Article

Institutional Ethos of Less Selective Massive Private Universities in Chile: Organizational Identities in a Competitive and Marketized University System

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Abstract: This article aims to reflect on the institutional ethos of three Chilean, less selective massive private universities, analyzing their organizational identities, discourses, and practices and discussing how the dynamics of the competitive and marketized Chilean educational system influence this ethos. Through a qualitative design, which includes semi-structured interviews with key university staff members and direct observations in formal and informal instances, this article concludes that the ethos of these institutions is structured around four main axes: pluralism and student diversity; the pursuit of excellence as a competitive horizon; the construction of merit as a personal, family, and institutional effort; and education for employability, underpinned by professional ethics and social commitment. Furthermore, we find evidence that the logic of the university market shapes these private universities’ ethos transversally.

Keywords: ethos; universities; higher education; qualitative methodology

1. Introduction

Over the last decades, a large part of the higher education across the world has undergone significant changes, such as the increasing complexity of the organizational functioning, the growing emphasis on the accreditation of higher education institutions, the attraction and diversification of their student bodies, and the importance of fundraising to finance universities [1]. Overall, these changes have resulted in the transformation of universities into institutions that are more receptive to the logic of the business/market field, driven by the expectations of their new students’ profiles and organized around the strategic management of their processes, in a context of competition inherent to the notion of academic capitalism [2].

Historically, and regarding university governance, Lueg et al. [3] point out that in academic narratives, there are two hegemonic approaches to what is considered legitimate. The first, the Humboldtian approach, which has not been particularly felt in Latin American universities [4], is characterized by scientific autonomy, independence, and the self-governance of academics. The second approach, called “managerial governance”, is more recent and represents university management from top to bottom, subordinating academics to market logic and continuous evaluation. As this latter approach has solidified in universities worldwide, the old Humboldtian model of the European tradition has transformed into a nostalgic narrative, a “nearly uncritical, hegemonic tale of a glorified past” [3] (p. 1).

The Chilean education system is recognized as one of the world’s most market-oriented [5], with the concept of academic capitalism gaining relevance [6]. This conceptual
framework, which has been debated since the late 20th century, addresses the commodification of higher education through the privatization of educational offerings and financing, the commercialization of teaching, the marketing of research, and the financialization of educational institutions [6]. The process of commodification, in turn, influences the governance of the system and institutions, “especially those that are more entrepreneurial and focused on managerialism” [6] (p. 637).

Although this new university model has gained centrality in the educational landscape worldwide, it has been implemented more drastically in the Chilean context [7]. These changes began within the framework of a military dictatorship ideologically aligned with the neoliberal principles advocated by the Chicago Boys [7,8]. Since then, the market-oriented university model has assumed a relevant role, transforming the Chilean educational system into a distinctive and paradigmatic case on the international stage [1,9,10].

In this way, the expansion, growth, and massification of the university system in Chile have unfolded within a model based on privatization, which has led to a reduction in public spending on education, and an increase in education financing by families [7], partially through student loans. The massification of higher education in this country has followed the logic of “segregated democratization” [11], meaning the simultaneous increase in quantitative access to higher education and the maintenance of inequalities through the qualitative hierarchization between lower- and middle-class students’ universities and elite’s universities [12].

Among other effects, the massification of higher education in Chile has given rise to the growth and expansion of a new particular segment of institutions. Although this segment does not constitute a homogeneous whole, it presents several main features: large enrollments, a student body largely composed of students from middle and lower- and middle-class backgrounds, alumni from secondary schools with lower academic achievement, and lower levels of selectivity. These universities often have faculty members closely connected to the professional field and primarily offer programs focused on marketable careers [13–16]. This university segment will be analyzed in this paper. Indeed, while sociological and educational research in Chile and the international context has paid significant attention to these institutions, studies have mostly focused exclusively on analyzing their organizational characteristics [17], understanding the social and academic profile of their student bodies [18], drawing comparisons between these institutions and more traditional universities [19], exploring the tensions and challenges faced by these new university students [20], or even examining the significance of credentials from these institutions for social mobility processes [21–23]. However, few studies have focused on the symbolic dimensions of the ethos of these institutions, understood as the set of values, visions, and dispositions that shape the identities of less selective, massive private universities. Despite its less consensual and precise definition, as will be discussed theoretically, this concept is the most comprehensive in allowing reflection on the plurality and diversity of dimensions related to the university identities analyzed in this article. These dimensions encompass openness to student diversity and pluralism, the pursuit of meritocracy and excellence, as well as student employability, underpinned by professional ethics and social commitment. Exploring this field of research seems particularly relevant for the Chilean case, given that these universities have a quantitative and qualitative prominence within the overall university system, playing a fundamental role in the operation of a consolidated, dynamic, and complex market, guided by the dynamics of supply and demand [16].

Considering the above, this article’s central objective is to reflect on the institutional ethos of three Chilean universities, considered paradigmatic cases of less selective massive private institutions that largely sustain the explosion of tertiary enrollment. Thus, this article’s aim is to investigate how the institutional ethos is configured in these universities, analyzing the similarities and specificities of each case. Two key questions guide our analysis: What are the main characteristics of the universities’ ethos under study? And how are the organizational identities, objectives, and discourses of massive universities structured within the context of a marketized, competitive, and dynamic university system?
To achieve this goal, this article is organized into four sections, in addition to this introduction. The second section describes and systematizes the main characteristics of the less selective massive private universities, contextualizing the Chilean case. Subsequently, it reflects on the concept of university ethos. The third section describes the methodological procedures of data collection and analysis used, detailing the strategies and information-gathering methods. In the results and discussion section, the institutional identities of the universities are analyzed, structured around four main emerging axes: (i) pluralism and student diversity; (ii) the pursuit of excellence as a competitive horizon; (iii) the construction of merit as a personal, family, and institutional effort; and (iv) the education for employability, underpinned by professional ethics and social commitment. Finally, the last chapter (conclusions) identifies the main findings of this study and suggests potential research directions within this field.

2. Contextualization and Theoretical Framework

2.1. The Democratization of Higher Education and the Creation of New University Profiles: The Case of Less Selective Massive Private Universities in Chile

One of the most striking transformations in higher education was its massification, in line with Trow’s predictions [24]. Initiated in the second half of the twentieth century, massification allowed access for the most disadvantaged socio-economic groups to the university, which until then was a stronghold of the elites. With the transition from an elite system to a mass system—and in some cases to a universal system [25], as seen in Chile [7]—there was a phenomenon of expansion and diversification of university offerings that took on different expressions on a global scale. While Altbach [23] speaks of a response to massification less based on the expansion of traditional universities than on the creation of a new scenario for higher education, Carpentier [26] points out that this response is linked, in many countries, to institutional differentiation.

The emergence of new universities is part of these new dynamics. The ‘new’ universities [27] created in England in the 1960s and 1970s and the ‘new new universities’ [28] that resulted in the 1990s from the transformation of polytechnics into universities document the diversification of the English university sector [29], where the historical and prestigious universities of Cambridge and Oxford [26] coexist with these recent and less prestigious new universities. Another way to meet the growing demand for post-secondary education was the creation of institutions of higher education focused on vocational education that sought to meet the needs of a new student profile without the aptitudes and skills to pursue academic studies and with a desire to quickly enter the job market [30]. With different levels of quality, these alternatives to traditional universities range from low-level programs, such as those in India, to more demanding training, such as those offered by German public and private Fachhochschulen [31] or by the Petit Enseignement Supérieur and the Institut Universitaire de Technologie in France, mostly attended by first-generation students [32].

However, as Wit and Reisberg [30] observe, the significant response to the growing demand for higher education was provided by the expansion of the private sector. With less expression in countries like England, France, or Germany, private higher education institutions became, in some countries, a demand-driven sector, as happened in Brazil starting in the 1960s in Brazil, where by 2015, public higher education institutions only accommodated 24.3% of all undergraduate students [33]. Latin America stands as the world region with the highest proportion of university enrollments in the private sector [34], which controls 67.5% of the total number of universities on the continent [35], with Brazil and Chile, for example, having more than 70% of their total enrollment in private institutions [36].

In addition, in Chile, there have been significant changes in its higher education landscape, particularly in the realm of democratization and the emergence of new university profiles. This transformation is prominently exemplified by the proliferation of private universities catering to the masses with lower socioeconomic status. It is important to note that the private university sector is not a homogeneous reality, particularly in terms
of quality and prestige. There are old and traditional private universities, created before 1981 and belonging to CRUCH (Chilean Council of University Chancellors), such as the Pontifical Catholic University, which are characterized by high standards of academic quality and research, as well as elevated levels of selectivity. There is also a broad set of new private universities that emerged in the 1980s, driven by Pinochet’s neoliberal policies.

Among the private universities—despite their heterogeneity (elite versus non-elite, highly selective versus less selective, large versus small, among other organizational differences)—we find a group of institutions with a large enrollment, medium to low academic selectivity, and catering to new university audiences. In Chile, these universities have largely supported the tertiary democratization process [16], understood as the exponential rise in university enrollment [37]. These institutions are characterized by their high number of enrollments and their territorial spread across different regions and cities [13], through the development of multiple campuses. Additionally, these universities have fewer years of institutional accreditation, lower levels of internationalization, and students with lower standardized test scores compared to traditional and elite universities [14,16]. Finally, these institutions tend to enroll students from the middle and lower classes, as well as students whose families do not have a historical tradition of higher education. According to Muñoz and Blanco’s [13] typology, vulnerable young people are concentrated in ‘massive universities’, developing lower expectations and aspirations (compared to the upper classes) regarding the outcomes and benefits of their higher education experience [21]. Despite their common traits, some of these universities are undergoing processes of institutional and organizational complexity, in terms of research, increasing academic selectivity and internationalization, among other factors [15] as is the case with two of the three universities studied in this article. Understanding the heterogeneity of this segment of universities requires a dynamic analysis, demanding constant updating.

2.2. Analyzing the Concept of Ethos in Education

According to McLaughlin [38], the concept of “ethos” is frequently used in the educational field, being inseparable from the theory of effective schools [39]. From another perspective, Bourdieu [40] has also discussed this concept, defining it as a “system of implicit and deeply internalized values” (p. 5) that families transmit to their children, and highlighting its importance in defining the attitudes that students adopt toward cultural capital and the school institution.

Starting from the 1990s and under the impact of the philosopher Hoyos’ [41] work, the concept of ethos begins to be problematized in the university context. However, the definition of the concept remains somewhat unclear [38], often being identified with the idea of “atmosphere”, “spirit of the institution”, or “climate”. In addition, Solvason [42] considers the concept of ethos too vague and suggests replacing it with the more tangible and accessible term “culture”, leading us into the realm of organizational culture analyzed Clark’s seminal research through the lens of the pioneering concept of “organizational saga” [43].

However, the “ethos” has been discussed in the literature as a relevant concept to understanding organizational identities. Rutter et al. [39], for example, talk about norms, values, and beliefs that permeate the institution’s spirit. Kuh [44] identifies ethos as “a belief system widely shared by faculty, students, administrators, and others. It is shaped by a core of educational values manifested in the institution’s mission and philosophy” (p. 1). Hoyos [41], who identifies pluralism as a fundamental value of the university [45], defines university ethos as the identity of the academic community “with its traditions and ideals, and at the same time, its openness to other communities, recognition of differences, and a critical attitude to seek truth, what is right, and what is authentic through dialogue” [41] (p. 16). On the other hand, Vargas [46] identifies two complementary perspectives of university ethos: one perspective associates it with the typical traits that make each university a specific community, essentially in terms of practices, orientations, and purposes by which it is guided; and the other perspective defines ethos as a set of common behaviors, habits, tendencies, and convictions that, not being problematized by those involved, guide the
behavior of the academic community. More recently, Budd [47] explored how contemporary students attending an English and a German university construe the “ethos of the University”. He identified a post-Humboldtian vision of higher education, oriented around both older and newer values. These values include the idea of independence in research and non-utilitarian science, the development of systematic thought, social progress, and equality and meritocracy.

The fact that this concept comprises many everyday life aspects that are not always openly formulated and explicit leads Vallaeys [48] to speak of a hidden ethos, drawing a clear parallel with the concept of hidden curriculum. From this perspective, identifying the ethos of a university involves analyzing four fundamental dimensions: the knowledge that is transmitted, the teaching methods used and the teaching culture, the organizational life of the university, and the image the institution projects of itself, for example, through marketing campaigns.

Finally, the relevance of analyzing university ethos is also pointed out by Kezar [49], who analyzes the importance of creating and sustaining a campus ethos to promote students’ engagement and success. Some university strategies to achieve this goal are the creation of a shared understanding of the ethos and of a willingness to perpetuate it, as well as the implementation of mechanisms to foster anticipatory socialization regarding the campus ethos among university members.

Unlike the international context, the university ethos has been little explored and analyzed in Chile. This topic has only been studied in recent years in a research project aimed at analyzing in-depth the identity hallmark of the country’s public universities [50]. The author concludes that there is a common ethos among different institutions, related to comprehensive education, education for equity and pluralism, citizen participation, inclusion, and gender equality. Likewise, it is highlighted that training professionals under a hallmark of quality and territorial relevance, regardless of their social origin, is a common feature of the ethos of these universities, although there are still differences between more state-oriented and more market-oriented dispositions [51].

Based on the foregoing, for this study, we understand institutional ethos as a system of beliefs, norms, and values shared by academics, students, and administrators, which is reflected in the institutions’ mission and philosophy, thereby shaping its identity, teaching methods, imparted knowledge, organizational culture, and the image it projects of itself.

3. Materials and Methods

This research addresses the institutional ethos of three less selective massive private universities in Chile through a qualitative methodological design, which allows for the understanding of participants’ discourses and meanings regarding social phenomena from their perspectives [52].

In this study, the case-study approach was the research strategy adopted to understand the universities’ ethos and its dimensions within the “natural” context, using diverse data sources to achieve a deeper understanding of it [53]. More specifically, three case studies were conducted in three Chilean universities chosen considering their size (massive enrollment and a large number of programs), the heterogeneity of their student population (belonging to middle- or lower-middle social classes and having studied in subsidized private and public schools), and their less rigorous enrollment criteria; that is to say, low levels of academic selectivity among students (measured by standardized scores), as can be observed in Table 1. University A was specifically chosen for its high enrollment and because, being among the most massive and least selective universities, it has achieved a higher level of selectivity in its student body, making it an important benchmark for comparison with the other universities in the sample. University B is an intermediate institution in terms of selectivity and size, with the specific characteristic of having adopted the free tuition option and, similar to University A, committing to both research and teaching. Finally, University C is the one with the most vulnerable student body and the lowest levels of selectivity, representing a typical case of a teaching-oriented university rather than a research-oriented one.
Table 1. Classification of the three universities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Type of University</th>
<th>Year Founded</th>
<th>Total Students 2022 (^1)</th>
<th>Nr. of Campuses</th>
<th>Nr. of Degrees</th>
<th>Degree Length</th>
<th>Research</th>
<th>Free Tuition Option</th>
<th>Points Score Average (1st Year) (PSU) (^2)</th>
<th>% Students Who Attended Public Schools (^3)</th>
<th>% Students Who Attended Subsidized Schools (^4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University A</td>
<td>Private (Non-traditional)</td>
<td>Late 1980s</td>
<td>Approx. 57,000</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Approx. 80</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Approx. 530</td>
<td>Approx. 19</td>
<td>Approx. 59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University B</td>
<td>Private (Non-traditional)</td>
<td>Early 1990s</td>
<td>Approx. 31,000</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Approx. 50</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Approx. 510</td>
<td>Approx. 32</td>
<td>Approx. 65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University C</td>
<td>Private (Non-traditional)</td>
<td>Late 1980s</td>
<td>Approx. 27,000</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Approx. 60</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Approx. 490</td>
<td>Approx. 34</td>
<td>Approx. 60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Compilation based on [54–56]. \(^1\) In 2022, the average total student enrollment in Chilean universities was 14,906. \(^2\) The scoring scale of the PSU ranged from 150 to 850 points. In 2022, the average PSU score for universities was 530.1. \(^3\) In 2022, the average percentage of students coming from public schools was 31.1%. \(^4\) In 2022, the average percentage of students coming from private subsidized schools was 54.8%. 

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The techniques used to generate information for this study consisted of two main approaches. Firstly, a semi-structured interview was employed due to its capacity to allow the interviewed subjects to express their opinions and viewpoints more effectively compared to a standardized interview or a questionnaire [57]. This technique aimed to understand the meanings that the directors of these universities attribute to the missions, values, and beliefs that shape the identity of these institutions. The interview was structured around five key points: (i) university profile and organizational processes; (ii) history and current positioning of the university; (iii) social and academic profile of the student body and organizational challenges; (iv) competencies and formative values; (v) social mobility and employability.

Secondly, direct ethnographic observations [58] were carried out in informal instances and ceremonial events at these institutions. This technique allowed for the production of data through direct observation of events, behaviors, or interactions in the natural environment where they occur [59]. In this way, the observation provided detailed and contextual information on four main dimensions: (i) disposition of physical space and student appropriation; (ii) university life, student participation, and recreation; (iii) clothing, physical appearance, and group formation; (iv) imaginaries, narratives, and university discourses.

Participant selection was carried out using theoretical sampling, where the interviewees mixed up to maximize differences [60]. Thirty-one interviews were conducted with key university staff members acting in different organizational areas, all contributing to the knowledge and reflection on university ethos: 15 programs’ directors, 3 social workers and psychologists working in student support offices, and 13 student affairs coordinators and community engagement representatives, as can be observable in Table 2. This university staff, engaged in diverse roles with heterogeneous connections to institutional leadership, along with varied responsibilities in students’ support, provides a more comprehensive insight into the ethos of these institutions and any subtle nuances they may have.

### Table 2. Interviewees’ characterization.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Number of Interviewees</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University A</td>
<td>Computer Engineering</td>
<td>Program directors</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Females</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chemistry and Pharmacy</td>
<td>Program directors</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Male and Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Psychologist</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Students’ affairs coordinators</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2 Males and 1 Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Community engagement representatives</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University B</td>
<td>Pedagogy in elementary education</td>
<td>Program directors</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Male and Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Law</td>
<td>Program directors</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2 Males and 1 Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Psychologist</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Social worker</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Students’ affairs coordinators</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1 Male and 2 Females</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Community engagement representatives</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University C</td>
<td>Veterinary</td>
<td>Program directors</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1 Male and 3 Females</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Management</td>
<td>Program directors</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1 Male and 2 Females</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Management</td>
<td>Student affairs coordinators</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Veterinary</td>
<td>Student affairs coordinators</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Veterinary</td>
<td>Community engagement representatives</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Management</td>
<td>Community engagement representatives</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s own elaboration.
As for observations, a total of 40 systematized observations were made in the universities, following a pre-established observational guide that outlined the dimensions for observation and analysis. These observations were conducted in everyday instances, such as recreational spaces, cafeterias, university surroundings, hallways/corridors, and others (N = 33), as well as during official events, such as graduation ceremonies, seminars, and student awards ceremonies (N = 7) as can be observable in Table 3.

Table 3. Observations’ characterization.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Campus</th>
<th>Number of Observations</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University A</td>
<td>Everyday instances</td>
<td>Central Zone</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Between November 2022 and April 2023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>East Zone</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University B</td>
<td>Everyday instances</td>
<td>East Zone</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Between September 2022 and March 2023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>North Zone</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University C</td>
<td>Everyday instances</td>
<td>Central Zone</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Between November 2022 and April 2023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>East Zone</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Official ceremonies</td>
<td>Central Zone</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>East Zone</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>South Zone</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s own elaboration.

Data analysis involved thematic analysis of the information produced during interviews and observations. It allows for the identification, analysis, and description of themes that emerge from the empirical data, contributing to the theoretical framework [61]. Initially, each observation and interview were individually coded by the research team, specifically by three researchers. Then, in a second step, the analyses were compared in groups to identify patterns and common themes. Finally, a consensus was reached by the research team on a set of recurring themes, which were transformed into the dimensions analyzed in the four axes that structure the results. NVivo 14 software was used for the analysis procedure.

The triangulation of data was employed by the researchers in this study as a strategy to ensure the validity and reliability of the analysis [62]. In this process, each of the three researchers individually coded the data from the interviews and observations. In the case of discrepancies, a group coding was performed.

In this article, the primary sources include excerpts from interviews and field notes recorded by the researchers during the direct observations. It is important to note that this study received approval from the Ethics Committee of the sponsoring university, and all participants provided voluntary informed consent.

4. Results and Discussion

The results are structured into four categories that have emerged from the analysis of interviews and observations and that largely define the four main features of these three private universities’ ethos. While each institution has its ethos, they share four dimensions that mostly define their identities. They are the following: (i) pluralism and student diversity; (ii) the pursuit of excellence as a competitive horizon; (iii) the construction of merit as a family, personal, and institutional effort; and (iv) education for employability, underpinned by professional ethics and social commitment.

4.1. Pluralism and Student Diversity

The first significant aspect of the institutional hallmark of these less selective massive private universities, common to all of them, is the defense of the principles of pluralism and diversity, visible in two major aspects: the socio-cultural profile of the student body they admit and the values that guide the institutions’ activities.
Regarding the first aspect, interviewees believe that the pluralism of their universities is manifested through the social heterogeneity of their enrollment, as well as through the diversity of trajectories—traditional or non-traditional—of their students:

“They are students from vulnerable sectors, coming from low socioeconomic levels. They represent the first generation in their families to attend university, carrying an additional burden. Many come from single-parent families and have often taken on work or responsibilities from a young age, and they bear a high emotional and social burden. They can be described as individuals of great effort and a strong desire for self-improvement. They are motivated to progress and uplift their families. Behind them, they have a family providing support and holding onto hope. They exhibit a strong work ethic and a determination to forge ahead” (female, University B, Social Worker).

In the same vein, an interviewee even points out that the university’s hallmark is bestowed by the profile of its students, alluding to the role of these universities in democratizing tertiary education and appealing to one of the most relevant features of these universities: the opportunity for students from families that had not accessed university education to finally attend.

“. . .the identity of the university is there, in the students and in the proposal that relates to students who traditionally could not access universities, neither public nor private, for various reasons. . .” (male, University B, program director).

Consistent with this perspective, these institutions adopt various mechanisms of academic, social, and psychological support for their students. Thus, the area of student support, whether through tutoring or more specialized services such as SAAC (The SAAC is a student support service facilitated by University B that aims to ensure retention rates, reinforce content and student learning, as well as provide continuous support. An important foundation of this work lies in the roles of tutors, who are students from higher years that act as mentors or guides), while being a relevant pillar of the educational practices of these institutions, is not identified by interviewees as the only (or main) differentiating identity mark of their work with students, compared to other educational institutions [63]. In this way, from these actors’ perspective, the distinctive hallmark of these universities is defined by student-centered teaching based on close teacher–student interaction, which positively impacts the integration and academic success of students, especially first-generation students [64]. As one interviewee points out:

“The distinctive hallmark which the students always talk about is the closeness they have, what we call an open-door policy. We have direct communication with the students; in other institutions, that doesn’t exist…” (female, University C, Program Director).

Regarding the second aspect, these universities explicitly state that they do not disseminate a markedly ideological stance in partisan or religious terms, which, from their point of view, gives them a hallmark of pluralism and diversity. Thus, their founding principles lie in generalist and pluralistic values, such as freedom, ethics, and regional development. Additionally, these institutions adopt generalist missions, such as building spaces for meetings and debates, or even promoting activities to enhance personal growth and ethical behavior.

This refusal to adopt clear and especially monolithic ideological positions could be related to the market orientation of these universities and the sought to expand the spectrum of “clients”, achieving openness to the most diverse ideological spectrums, in line with “(….) the transformation of higher education into a competitive market and, ultimately, into a very lucrative business” [65] (p. 51). An interesting case of this openness is University C, which incorporates symbolic elements of such diverse nature as those belonging to religious heritage or to the republican and patriotic heritage of Chile, as observed. The same reality occurs at University A, which, while bearing the name of
Anjita, a key humanist in the creation of the Chilean education system, does not seem to hold
strong commitments to republican and/or national values. On the contrary, observations
revealed a commitment to internationalization, highlighting its partnerships with foreign
universities, exchange programs, and internships, as well as its positioning in international
rankings. The importance attributed to the international positioning of the University and
the program is evident, for example, in the frequently organized international seminars at
these institutions.

“For two hours, various topics are presented, many of which even extend beyond
the boundaries of Chilean education and pedagogy. As mentioned earlier by
the faculty authority, the seminar aims to internationalize the education faculty
with perspectives on current issues” (Fieldnotes, University B, 13 October 2022,
International Pedagogy Seminar).

In summary, these universities adopt diversity as a core principle of their ethos,
welcoming individuals from heterogeneous social backgrounds and with diverse academic
paths. They maintain a neutral stance on political, ideological, and religious matters,
creating an inclusive environment where everyone, regardless of their values, feels accepted,
as a form to develop an open market strategy.

4.2. The Pursuit of Excellence as a Competitive Horizon

A common trait of these less selective massive private universities is the goal of
academic quality, a concept that has gained increasing focus in international and Chilean
higher education studies. It has been fueled by the development of mechanisms for
ensuring the academic value of universities [66], where rankings and classification systems
are the most visible expressions [67].

Unlike in elite universities, where quality is an inherent element achieved through
rigorous selection processes [16], in these three universities, the pursuit of quality devel-
ops under the notion that it is not taken for granted, and it must be actively constructed.
This differentiation process involves a commitment to scientific and research develop-
ment, strengthening postgraduate programs and international teaching, and developing
research networks. These goals are achieved through specific actions, such as the hiring
of highly qualified faculty or the pursuit of collaboration agreements with international
universities. In this way, the discourse of the authorities of the universities under study
reveals their attempt to emulate elite universities and distance themselves from the less
prestigious technical institutions through the gradual improvement of their academic
quality indicators:

“We are advocating for a university that goes beyond the complexity of what we
had before. Throughout our history, University C has always been a teaching-
focused institution. Today, it has evolved into a university with promising re-
search indicators and successful community engagement. This transformation
puts us in a different league, no longer confined to competing solely with technical
training centers or institutes.…” (male, University C, Student Affairs Coordinator).

“We were the first non-traditional university to offer the pharmacy program.
Previously, institutions such as the University of Chile or the Pontifical Catholic
University of Chile were established as traditional institutions. However, we
successfully positioned ourselves and validated our program. Nowadays, in
the market, many sectors prefer pharmacists from University A […] . I believe
this preference arises from the distinctive imprint that University A leaves on
you. It operates much like a traditional university in terms of management and
academics. Indeed, it can be closely compared to traditional universities. We
faced numerous challenges; it was not an easy journey” (male, University A,
Program Director).

Driven by goals of effectiveness and efficiency that are measured through the employ-
ability of their students, these universities construct an ethos based on the idea of academic
quality as a path to establishing a position in the competitive Chilean higher education market. These institutions also compete for reputation, students, and resources, having common competitors: traditional universities with high academic and social prestige that have accumulated symbolic capital over time, such as universities of the Council of Rectors [68], and also selective and prestigious private elite universities [16]. As a director states, this hallmark of quality is built considering the different levels of selectivity of these institutions:

“...University A, even though it’s not selective in admissions, does seek to provide an excellent education and that excellence is also sought in terms of the university’s positioning (...) to be recognized as a university of excellence, which is a tough road, because fundamentally we are a young university, 30 years old.” (male, University A, Program Director).

Thus, achievements in terms of institutional accreditation in Chile or even positioning in international university rankings (a matter that occurs especially at University A) also form part of the identifying the hallmarks of these universities, mobilizing discourses, images, and ideals. Consequently, as observed on university campuses, institutions broadcast their positioning in the allocation of national research funds through screens, posters, and even social media, boasting some of the most significant researchers nationally. In this way, and in line with the work of Wörner et al. [69], in an increasingly competitive university market such as Chile’s, quality becomes a brand, with aspects such as advertising strategies and university marketing campaigns gaining importance.

Furthermore, and considering students as the best ambassadors of the university’s “brand” [15], it matters in these institutions that students are called upon to incorporate and proudly embrace the values of each university, including the spirit of quality of these institutions. Ceremonies and official speeches are privileged moments for the dissemination, internalization, and exaltation of the institution’s quality hallmark that students should be proud of “feeling the university as their alma mater”. In the same vein, the repetitive use of expressions such as “world-class university” by the rector during official ceremonies of University B imprints in the institutional collective imaginary the idea of exceptionalism, helping to build a community of committed ambassadors of their institution’s value, thereby contributing to enhancing the institution’s reputation.

The strengthening of engagement with the university’s “alma mater” is also a strategy at University C, where students are invited to end official ceremonies by loudly repeating the “University C value hallmark”. The university’s three value commitments are proclaimed in unison, much like a mantra: “professional ethics; civic and citizen responsibility; community commitment”. Thus, the “construction of quality” does not solely occur through advertising campaigns or the dissemination of values; it is also built by the entire university community during collective moments of sharing and celebrating university values and principles.

4.3. The Construction of Merit as a Family, Personal, and Institutional Effort

Another fundamental element of the ethos of these universities is the meritocratic ideal. This ideal is visible, for example, in field notes collected during the observations carried out at official ceremonies of these universities:

“Effort, dedication, and commitment seem to be the underlying themes of each intervention in these ceremonies. In this graduation ceremony [at University A], various participants repeatedly refer to the existence of a “long and challenging path” in many cases. However, as they point out, all the students successfully achieved their goals, enriching themselves not only as professionals but above all as individuals, equipped to ‘undertake, succeed, and contribute socially’” (Fieldnotes University A, 7 December 2022, graduation ceremony).

The exaltation of meritocracy is not coincidental, as meritocracy enjoys a broad consensus in Chilean society [70], despite the evidence of social inequality and limited intergenera-
tional mobility in Chile. This adherence to the meritocratic narrative is inseparable from the intensity of the neoliberal principles implemented by the Chicago Boys and contemporary individualism [71], as well as the value of effort and its reward [72].

However, in these universities, students’ merit is not perceived according to the traditional equation proposed by Young [73], which includes intelligence and effort. Instead, it is synonymous exclusively with the combined effect of the student’s work, the family investment, and the institution’s support. This is akin to the experience of middle-class groups that have undergone the positive processes of social mobility [74]:

“The speech was filled with emotion, primarily addressing what it means to be a professional in today’s society. It mentions that being a professional signifies an achievement resulting from personal sacrifice and effort. However, this speech emphasizes that families ‘are relevant throughout this entire process’” (Fieldnotes University C, 13 December 2022, graduation ceremony).

From the perspective of administrators, the desired academic success is possible when the student, family, and university are aligned. Thus, in line with Flanagan’s work [64] on new university students, including first-generation students, the importance of family and the university for the academic success of these young people is confirmed. It is considered essential by the interviewees to develop special programs for families that promote the value and benefits of attending university and guide them on concrete ways to support their children.

Similar to institutional discourse, student discourse is also imbued with a meritocratic spirit based on individual, family, and institutional effort. As a student states during a graduation ceremony, justifying his successful trajectory in the law program, if personal and individual perseverance and effort are fundamental to achieving anything in life, the solid support of the family and the university are also determining factors for overcoming obstacles:

“At this graduation ceremony, most of the speeches aimed at supporting families in students’ educational trajectories. While not explicitly mentioned, there is also an institutional spirit to highlight that the future of these students will be different thanks to their university experience and that, without the education they received, their destinies would be limited by their backgrounds. Emphasis is placed on the university’s motto, which means “reach higher” (. . .). Moreover, we can see that in this event the student’s speech constantly refers to symbolism related to effort, dedication, and family support, suggesting that students achieved their goals due to a combination of factors involving families, the university, and personal effort” (Fieldnotes University B, 2 November 2022, graduation ceremony).

The meritocratic ethos is also evident in other activities of these universities, such as awarding prizes to the best students. While academic distinction is a common practice in educational institutions, it is worth noting that, in the case of University C, this recognition is not limited to the academic dimension. It also includes a variety of formative vectors such as practices in elite institutions, where “comprehensive education” stands out over purely academic education [12]. The same pluralistic logic of student recognition has been found by Labraña [50] in traditional Chilean universities, confirming that these institutions serve as a mirror for massive universities. Thus, for instance, in the case of University C, students are recognized in the following dimensions: (1) social responsibility, professional ethics, and commitment, acknowledging extracurricular activities such as annual volunteer work; (2) student well-being, recognizing students who contribute to psychosocial well-being; (3) sports activities, recognizing outstanding athletes; (4) volunteering, rewarding those who show higher commitment to voluntary work; and (5) University C’s hallmark, honoring students who embody the university spirit and a sense of belonging to the university community. This mirrors traditional and elite institutions, where the internalization of the “esprit de corps” is part of individual formative processes [75].
Consequently, the meritocratic ideal disseminated in these institutions is perceived as synonymous with effort, work, and even individual and collective responsibility for successes or failures. The notion of talent or brilliance among students is absent, unlike what happens in elite university contexts. Additionally, the ethos of these institutions is built on the idea that student success also depends on family support and the ability of institutions to adapt their institutional character to the needs of these new students. It represents a notion of merit essentially anchored in individual effort, but inextricably tied to the combined efforts of students, families, and the university, without which overcoming “probable class destinies” would be challenging [76].

4.4. Education for Employability Underpinned by Professional Ethics and Social Commitment

The fourth constitutive aspect of the institutional ethos of these universities is related to their orientation towards employability, underpinned by professional ethics and social commitment. Unlike the historical mission of universities, which focused on producing critical and abstract knowledge, these massive universities place special attention on students’ employability, in line with the consensus in the literature regarding the central role of this dimension in higher education today [77]. Thus, these universities are aware that they are attended by young people from lower- and middle-class families for whom the university represents a possible passport to access professions with better salaries and more prestige than those of their families [22,23], impacting their pecuniary and non-pecuniary earnings [78]. Therefore, these institutions project themselves and build part of their ethos on the idea that they train for employability, promoting discourse as an enhancer of real processes of social mobility:

“Their hallmark is much more oriented towards employability (…) achieving that their students acquire a combination of knowledge and personal skills that allow them to develop well in the work environment…” (male, University A, Program Director).

Furthermore, in line with the idea that employability is an outcome and indicator of the quality of education provided [79], these universities boast high levels of successful professional placement for their students, in some cases reaching 100%:

“I believe that the strong work we have done, precisely as you were talking about establishing as a hallmark, is reflected in our 97% employability rate” (female, University B, Program Director).

They perceive this high employability as a structuring axis of their ethos, although without deeply questioning the quality of employment or its characteristics.

However, it is not employability alone that is the central component of this ethos. Rather, it is a specific form of employability, which can be defined as “employability with ethics and professional responsibility”. For these institutions, the idea of training for the job market does not only emerge associated with the development of the necessary technical competencies for the profession but also with the development of “a set of moral principles and ethical ways of acting in a professional environment” [80] (p. 96), which must be integrated into the training projects of professionals in the new millennium [81]:

“We want to educate students to be professionals with civic awareness, civic responsibilities, and a sense of participation, who also feel engaged with their work” (male, University C, Student Affairs Coordinator).

Within these values, community commitment is part of the educational process of these universities. In this way, as one director points out, graduates will be professionals who should contribute to society, assuming responsibilities in the community where they are inserted. Graduates from diverse fields, such as law or education, share this commitment to the social environment and its needs, as documented in the interviews:

“What we seek is for [our graduates] to be teachers who effectively have a high commitment to schools (…) first, a commitment to what they develop as
professionals; second, a commitment to their context, which varies depending on where they are situated; third, a high degree of social and moral commitment to the students.” (female, University B, Program Director).

“...more than the part of “no, now they will be lawyers, they will be able to generate money”, the opposite, like “you can make a contribution to society”, like that aspect is always strongly emphasized especially towards the end of the degree, in the fifth year.” (female, University B, Program Director).

In summary, employability underpinned by ethics and professional responsibility is constructed from the notion of social responsibility, becoming a hallmark of these institutions in the Chilean education market. As expected, the development of this strategy involves mobilizing key elements, such as institutional image, reputation, brand strengthening, and increased institutional value [82]. These aspects are also highlighted in the interviews that account for the importance of employability as a mobilizing axis of these institutions’ institutional strategy.

5. Conclusions

This study aimed to examine the concept of institutional ethos in three less selective massive private universities in Chile. To achieve this, three case studies were conducted at Chilean universities, involving a set of interviews with key university staff members and direct observations within the everyday activities and ceremonial events. The research findings reveal that these universities’ ethos focuses on four key dimensions. The first one is the importance attributed to pluralism and diversity, both in the values and discourses professed by the institutions and in the sociocultural profile of the students they embrace. The second dimension is their focus on seeking academic quality as a strategy to position themselves in the competitive Chilean education market. Thus, these institutions compete to stand out in relation to others, promoting scientific development, research, postgraduate programs, and international networks. Thirdly, merit as family, personal, and institutional effort is part of the identity of these universities, rewarding the best students recognized for their academic achievements and for other dimensions identified in the institution’s hallmark, such as social responsibility and professional ethics. Finally, these universities’ ethos is built on an orientation towards education for job placement and community engagement.

These four elements of institutional ethos both shape and are shaped by the context of creation, growth, and development of these universities. Within the Chilean university system, these universities need to define their identity pillars and action plans to consolidate their positions in the dynamic educational system. Firstly, these universities structure their ethos with values that are both socially consensual and laboriously competitive, attracting a wide diversity of students and consolidating their positions alongside employers. Pluralism, meritocracy, academic quality, and employability underpinned by ethics fall within this spectrum of attractive values, which are highly unanimous and therefore highly competitive in the university market. Secondly, under a competitive logic, the universities under study strive to resemble more established Chilean universities (whether traditional or elite universities), as the interviewees have stated. Thus, these institutions develop processes of “academic drift”; that is, they imitate those institutions that are in a higher position in the prestige hierarchy [83]. To illustrate this trend, Riesman [83] uses a metaphor that describes a snake-like parade, where the head (the complex university model) sets the direction of the trajectory and the other institutions, which make up the body of the snake, follow, without knowing where the head is leading [84]. This is visible in the expression “competing in other leagues”, outlined by the authorities of universities under study. This suggests that, as part of their complexification process, these institutions compete with traditional and elite universities for resources and prestige, setting themselves apart from other private universities, and notably from technical and vocational institutions.
The description and analysis of the four pillars that structure these universities’ ethos contribute to understanding a specific segment of universities—less selective, large, and private ones—and to comprehending the complex processes of consolidation of these universities’ ethos in marketized systems [47], such as the Chilean one. This study offers a fresh perspective by examining the institutional ethos of a segment of universities often overlooked in higher education research, providing new insights into how these institutions define their identity through four key dimensions. Furthermore, this study stands out for incorporating perspectives from various institutional actors—each with different academic backgrounds, roles within the universities, and levels of responsibility—and for including direct observations across different university contexts. This multifaceted approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the university ethos, capturing the complexities and variations in how these institutions shape and experience their institutional identity. Although these three universities constitute case study examples that cannot be generalized to other universities—differing in terms of size, student profile, and academic selectivity, among other factors—examining them provides insight into the identity profiles of a specific group of universities that play a significant role in the massification process in Chile, essentially due to their high enrollment levels [16].

Despite the contribution to the understanding of the ethos of less selective massive private universities, this study has a few limitations that need to be considered. One of them is related to the selection of universities. While these ones were chosen for their massiveness and flexible profile in student selectivity processes, future studies could enrich the view of the institutional ethos of less selective massive universities by incorporating other private or public institutions and deepening the knowledge of the increasingly complex and heterogeneous Chilean university market. Another limitation concerns the scope of the analysis of the institutional ethos of these institutions at the national level, as the three selected universities have campuses in other regions of the country. Indeed, the present research did not capture potential regional heterogeneities in the appropriation of university ethos by different institutional actors. Thus, an interesting research path would be to reflect on regional heterogeneities within these institutions. Finally, it is relevant to remember that institutional ethos is susceptible to changes, as new demands emerge from society and new requirements are imposed both by educational authorities and by the internal dynamics of the university market. Reflection on the ethos of universities—whether public or private, massive or elite—therefore requires constant updating. This is the only way to achieve a synchronous and diachronic understanding of the diversity of institutional identities in higher education.

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