

# Policy Translation of Social Movement Demands: The Case of Tuition-Free Higher Education in Chile<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract




*In 2011, Chile experienced massive student protests against the marketization of education. During 2013, center-left President Michelle Bachelet proposed tuition-free higher education for Chile's families in the bottom 70th percentile of the income distribution, fueling controversy due to the uncertainty and unexpected consequences of the policy. This study analyzes how the tuition-free policy was developed, the actors involved, the political discourse deployed during implementation, and the strategy used to make this policy a reality. Using semi-structured interviews with key actors, such as policymakers and scholars, and a review of newspaper columns, we explore how politicians and bureaucrats translated the students' demands into the tuition-free policy. Our findings suggest that the policy translation process included the involvement of former student leaders, prioritization of the tuition-free policy, and a quick, straightforward implementation process that enabled the government to fulfill its promise.*

**Keywords:** Free tuition, higher education, policy, Chile

In response to the massive student protests against market-oriented education that took place in 2011, the center-left presidential candidate, Michelle Bachelet, promised a tuition-free higher education during her campaign in the 2013 elections. Research suggests that Bachelet's victory in the presidential election can be partially attributed to her willingness to meet student demands for free tuition (Palacios-Valladares & Ondetti, 2018). During her 2014–2018 presidential term, she partially achieved her promise of free tuition, while also launching a broader reform of the higher education system (Delisle & Bernasconi, 2018).

As stated by Chile's Ministry of Education (2016), three principles guided the reform effort: (a) the promotion of equity, inclusiveness, and public education; (b) the assurance

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of the quality of education; and (c) the strengthening of technical-vocational education. As part of this reform, Bachelet's government created two new state universities for the first time in 40 years, built 16 regional Technical Education Centers, passed a bill to regulate the administration of universities undergoing bankruptcy, eliminated a law that prohibited student participation in university governance, and created legislation to streamline coordination across state universities. Most importantly, her government passed legislation to change the regulatory system, authorized a new quality assurance system, and approved tuition-free undergraduate education (MINEDUC, 2016). The law for tuition-free education included how the policy would be implemented and who would benefit. However, from the beginning of Bachelet's term, the tuition-free policy became a controversial topic along different fronts taken up by various stakeholders (i.e., politicians, policymakers, university presidents, among others). On the economic front, stakeholders questioned the existence of sufficient resources to finance the reform. On the technical side, they questioned if there was enough evidence of success in other contexts to support the reform. And on the political front, stakeholders questioned if the necessary consensus existed to approve the tuition-free policy in the Congress.

To understand how this policy was developed, this study analyzed the creation and implementation of the tuition-free policy in Chile through two sources: semi-structured interviews with key players involved in the implementation of the policy (e.g., researchers, policymakers, and politicians) and newspaper op-ed columns about the reform. Specifically, our objective was to explore what happened inside the "black box" of policy making, that is, the way in which the demands are processed, translated, and transformed into educational policies (Gilad et al., 2019). In other words, we wanted to explore the stages that exist between the students' movement demands and the implementation of the tuition-free policy as a result of the protests. Therefore, this study was guided by the following question: How did policymakers and politicians translate student demands into Chile's tuition-free policy? This paper sheds light on a process through which bureaucrats and policymakers used traditional frames to translate student demands in service of drafting the actual policy. This paper expands the literature focusing on the student movement as a political actor, which promoted the tuition-free policy (Bellei et al., 2018; Bidegain & Maillet, 2021; Donoso & Somma, 2019; Somma & Donoso, 2021). We contribute to the scholarship of higher education policy development, focusing on how key actors involved in the reform foregrounded student demands within the government agenda and crafted them into public policy.

### **Chilean Higher Education**

From 1842—the founding year of Chile's first university—until the late 1970s, the Chilean higher education landscape was mostly composed of public universities that did not charge fees. During that period of time, only six private universities were founded (Levy, 1986). However, during Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship (1973–1990), the Chilean higher education system underwent drastic changes, ruled by the marketization, which included expanding access to higher education, charging tuition at public institutions, reducing state subsidies, and creating new technical and vocational institutions. In 1981, as part of a higher education reform, new private universities were created under very lax licensing rules, while the regional branches of two major public

universities were turned into 14 smaller, separate universities. In addition, a large portion of higher-education public spending began to be distributed based on competition amongst various university projects. These two changes left institutions struggling for dwindling fiscal resources and allowed for the introduction of private contributions within the system. The lax licensing process also contributed to private institutions' growth and enrollment, creating a system based on competition through expanded privatization. By 1993, Chile had 44 new private universities in addition to 218 professional institutes and technical training centers. Many of these private universities had low admission criteria, making Chile a relatively exceptional case of extreme privatization (Bernasconi, 2009) with high levels of segregation, especially in the top socioeconomic levels (Kuzmanic et al., 2021).

The higher education system in Chile remained the same during the country's transition to democracy. Subsequent governments even strengthened market-oriented policies. In fact, Chile's public higher education tuition fees have been among the most expensive in the world (Bernasconi, 2009; OECD, 2016) and represent a large portion of universities' financial resources (Bernasconi, 2010; Paredes, 2015). Furthermore, a state-guaranteed student loan system was implemented in the 1990s to provide funding to students enrolled in traditional institutions, which was founded before Pinochet's dictatorship. However, the massive expansion of higher education and the resulting growth in enrollment pressured the Chilean government to create the *Crédito con Aval del Estado* (CAE) in 2005, a state loan financed by private banks (Bellei et al., 2018). This loan was specially created and targeted toward students of low-to-medium socioeconomic status (SES) who were admitted into the new private universities. Although it allowed thousands of students to enter higher education, the CAE also caused unprecedented rates of student debt, allowed high levels of profitability for banks, and encouraged the presence of many low-quality private universities in the educational system, which fueled the widespread social discontent in 2011.

### **The 2011 Higher Education Student Protests**

In 2011, university students took over Chilean streets with massive student-led protests. Although K-12 students had protested in 2001 and 2006, these new demonstrations grew to become the biggest protests since Chile's transition to democracy (Garretón, 2016). Broadly speaking, students aligned their demands around three main themes: (a) more public educational resources, which was a response to the privatization propelled during the dictatorship; (b) access to universities governed by equity, quality, and social heterogeneity, as the marketization of the system had led to extremely unequal access; and (c) democratization of the management of institutions, as an effort to restore the involvement of students and faculty in administrative decisions, which had existed before the 1980s (CONFECHE, 2011). From the students' perspective, this set of demands aimed to change the system's for-profit spirit, high levels of marketization, lack of regulation, increase of educational debts, and devaluation of higher education degrees. Furthermore, the student movement was trying to disrupt the ongoing narrative of higher education as commodity and instead position the discussion around the idea of higher education as a social right (Donoso, 2016). In strategic terms, the intent of disrupting the

narrative was to center the public discourse around the demands for public education tied to the tangible demand for tuition-free higher education (Picazo & Pierre, 2016).

The student protests lasted for several months and the center-right president at the time, Sebastián Piñera, responded with reducing interest rates for the already established student loans (e.g., CAE and the state-guaranteed student loan system) and proposed a significant change to the accreditation system to improve and standardize the quality of the institutions (Bellei et al., 2014). These changes failed to appease the student movement, resulting in the resignation of Joaquín Lavín, a Minister of Education, and the removal of another minister, Harald Beyer, demonstrating the power that the student movement leveraged (Guzmán-Concha, 2012). Finally, the political climate produced by students through street-blocking protests, artistic manifestations, public concentrations, and social media promotion generated large-scale citizen support for student demands (Garcés & Santa Cruz, 2018; Villalobos & Ortiz-Inostroza, 2019), centering the demand for a tuition-free policy within the national public debate.

### **The Student Social Movement's Success**

Several authors have analyzed the success and impact of the 2011 student protests, concluding that the success was due to the movement's inclusion in the political arena (Meyer & Minkoff, 2004). This incorporation was achieved in different ways. First, student leaders were recognized by the government and the nation as relevant political actors—the movements' statements and opinions became instrumental in the educational debate (Bellei & Cabalin, 2013; Bellei et al., 2018). Second, three of the main student leaders—Camila Vallejo, Gabriel Boric and Giorgio Jackson—ran for Congress and were elected in 2013. In their new roles, they became central to the public discussion and, within the government, leveraged the 2011 student demands (Bellei et al., 2018). Third, the student movement developed a series of tactics to increase their influence and resources even after 2011, collaborating with other networks and additional stakeholders, such as the teachers' union, workers' unions of various sectors, and several grassroots organizations (Bellei et al., 2018; Montero et al., 2018). Finally, the student movement kept protesting in different forms from 2012–2014, manifesting action that included marches, takeovers of university buildings, collecting signatures, and symbolic protests (Villalobos & Ortiz-Inostroza, 2019). The sum of all these actions created insurmountable pressure on the governments of Piñera (2010–2014) and Michelle Bachelet (2014–2018).

According to social movement scholars, the most probable outcome of a protest is agenda-setting (Amenta et al., 2018). In this case, one of the first outcomes of the movement was the students' capacity to center their demands as a core issue of the public agenda by dominating the media and communicating their ideas and requests to different political sectors and stakeholders in the Chilean society, as well as the institutional-political system (Montero, 2018). The student movement had the capacity to challenge the public's understanding of education's role in society (Picazo & Pierre, 2016), resulting in a national discussion on the purpose and structure of higher education (Salinas & Fraser, 2012; Somma, 2012), which, as mentioned above, was part of the students' aim of framing higher education, and education more broadly, as a social right.

Furthermore, as other scholars have established, the best possible outcomes of a movement are policy and other political changes (Andrews, 2001), which Chilean higher education students also achieved. The student movement critically addressed neoliberal policies that impacted higher education, but they also deployed a bigger critique of other policies enacted in Chile over the past three decades (see Gárate, 2012). Neoliberal policies are characterized by the privatization, commercialization, and deregulation of the state, thus, moving away from a social welfare framework (Rhoades & Slaughter, 2004). Chilean students' demands also included issues related to the healthcare and retirement systems, as neoliberal policies implemented in the country affected other aspects of their and their families' lives (Lustig et al., 2012). For this reason, the movement also promoted bigger discussions about the country's constitution, economic development, and use of natural resources (Donoso, 2016), allowing new political leaders and coalitions to emerge. Perhaps the most exemplary case is the election of student leader Gabriel Boric—the current president of Chile—as a member of congress in 2012 who then pushed to change a 30-year-old binomial party election system (Garcés & Santa Cruz, 2018). Also, as previously mentioned, the protests made a lasting impact during Piñera's (2010–2014) and Bachelet's (2014–2018) terms, leading to new policies developed to calm the protests, improve the higher education system, and attempt to respond to the citizens' expectations. In this picture, the tuition-free policy played a key role.

### **The Tuition-Free Policy in Higher Education: A Timeline**

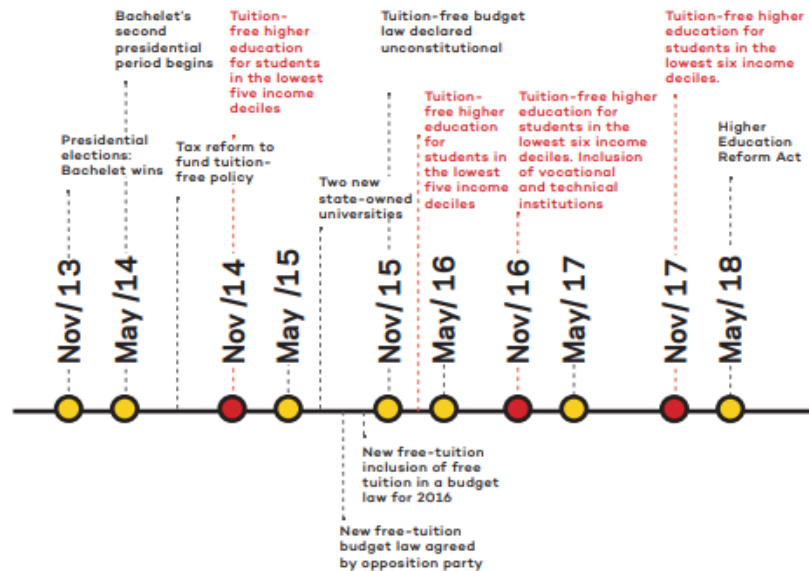
During Michelle Bachelet's second term in office (2014–2018), the tuition-free policy was a controversial topic. From the beginning, different academic and political (mainly right-wing opposition) actors questioned how the required expenditures would be financed and whether free tuition should be universal or targeted. Members of the opposition and university presidents from private institutions were vocally opposed to the policy. On the other side of the spectrum, political support for the policy came mainly from within the government, members of Congress in the government's coalition, and rectors within public higher education institutions. Finally, the student movement adopted a distant position from the government policy but did not fully criticize the reform idea. Although movement leaders were looking forward to a reform, they recognized that the implementation of the policy did not change the neoliberal foundations of the system, which was their ultimate goal.

The government's plans for higher education reform were as broad as the number of stakeholders, but free tuition seemed a more achievable victory in Congress. Since the higher education reform bill was not ready to be signed into law in 2015, President Bachelet offered free tuition in September 2015 using the budget law of 2016 (Bernasconi, 2019). Using this political tactic, the government generated a seed for the tuition-free policy. This unorthodox, but expedient way to advance policy, is frequently used as a shortcut to the usually protracted discussion of regular legislation. However, the outvoted Congressional minority and opposition questioned the constitutionality of this budget change and, in December 2015, the Constitutional Court ruled key provisions of the tuition-free budget unconstitutional, rendering the program impracticable. Last-minute negotiations between the government and opposition secured the opposition's support for a

new version of the budget reform that would not be impugned in Constitutional Court. Thus, in late 2015, the new budget was approved by Congress and signed into law by President Bachelet.

Accordingly, the 2016 budget law funded tuition-free higher education for students in the bottom half of the income distribution who enrolled in public universities and a set of private universities complying with strict accreditation criteria<sup>2</sup> (Torres, 2019). A similar bill was approved in 2016 for the following fiscal year, which maintained the policy. After the first year, lawmakers expanded the policy to students in the bottom 60% of socioeconomic status, and students enrolled in four-year accredited vocational and technical institutions became eligible. The program was finally approved as permanent legislation as part of the Higher Education Reform Act of 2018, benefitting around 350,000 of the total 1.2 million students nationwide (Bernasconi, 2019). The Higher Education Reform Act includes a stepwise expansion in tuition-free beneficiaries, progressively reaching students from higher-income families in-synch with tax revenue increases as a proportion of Chile’s gross domestic product. Figure 1 shows the main events summarized in a timeline.

Figure 1  
Timeline of Tuition-Free Policy



<sup>2</sup> In the first year, the tuition-free policy was available only for students attending CRUCH (Council of Rectors of Chilean Universities). This applies to universities and students attending private universities that had at least four years of institutional accreditation, did not have for-profit owners, and included participation of students and staff in the decision-making process. For private institutions, participation in tuition-free policy is voluntary, though for state institutions it is mandatory.

### **Conceptual Framework: Opening the Black Box of the Political Process**

Although several authors have analyzed the student movement's impact on policy agenda, legislative reforms, and the educational system, most research on higher education reform in Chile has looked at it from a movement-centered perspective. This study focused on the student movement, its leaders, and how they pushed demands that culminated in the reform (Bellei et al., 2014, 2018; Donoso, 2016; Donoso & Somma, 2019; Montero, 2018; Palacios-Valladares & Ondetti, 2018). Furthermore, there has not been much research on the tuition-free policy implementation process. As we mentioned before, and following in the steps of Gilad et al., (2019), our objective was to explore what happened inside the black box of policymaking, particularly how politicians and bureaucrats translated students' demands into the resulting tuition-free policy. This process of translation occurred as the movement's demands needed to be bargained along regularized channels, and among players positioned within the government, in this case through congresspeople, policymakers, and bureaucrats.

In contrast to social movement research, which generally treats the policy process as a black box, we applied Gilad et al.'s (2019) framework. Using a bureaucratic politics perspective framework, we analyzed the process of debate and implementation of a policy, instead of the previous stage of agenda-framing, or the latter stage of assessment of the policy's impact. The bureaucratic politics perspective focused our attention on the distinct role that bureaucracies and bureaucrats play in shaping government responses to social movements, specifically in translating movement agendas into concrete policies. Gilad et al. state that bureaucrats tend to frame the problems underlying movement agendas, and the solution to those problems, using their institutionalized problem frames, and in accordance with their existing policy solutions. Furthermore, they do not necessarily seek to solve similar policy problems that movement participants would pursue if they were to have greater access to the policy making process.

Therefore, we chose to use a bureaucratic political perspective to understand the social movement outcomes of the Chilean student protests, mainly because it allowed us to open the policy-making black box. Ultimately, understanding the government's response to movement agendas, "involves a crucial, yet overlooked, dimension of translation, meaning policy elites' framing of social movements' agendas as related to defined, professionally endorsed problems and concrete policy solutions" (Gilad et al., 2019, p. 371). Hence, the movement's impact and outcomes were contingent on the policy elites' motivation to adopt students' demands (Amenta et al., 2010). In other words, scholars have agreed that social movements are necessary to influence policy, yet their capacity to advance changes in laws or transform education policy is conditional on how beneficial institutional political players perceive aiding the group will be to their interests (Almeida & Stearns, 1998; Kane, 2003).

Additionally, we follow Allison and Haplering's (1972) idea that the translation of a social movement agenda results from bureaucratic politics, implying that there is a bargaining process among players positioned within the government's regular channels. In other words, institutions play a role in structuring the bureaucratic politics and dynamics so that certain political and bureaucratic actors gain uneven access to the decision-making process and thereby wield unequal influence. Therefore, the demands will always be translated by the government and bureaucrats (Gilad et al., 2019) where

different actors have uneven access to influence this process, even when they access the formal channels.

### **Methodology**

This study sought to better understand the development of the tuition-free policy implemented in Chile using a qualitative approach to gain a deep understanding of the phenomena and their influences (Maxwell, 1996). First, we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews (Flick, 2014) with 14 Chilean and international experts with a broad spectrum of expertise and experience (Table 1), including scholars from Europe and the United States with expertise in reforms and Chilean policymakers and academic experts in higher education. We emailed experts that were critical actors who had participated directly and indirectly in the higher education reform. Chilean participants who were actively involved in the reform’s development provided critical information about how the tuition-free policy emerged and developed over time, including directors of think tanks, government advisers, academics, and researchers in higher education with political experience. Foreign participants’ expertise provided a deep understanding of how higher education reform is developed from a broad international perspective. We contacted the potential interviewees by email and invited them to participate in the study. After gaining consent, we conducted face-to-face interviews that lasted approximately 50–70 minutes and later transcribed them verbatim. The interviews took place online and in-person between 2017–2018. Most interviews were conducted in Spanish, but a few were in English. The interviews covered higher education reform generally and the tuition-free policy more specifically. To enrich our data, we also analyzed documents from the government and other stakeholders who wrote about the tuition-free policy.

**Table 1**  
*Participants*

#	Country	Occupation	Gender	Expertise
1	International	Scholar	M	Expert in higher education
2	International	Scholar and Political Actor	M	Expert in educational policies
3	Chilean	Scholar	M	Assessor of different government and research and expert in higher education
4	International	Scholar	M	Expert in higher education policy
5	Chilean	Scholar	M	Assessor of different government and research and expert in higher education
6	International	Scholar	M	Consultant and expert in international higher education
7	International	Scholar	F	Expert in higher education
8	Chilean	Political Actor	F	Assessor of universities and governments in higher education
9	Chilean	Scholar	M	Assessor of different government and research and expert in higher education
10	Chilean	Scholar	M	Consultant and expert in higher education
11	Chilean	Scholar	M	Professor in a traditional university. Expert in accreditation in higher education
12	Chilean	Scholar	M	Consultant of national and international organizations



13	Chilean	Scholar	M	Research in higher education. Director of a left-leaning education think-tank.
14	Chilean	Scholar	M	Advisor for national public organizations

Second, we reviewed newspaper opinion columns published between 2014–2016 in Chile’s two national newspapers, *El Mercurio* and *El Dínamo*, that mentioned the tuition-free policy and the higher education reform. In Chile, the press mobilizes the whole media system and guides all other media (Couso, 2012). As a relevant public discussion-oriented source of information, and a form of voluntary political participation similar to letters to the editor (Cooper et al., 2009), opinion columns provided another perspective on the tuition-free policy by addressing the national debates, controversies, disputes, and opinions of intellectuals, politicians, academics, clergy, and student movement representatives.

The selection of newspapers followed two criteria. First, we focused on media that had different editorial lines, seeking to control the bias (at least in part) resulting from the newspapers’ ideologies (Ortiz et al., 2005). *El Mercurio* is a long-standing newspaper with clear right-leaning political tendencies, while *El Dínamo* defines itself as plural and liberal medium, with room for all voices and all the issues of Chile in the 21st century. Second, we selected newspapers that covered the educational discussion in general (and the discussion on tuition-free policy), allowing a great deal of information to be collected on the public’s political discussion (Koopmans & Rutch, 2002). The consideration of these two criteria resulted in the selection of *El Mercurio* and *El Dinamo*. In both cases, we used a search engine to include every publication related to the tuition-free policy published in both newspapers. In total, we analyzed 105 newspaper opinion columns, sorting them into 10 broad categories to identify the main actors and topics (e.g., students, government, the state’s role, educational reform, higher education institutions, stratification of higher education institutions (HEI), funding of free tuition, market education, higher education fees in other countries) surrounding the higher education reform in Chile.

In both sources (i.e., interviews and documents), we analyzed the data following Braun and Clarke’s (2012) recommendations for thematic analysis: data familiarization, initial code generation, and emerging theme identification and consolidation. To ensure the reliability of the data and subsequent analysis, two researchers analyzed the data simultaneously, discussed it, and then generated the final codes. To process the data, we used qualitative software, ATLAS.ti. Finally, we based our results on both sources of information to showcase different narratives that intertwined during the implementation of the tuition-free policy. The newspaper opinion columns helped show the discourses in the public sphere, serving as a counterpoint to the interviews. Furthermore, individuals who wrote the opinion columns were involved with the process, either as student activists, presidents of universities, academics, or former government officials. Because of the public nature of the newspaper opinion columns, we did not anonymize the names of actors, but in the case of interviews participant anonymity was guaranteed<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> To access the columns’ coding, please reach out to the authors.

## **Findings**

We identified three themes from our expert interviews and newspaper analysis: (a) the emergence of new alliances and players involved during the implementation process of the tuition-free policy; (b) the political discourse deployed in the process of translation of the policy; and (c) the strategy chosen to materialize the tuition-free policy. The following sections describe each theme.

### **(New) Alliance and Actors Involved during the Implementation Process**

The success and strength of the student movement led Bachelet to include specific demands within the tuition-free legislation and change the configuration of the existing alliances in two significant ways. First, from the beginning, the government had made room at the decision-making table for a new political player: the student movement's political leaders, who came from two of the country's most prestigious universities (the Universidad de Chile and Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile). The visibility of the protests allowed student leaders, like Camila Vallejo, Gabriel Boric, and Giorgio Jackson, to generate support and become members of Congress after the 2013 elections and have since become members to ministerial cabinet and Chile's president. These leaders gave power to the people's voice within their roles in Congress, putting pressure on the political system and, specifically, onto the new government.

The student movement successfully placed and positioned politicians within the governmental system who supported their demands, thus attaining traditional forms of power. This newly attained power allowed for issues raised by the student protests not to be forgotten yet fell short of achieving actual changes. These new political leaders played a vital role in the higher education reform efforts, opposing more experienced and technical players in the government. They also felt empowered by people outside of the establishment and, as one national expert stated, they arrived with "this attitude, like 'we come from the street, and we bring the ... social power, of the society, and here we will act from the maximum democracy'" (National Policymaker).

Student activists also entered the government in key advisory positions to help with the reform development. As an interviewee observed:

All the advisors [of the Secretary] in the beginning came from the student protests: former student leaders, some with more experience than others [...] very young people...I think it's fantastic that you surround yourself with young people, but to the extent that you mix with people with a little more experience so that there can be a balance, [there was] a lot of contempt towards the technical, toward technocrats; therefore there were no people with more experience in the managerial positions of the Ministry [of Education]. (National Policymaker)

More than ever before, student leaders and activists were actively involved in political discussions about higher education reform, and their voices were heard and validated by policymakers. Their involvement and power streamed directly from the Ministry of Education, as one participant noted:

[T]he Minister [of Education, Nicolás Eyzaguirre] had the idea that there were some enlightened people, who were also the kids who had come directly from the

student protests and knew everything because they had the absolute truth and they were going to put together the new reform. (National Policymaker)

The student movement was also recognized as a relevant actor in the public sphere. As a column from *El Dínamo* (2014) stated, “On the other hand, the student movement continues as a coherent actor, aligned with its historical demands, with the capacity to influence and defend its own agenda” (Velarde, student activist, 2014).

The inclusion of student leaders and activists as new actors within the discussion of higher education policy contributed to the displacement of two other relevant actors: scholars and political experts. These two historical actors claimed that the tuition-free policy was developed without the input of individuals’ knowledge on how to structure the actual content of the legislation. Thus, when the time came to produce the content of the bill, policymakers fell short. As one national scholar reflected:

In the end, the policy is totally misplaced because, among other reasons, it started without an assessment of the context, and its center of gravity was universal free tuition. From that point of view, everything got tangled up and since then, the government has never known how to get out of the mess and now this government is coming to its end. (National Policymaker)

From the experts’ perspective, their exclusion from the decision-making process was due to a hostile narrative against specialists, as they were not seen as allies of the social movement and student leadership. Regardless of the actual action or involvement, this discourse marginalized many technical actors, as this interviewee observed, “There were also specialists who were not consulted either, who were ignored, because [...] the technocrats were like representatives of the existing system, defenders of what exists, of the status quo.” (National Policymaker)

The clergy also lost political prominence. As an influential actor in Chilean higher education, the clergy (especially those from private universities) were excluded in the policy debate. They published several columns in the country’s most influential newspapers to voice their opposition against the tuition-free policy, mainly based on the uncertainty regarding how private institutions would be funded. One rector from a Catholic university wrote: “If you do not understand all the factors that free tuition involves, it will not have the expected citizen support, it will be partial and harmful for the development of students and the country” (Sánchez, 2015).

In sum, the student movement brought new political actors into traditional channels of power. The new government included former student leaders within their cabinet, as they heightened the approval of the administration and would help to push forward the education reform agenda. At the same time, this created a shift in the alliances and actors involved in the decision-making process of the government, and therefore impacted who was involved in the creation and construction of the policy.

### **The Political Discourse: The Construction of Free Education**

Unlike prior protests, the 2011 student movement was clear about its demands. As expressed in an opinion column, one of the three main demands was free education, linked to the idea of social rights:

Free quality public education: that is the slogan that has gathered thousands of students in the streets in recent years. Public, because we want democratic higher education that responds to the interests and development of our country. Free, because we understand education as a social right that must be guaranteed by the state rather than a commodity that is traded on the market. And quality, because we want to give back the dignity lost to the unfinanced public education sector and left aside by the state. (Reyes, 2015)

Although the student movement brought free tuition to the forefront of the national debate, this was not the only demand. At first, the student movement opposed Chile's highly marketized higher education system. Their needs were broad and included several changes to benefit students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, as one expert recalled:

Let's remember that towards the year 2011, this [student movement] arose in a context where the student demands were different. It was about student loans, public transport passes, it was anything [...] The student movement started to mutate, and suddenly it [free tuition] arose, and that was instead towards the end of 2011. The flag of free tuition was raised along with two other demands: public, free quality university education. (National Scholar)

So, why did Bachelet focus the debate only on free education, while students still had a broad set of demands? Several of our interviewees agreed that the answer was clear for them: free education filled a policy vacuum in the left-center coalition, giving substance to a weakened political conglomerate. As one stated:

When Nueva Mayoría [political party] articulated themselves, in the absence of a project, with particular demands, they knew how to listen, how to monopolize a half-finished project and win the election. I think it had to do with social needs. (National Scholar)

Bachelet's party saw the student mobilization as an opportunity to win the presidential elections again. Former student leaders and academics recognized that the tuition-free policy was an essential element of Bachelet's campaign, as stated by one interviewee:

So, I think the correct formula is that the slogan of free quality education has to be connected to the de-commodification of education. It was the Concertación [Bachelet's political party] that changed the terms. Bachelet forgot about free quality public education while she held onto free education, and that same free education transformed into a focused scholarship [tuition-free policy]. (National Scholar)

As stated before, the student movement intended to disrupt the narrative around education as a commodity, focusing on the issue of public education. As a way to find practical actions, the movement pushed free tuition for everyone, with no exceptions, as one of their demands. Meanwhile, in preparing for the campaign, Bachelet's team

decided to push the tuition-free policy as the centerpiece of the government agenda. This decision obscured the demands and left behind the others raised by the students. However, the student movement was aware of the decision to center this policy, as they were in constant conversation with the political parties, and they agreed to support it as they thought this would bring them one step closer to their preferred reform. As one participant shared:

The conspiracy that Bachelet scammed the students was not valid. There was a political process of forces, of a clash of powers, and we [the students] who defended the idea of de-commodification were disunited. The one who unified us at that time was Bachelet. (National Scholar)

Most of our participants agreed that Bachelet's decision to choose free education over other demands, like quality public education, was a strategic and political decision. Ultimately, the implementation of a tuition-free policy did not imply changing the entire higher education system. This made it an easier policy to legislate, as it would not disrupt the status quo. The way the policy was developed would only change who paid the tuition, transferring costs from private entities (mainly families) to the state. As one expert clearly expressed:

Afterward, it was only free quality education [not public]; they were cutting the pillars. If I think of the three conditions, the easiest to access was probably free education, the simplest...The subject of the public is different because it implied that the State would have to renounce the option of the economic, social model, installed or reaffirmed during the structural reform of the eighties, reaffirmed and over-reaffirmed in the nineties, in which the principle of subsidiarity is at the base of the functioning. (National Scholar)

Additionally, several participants elaborated why the tuition-free policy was chosen as the primary demand. Some participants insisted that it was easier to reach a global consensus over the tuition-free policy than the other demands, which did not financially affect families' income. As one participant said, "I imagine that there is greater consensus on a policy like that versus other policies that have nothing to do with financing but that, for example, lead to stricter quality assurance or regulatory control, etc." (International Scholar). However, the focus on the free education policy caused problems. As one interviewee pointed out, the exclusive focus on this policy did not allow for a comprehensive reform of the higher education system:

In the end, free tuition was transformed into the axis of the reform and the law was articulated around free tuition and profit control. There is no integral thinking behind the law like "let's think of a system and transform so it responds to national development purposes," which is not in the [free tuition] law. (National Scholar)

In summary, although students had demanded free tuition, the decision to foreground and push this policy, obscuring the others, was a strategic decision taken by Bachelet's team. As insiders of the process have shown us, this policy carried support from students

and the general public, as it seemingly pushed public education forward. However, most importantly, looking at it as a political power play, the government strategically used the free tuition policy because it was perceived as easier to carry out, with less political costs, as it did not disrupt the economic system and power.

### **The Strategy: How Free Tuition was Implemented from the Stakeholders Perspective**

Considering the citizen support, the student movement's strength, and the expectations of the government to fulfill the campaign promises—which if unfulfilled could spark new student protests—the tuition-free policy's implementation was unexpected, as it had to meet two criteria: promptness and simplicity. The speed of the implementation was a self-imposed condition to approve and execute the policy during the presidential term because, as one expert indicated, “With the change of government, you will lose control over the initiative” (National Policymaker).

To accelerate the policy's implementation, the government decided to provide free tuition during the first two years through a budget without formal approval by the legislature. This strategy was criticized for several reasons. For some, it focused excessively on university funding, erasing the rest of the higher education system (i.e., vocational institutions) from the discussion. For others, approval by way of the budget and not by law was an anti-democratic practice that did not allow or encourage public policy discourse, as it works as a shortcut, bypassing discussion in Congress. The following quotes from opinion columns reflect these positions:

For the second year, free higher education has been approved via budget [...] The lack of ability to talk calmly, generate broad consensus and, above all, focus on the important things has disfigured the country's primary objective: the quality of education and its impact on people. We have watched, with impotence and concern, how relevant actors have insistently pushed the discussion on higher education only to the financing issue, and once there, it has sought to bring water to the mill itself. (Nazer, 2016)

This free tuition cannot not be criticized or discussed by any social actor since this public policy will not be carried out accordingly by means of a bill but will be approved through a legal loophole (Sande, 2015)

As established in these opinion columns, implementing the tuition-free policy through a budget was seen as anti-democratic, as it did not allow for the policy to be discussed in Congress. Instead, as mentioned before, the budget strategy was a direct shortcut the government used to evade addressing who they would consider eligible for tuition, how the government would implement the policy or pay the tuition, how institutions would comply to the government's requisites, among others. However, in the way that the policy was carried out, the free tuition reform had to be simplified or limited to determining the amount of money that universities would receive for enrolled students. Hence, the legislation provided only general guidelines, allowing the policy to be approved with some facility but causing the details to remain a topic of debate. As indicated by a stakeholder:

There is a big hole there in terms of how to implement this policy, which is quite unstable. We may have to wait quite a while before we take this seriously, make a good cost analysis and define tariffs and everything necessary (National Policymaker).

For some experts closer to the student movement, simplicity required the nature of the students' demands to be reduced to funding as the conditions were not favorable for a more comprehensive transformation of the higher education system. As stated before, this policy generated a great deal of support for the government but did not disrupt the structure of the system. Since policymakers rushed the policy implementation to avoid students' protests, they did not have the resources to fully develop the policy contents. Hence, the policy implementation was prompt and simple. Simplifying the policy did not allow understanding of the complexity of the problem, as reflected in this opinion column:

The reform project that will enter Congress is very poor. It maintains the current logic of the financing system and does not address the necessary strengthening of public education, determine mechanisms to achieve universal free tuition, or establish a regulatory framework that guides the system. (Reyes, 2016)

With a reasonably similar diagnosis, the most critical actors of the student movement also criticized the simplicity of the free tuition policy. However, their criticism targeted the government's supposed inability to process and transform the students' demands into public policy. As one former Education Minister indicated:

The second problem—which is not minor—is that the government promised to apply universal free tuition without awareness of the complexity of its implementation. It was easy and popular to assume the free demand of the student movement. Its implications should have been processed and studied. And that was not done. (Aylwin, 2015)

In sum, the policy implementation strategy was risky. It sought to deliver short-term results, generating the financial and political conditions to make free tuition an immediate reality. However, this required an over-simplification of the discussion and general approval of the law without thinking carefully through the implementation conditions, provoking criticism from several sides.

### **Discussion**

The student protests spurred substantial changes to Chile's higher education system by drawing national attention to education, particularly the problems resulting from the neoliberal policies implemented during the dictatorship. Several months of protests and strikes led by university students with the slogan, "good quality free public postsecondary education for all" garnered widespread support from Chilean society. The aim of this article was to explore what happened inside the black box of policy making during this period of time, between the student protests and the implementation of the tuition-free policy. In other words, we wanted to explore the stages that exists in between the

students' movement demands and the implementation of the tuition-free policy that resulted as the outcome of these protests.

First, the policy translation process involved new actors, such as student leaders, who were critical to the reform process. Three of the leading student leaders were elected to Congress in 2013, attributable to immense national support. The Ministry of Education, which was in charge of developing and implementing the reform effort, also hired several former students who had participated in the movement as advisors with direct access and input in the decision-making process. Students' voices were critical during the policy-making process, and students were able to position themselves inside the system and keep pushing for changes according to their original demands.

Additionally, the translation process changed the Bachelet administration's political orientations even before the mandate for higher education reform was implemented by the government. The students' demands were an incredible opportunity for Bachelet's party to reinvent itself amid a crisis. Bachelet and her coalition introduced the tuition-free policy as a rallying cry, central to her electoral campaign. Her decision to push free tuition forward over the demands for high quality public education was discussed several times in the interviews and most participants came to the same conclusion. Despite the opposition party's arguments, the tuition-free policy was the easiest to implement. The policy was trendy and did not change the whole higher education system as it was initially envisioned and later executed. The reform only changed who paid tuition fees, from private entities to the State.

A third important aspect was the execution of the policy. The current legislative system in place does not allow for fast implementation of a policy of this magnitude. However, there was a sense of urgency for Bachelet's government, as a presidential term only lasts four years in Chile. The relatively quick and simple tuition-free reform implementation was possible because it did not significantly affect all economic interests and stakeholders. In contrast, policies related to institutional quality and education's transformation into a public system would have required more expensive and controversial long-term reforms. Thus, the logical but very risky bureaucratic solution chosen to implement the student movement's demands was based on an increase in the government's annual budget.

Although our analysis allows us to better understand one of the most critical education reforms in the last 30 years, three issues need to be considered to understand the process of translation and implementation of the policy, and of our findings. First, the knowledge gap regarding free education was a government deficiency, and an area understudied by academics, experts, and the general public. Thus, financing deviated from the path dependence of research on higher education in Chile (Bernasconi, 2014), while the student movement—although massive—had little analytical capacity, was largely descriptive, and offered few guidelines for political action (Asún et al., 2019). Free education was a relatively new topic nationally and had not been widely discussed by political and social actors. Therefore, the decision to implement a tuition-free policy in a short amount of time necessitated a certain degree of improvisation and simplification.

Secondly, higher education reforms were created in an environment marked by debate and political discussion in the public sphere that the country had not seen in decades. Chile in earlier decades, although already having a democratic government, still



carried the vestiges of the dictatorship. In addition to heated discussions about constitutional change and tax reforms, multiple laws were promoted at the school level to limit the market's role, reduce school segregation, and enable social inclusion (Valenzuela & Montecinos, 2017), particularly in Bachelet's first year. In this context, the tuition-free policy implemented during her second year conflicted with other laws and reforms that were gradually wearing down the government's political capital, which could explain why Bachelet considered free tuition a silver bullet that needed to be approved quickly.

Finally, beyond small groups, the student movement did not actively support the government-sponsored tuition-free reform. Although it was one of their demands, the way it was carried out was not the way students intended, as it did not change the system's structures. Due to this, protests against Bachelet continued throughout her presidential campaign and her first year in government (Garcés & Santa Cruz, 2018), followed by years marked by indifference or criticism. Despite meeting one of the movement's main demands, the students' position became increasingly critical. They sought a minimalist reform, understanding the free education policy as cosmetic and shallow (Orellana, 2017). The student movement's critical attitude diminished the reform support base, further reducing the reform's scope across higher education.

In addition to our study's findings, these points allow us to understand the complexity of the political process during Chile's implementation of a tuition-free policy and provide a better understanding of the government's response to higher education and the student movement's agenda. Previous research on the student movement protests analyzed how successful they were in terms of the political actions they were able to push forward. However, there have not been many attempts to follow and illustrate what happened once the students put forth their demands or research studying how their demands were translated into Bachelet's tuition-free policy. This paper complements the existing literature by focusing on the tuition-free policy making process and what happened after the student movement's first year of protests, shedding light into the black box of the policy making and translating the movement's agenda into the government's response.

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