



Student movement and the demand for free education

Free, quality education is the most well-known demand of the various student protests held in Chile since 2006. This appeal received unprecedented support from diverse sectors of society and was even a pivotal factor in the 2013 national elections.

In the research project titled “Higher Education Protests in Chile: Conflicts between individual interests, ideologies, and demands for social rights,” Dr. Sebastián Guzmán, investigator for the Education Research Nucleus of the Universidad Andrés Bello, is assessing the impact made by these movements for education.

The aim of this ethnographic study is to understand how student movements motivate student participation. In particular, Dr. Guzmán has spent a year investigating the student centers of two public universities. Dr. Guzmán has attended student meetings and marches, participated in forums and informal conversations, conducted interviews, and analyzed the documents of student organizations and related counterparts.

“This investigation seeks to understand how the student movement continues motivating students’ demand for free education, even though many students already receive scholarships covering a large portion of tuition and, according to circulated proposals, will receive free education in the coming year,” explains Dr. Guzmán.

An important paradox to consider is that the movement began stronger in 2015 than the previous two years. However, over the course of 2015, the movement stalled and could not mobilize due to internal problems at the universities. This resulted in the focus of popular movements being redirected to other national demands.

“There has been a disconnect that has been difficult to overcome. This has formed the basis for some preliminary results of our project. These include the reasons behind the difficulty in prioritizing national topics in assemblies; how the movement uses strikes and votes for strikes to create awareness, even though strikes are a double-edged sword; and how agreements among leadership can prevent in-depth debates with non-leaders, which would raise awareness about the need to mobilize and about particular problems with reform proposals,” comments Dr. Guzmán.

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