

DIVERSITY, EQUITY, & INCLUSION

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Chilean Higher Education

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In Chile, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have become central to higher education reform in a system long shaped by inequality and market competition. Student movements in 2006, 2011, and 2018 reframed DEI as a condition of institutional legitimacy. Yet regulatory frameworks have often translated DEI into managerial compliance rather than structural change, revealing both the gains and limits of institutionalizing equity.

In Chile, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have become central to higher education reform. The incorporation of DEI into higher education law, accreditation standards, and institutional strategies has given these agendas unprecedented visibility and normative weight. Yet the very instruments that have enabled this institutionalization—legal mandates, strategic planning frameworks, and quality assurance systems—are embedded in managerial rationalities that prioritize auditability, standardization, and reputational risk management. This creates a structural tension: while inclusion is publicly affirmed as a fundamental value, it is frequently enacted as a technical checklist item, evaluated through metrics and controlled by bureaucratic procedures.

Regional Inequalities: From Equity Policies to Structural Limits

The social and territorial context of Chile is fundamental to understanding why DEI has become a policy priority. Regional inequalities have historically structured the university system, concentrating resources, prestige, and influence in Santiago, while regional universities continue to operate under conditions of structural disadvantage. Students from outside the capital—many of them graduates of under-resourced schools—face compounded barriers to both access and success. Universities are therefore compelled to address these inequities, but often in ways that remain reactive rather than transformative.

Programs such as the *Programa de Acompañamiento y Acceso Efectivo* (PACE), in place for over a decade across different regions, exemplify this tension. While PACE and other mechanisms targeting students with caregiving responsibilities have created alternative pathways to university, their reach is modest, and their impact uneven. These initiatives mitigate visible barriers to entry but do little to dismantle the structural hierarchies that reproduce inequality between Santiago and the regions, or between elite and peripheral institutions. Consequently, although they are celebrated as equity measures,

their long-term effectiveness in redressing systemic disparities remains highly contested.

Student Movements and the Limits of Reform

The trajectory of student movements has been central in pressing for reforms in Chilean higher education, but their achievements reveal both advances and constraints. The mobilizations of 2006 and 2011, led by secondary school and university students, exposed the inequities of Chile's voucher-based education system and demanded equitable access and higher quality. While these protests helped lay the groundwork for a subsequent gratuity scheme that expanded participation, the reform largely addressed affordability rather than the deeper structural inequalities embedded in the system.

A decade later, the feminist mobilizations of 2018 transformed campuses into arenas of protest against harassment and patriarchal structures. Although initially sparked by cases of abuse, these mobilizations evolved into a national reckoning with gender inequality. In response, the Council of Rectors of Chilean Universities advanced gender mainstreaming through its Commission on Gender Equality, promoting preventive protocols, communication campaigns, and recognition of gender identity. Yet, much of this institutional response has been procedural, often limited to compliance-oriented measures rather than a transformation of entrenched academic cultures.

Together, these movements illustrate how bottom-up activism has reframed DEI as a matter of institutional legitimacy. At the same time, they highlight the limits of reform in a system where structural inequalities, patriarchal norms, and metropolitan hierarchies continue to constrain more transformative change.

New Regulations and Implementation Mechanisms

The regulatory turn of 2018 was decisive in placing DEI on the higher education agenda, but it has also revealed the tension between formal mandates and substantive change. Law 21.091 on Higher Education requires universities to promote interculturality, adopt reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities, and prevent arbitrary discrimination. While these obligations are embedded in institutional governance, their implementation has often been procedural, emphasizing compliance rather than transformation. Similarly, Law 21.369, enacted in 2021, mandated binding protocols, gender units, and preventive measures against gender-based violence. Yet, in many cases, these mechanisms have been reduced to bureaucratic requirements with limited capacity to alter entrenched institutional cultures.

The National Quality Assurance System, through the National Accreditation Commission, reinforced this compliance-based logic by embedding DEI into accreditation criteria. Universities must now demonstrate measurable progress in promoting inclusion, quality of life, and coexistence to maintain legitimacy. Although this has pressured institutions to adopt formal DEI frameworks, it has also risked turning diversity and equity into checklists, privileging documentation over genuine cultural transformation.

Institutional practices reflect this ambivalence. While gender equity and access policies have advanced more decisively—supported by dedicated units and initiatives such as *InES Género* (*Innovación en Educación Superior Género*)—other areas such as interculturality and disability inclusion remain weakly institutionalized. In these domains, efforts often stop at minimum compliance, revealing the limits of a regulatory model that secures visibility for DEI but struggles to confront the structural inequalities and cultural hierarchies embedded in Chilean higher education.

Interculturality on Hold

By contrast, interculturality has been more difficult to institutionalize. While universities in northern and southern Chile have created centers dedicated to Indigenous languages and cultural practices, and while interculturality is now a recurring theme in institutional documents, much of its implementation remains declarative. The absence of a national definition has allowed wide variation in how universities interpret the concept, from Indigenous recognition in frontier regions to broader pluralism in central universities.

Legal mandates have increased visibility, but initiatives have largely targeted students, with limited focus on faculty and

administrators. Moreover, managerial logics that prioritize efficiency, profitability, and competitiveness often clash with intercultural commitments, sidelining initiatives that do not produce immediate measurable returns aligned to external quality assurance.

Pressing Challenges

Moving forward, the challenge is to shift DEI from compliance-oriented frameworks to transformative practices. This requires the creation of robust evaluation mechanisms that extend beyond accreditation checklists. For interculturality, essential steps include curricular integration, systematic faculty training, sustained partnerships with Indigenous and migrant communities that strengthen outreach, the provision of multilingual services, and the recognition of non-hegemonic knowledge systems. For gender equity, the agenda must expand beyond harassment prevention toward structural changes in academic careers, including promotion systems, caregiving policies, and pay equity. Regional inequalities require special attention, as metropolitan universities tend to advance faster in DEI implementation than their counterparts in peripheral regions, reinforcing the very disparities DEI policies seek to reduce.

Looking ahead, the future of DEI in Chilean higher education will depend on how political valuation and organizational adaptation interact in the coming years. Three scenarios can be envisaged. The first is a regressive scenario, in which political support for DEI weakens, leading to the erosion of regulatory mandates, budgetary cuts, and the retraction of institutional commitments. In this context, DEI would risk becoming a marginal or optional concern, maintained only where internal actors preserve momentum. The second is a regulatory expansion scenario, where political commitment remains stable or even increases, resulting in more detailed accreditation requirements, legal obligations, and performance indicators. However, in the absence of internal institutional change, DEI would remain largely procedural, producing formal compliance without substantial transformation. The third is a transformative consolidation scenario, in which continued political and regulatory support is accompanied by deep organizational shifts. In this case, Chilean universities meet external requirements but also reconfigure internal cultures, structures, and epistemic practices. DEI becomes embedded across teaching, research, and governance as a generative principle, rather than a peripheral obligation. All in all, the path Chilean higher education takes will depend not only on state policies or managerial tools, but on whether institutions are willing to confront and redress the historical inequalities that continue to shape their reproduction.

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