broad range of different approaches from traditional student representation in governance and student evaluation, through to so-called “open-door” policies in new private institutions that resonate with contemporary consumerist discourses. Given the broad consensus that the critical perspectives of students are a critical means of improving pedagogical quality (Darwin, 2016), it is incumbent on policy designers to encourage more expansive and legitimately representative models of capturing student voices, rather than fallback by default on the “hidden hand” of the market. Without higher education systems effectively harnessing these potent student voices, institutions are missing an important opportunity to improve pedagogy through more systematic forms of engagement. Finally, at a more local level, as major reform is being negotiated to the Chilean higher education model, this may be a productive time for accreditation authorities to foreground student voices in institutional quality assurance practices, moving them from their largely peripheral reality to a more democratic center.

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