

Relationship between academic capitalism and quality in Chilean universities: A quantitative study

*Relación entre capitalismo académico y calidad
en las universidades chilenas: Un estudio cuantitativo*

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Recibido 04 de Agosto de 2022, aceptado 23 de septiembre de 2022

Received: August 04, 2022 Accepted: September 23, 2022

ABSTRACT

Academic capitalism configures itself from a set of answers that universities offer to the requirements of a more competitive environment, based on higher levels of marketization. Some essential aspects of academic capitalism in universities include entrepreneurialism, managerialism, income attainment, outsourcing of services, focus on-demand, resource management, and competition. This research analyzes the effect of such variables of academic capitalism on crediting years at universities. To do so, 46 of 55 Chilean universities (84% of them) answered a survey on the matter. The results indicate that academic capitalism explains 56,4% of variations in crediting years at the studied universities. Specifically, significant variables to explain individual institutional quality are managerialism (Test $t = 2,595$; $p < 0,013$), and attainment income (Test $t = 4,628$; $p < 0,001$). These findings are original and novel. They suggest that those universities that have been more permeated by academic capitalism have behaviors consistent with higher quality and reach better accreditation results.

Keywords: Academic capitalism, quality of universities, Chilean higher education.

RESUMEN

El capitalismo académico se configura a partir de un conjunto de respuestas que ofrecen las universidades a los requerimientos de un entorno más competitivo, basado en mayores niveles de mercadización. Algunos aspectos esenciales del capitalismo académico en las universidades incluyen el espíritu empresarial, el gerencialismo, el logro de ingresos propios, la subcontratación de servicios, el enfoque a pedido, la gestión de recursos y la competencia. Esta investigación analiza el efecto de tales variables del capitalismo académico en los años de acreditación en las universidades. Para ello, 46 de 55 universidades chilenas (84% de ellas) respondieron una encuesta al respecto. Los resultados indican que el capitalismo académico explica el 56,4% de las variaciones en los años de acreditación en las universidades estudiadas. Específicamente, las variables significativas para explicar la calidad institucional individual son el gerencialismo (Test $t = 2,595$; $p < 0,013$) y el ingreso por logros (Test $t = 4,628$; $p < 0,001$). Estos hallazgos son originales y novedosos. Sugieren que aquellas universidades que han sido más permeadas por el capitalismo académico tienen comportamientos acordes con una mayor calidad y alcanzan mejores resultados de acreditación.

Palabras clave: Capitalismo académico, calidad de las universidades, educación superior chilena.

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INTRODUCTION

Chilean higher education has experienced profound transformations since 1981, brought about by the intensification and relevance of privatism [1]. Thus, a significant area of interrelated processes emerges, increasing private dynamics within the system and constantly redefining the State's role vis-à-vis universities [2]. In the Chilean case, new management practices typical of academic capitalism have materialized, especially the adoption of entrepreneurial behaviors, and a shift toward more managerial forms of leadership to the detriment of faculty members' power [3].

In turn, accreditation requirements influence most of universities' strategic management, including the organization of teaching and research activities, the design of academic careers, the hiring of supporting staff, and investment planning [4]. Indeed, external quality assurance mechanisms also promote managerialism in higher education.

Within this context, we explore the relationship between academic capitalism and its managerial implications and quality in universities. Academic capitalism is conventionally defined as market and market-like behaviors on the part of universities and faculty [5-6], comprising variables such as: entrepreneurialism, managerialism, income attainment, outsourcing of services, focus on-demand, resource management, and competition. Using the number of years granted to an institution by the National Accreditation Commission as a proxy, the explanatory capacity of these variables in relation to the quality of universities is ascertained.

It's important to empirically determine in what measure the dynamics created by academic capitalism in Chile and their impact on managerialism practices in the organizations [2] did contribute to or inhibit quality of higher education thus defined. In general, studies on quality of higher education in Latin America, and particularly in Chile, have a technical-functional character; such studies mainly search for needed inputs to reach certain quality goals, or for criteria and standards of accreditation [7].

This focus pervades the debate on public policies for the higher education sector, concentrating on mechanisms, procedures, and standards [8]. The

priority of those policies must always be quality assurance for institutions and programs [9], having their main axis on accreditation [10]. At the same time, they are required to create the necessary arrangements—at system level—for universities to be able to procure, maintain, and strengthen the inputs needed to produce quality results, and continually improve them [11].

At the same time, international literature holds that higher education markets, especially the market of institutional prestige or reputation [12-13], operates independently as a quality vector through the incessant stimulus to competition [14-16]. Indeed, competition creates intense pressure on universities' governance and management, in a double sense: on one hand, to obtain competitive advantage in relevant markets (students, professors, and financing, and in the work market for its graduates); on the other, to demonstrate its own competitiveness through national [17-18] or international [19-20] rankings (i.e., the reputational or prestige market).

Thus, academic capitalism and its policy regulation through governments generates a clamping movement over universities, conducive to their internal organization around quality demands, and the adoption of a highly rationalized bureaucratic-strategic management that, in other parts of the world, is called market (or quasi market) governance, attainable through a competitive bureaucracy.

In contrast, the Chilean literature on quality and quality assurance does not approach, with rare exceptions [21-22], the relationship between the above-mentioned key factors, i.e., the political economy of the higher education sector, competition in the organizational field, and governance of that field through regulation policies, evaluation, and accreditation [23]. This paper seeks to reduce such gap in knowledge and, in particular, aims to contribute to research about the link between academic capitalism and the accredited quality of universities—a research that, internationally, shows a promising start [24-28].

FRAMEWORK: ACADEMIC CAPITALISM

Academic capitalism theory evolved in three directions since its origin in late twentieth century: i) a global academic capitalism theory [3, 29-31];

ii) a theory on varieties of academic capitalism [32] or variegated academic capitalism [33]; and iii) a debate about the reception of academic capitalism central theory in the periphery [34-35].

At the same time, the analysis of the relationships between academic capitalism political economy and governance, and its impact on the behavior of universities, has developed and deepened [36].

Our conceptual model on academic capitalism organization and operation [2] starts from the basic processes of higher education political economy through the more general process of marketization of higher education, i.e., the centrality of competitive coordination of systems [37-38] through relevant markets - institutions, students, faculty, financing, and reputational [39]. Depending on the variegated nature of academic capitalism, the latter process originates with variable intensity privatization of provision and financing of higher education, measured respectively as the proportion of private enrollment, and private financing in the system [40]; teaching commodification [41]; research commercialization, and commercialization of other academic products and services [42]; and financialization of higher education institutions and systems [43]. These processes impact higher education systems variably, affecting government, management and universities' behavior, especially those that are more entrepreneurial [44-45] and focused on managerialism [46].

At the system governance level, the literature shows that these processes determine the character of each national variety of academic capitalism, around the following dimensions [47-48]: political-administrative regulation of higher education markets [49]; framing the action of internal and external stakeholders [50]; quality assurance and academic self-governance limits [51]; steering at a distance, which assumes a significant component of self-management [15, 52], but oriented and conditioned by the national government [53]; and financing policies conducive to stimulate universities' competitive entrepreneurialism [54-55].

The combined effect of decisions adopted in these dimensions also contributes to the organization, management, and behavior of individual universities, as confirmed by the collected studies in a recent

book by Capano and Jarvis [56], and many of our own studies in the case of Chile [57-59].

In Chile, we especially highlight the relationship governance and processes of marketization, described in terms of their impact on enlarging, maintaining, or reducing privatization, commercialization, and financialization, and their effects on entrepreneurialism, managerialism, income attainment, outsourcing of services, on-demand focus, resource management, and competition. In turn, these effects significantly impact, as will be shown, on the quality of institutions recognized by the accreditation agency. The evaluation of such impact is a matter widely discussed in international literature [60-63] as well as in Chile [64-70].

In the Chilean case, institutional accreditation of universities, particularly its duration measured in years, represents a fundamental element in signaling quality [64], and also serves a double purpose. On the one hand, it is a proof of quality performed by the public accreditation agency, which certifies the fulfillment of the institutional project (i.e., fitness for purpose) and the existence, application, and results of effective mechanisms for self-regulation and internal assurance of quality. On the other hand, according to the Ley de Educación Superior [see 71], accreditation is mandatory for universities. When issued, it may be valid for three years, which is the basic (minimal) level of accreditation; four to five years, an advanced (intermediate) level; or six to seven years, a level of excellence (superior) that must include the accreditation of an institution's research endeavor. An external instance intervenes if an university is not granted the basic accreditation; if it does not reach that minimal level in three years, it loses official recognition, and cannot continue to issue degrees and titles. Furthermore, the legislation establishes that universities need an advanced accreditation in order to benefit from fiscal subsidies, which allow it to offer free access to students whose families are in the bottom 60% of the income range. In turn, accreditation is employed and perceived in the reputational market as a sign of quality [72], used by students, employers, and public opinion to express preferences, and to choose a higher education institution.

In research that points to a positive relationship between quality, measured in years of accreditation,

and the universities' organizational and behavioral features, three recent studies have particular interest for the analysis of quality and the effects of academic capitalism.

The first, by Fernández Darraz and Ramos Zinke [4], notes a positive relationship between organizational capabilities in the internal quality assurance area –i.e., the installation of routines that guide decision making, and significant results from specific resource combination and allocation, a phenomenon that has been happening in Chile [73-74]– and the successful response to requirements established by the accreditation process, which, in time, will lead to an increase in the number of years of accreditation.

The second study, by Bernasconi and Rodríguez [64], does not find relevant correlation between the dimensions of institutional management defined by the accreditation criteria – mission definition and purposes, coherent organizational structure, institutional planning and analysis, human resources management, material resources management, and financial management –and the criteria used by the accreditation agency to assign the years of accreditation. Indeed, the study could not verify the hypothesis postulated– that each variable configuring the institutional management should be positively related to the universities' quality. Instead, the variables for institutional management have a low and erratic relationship to the level of accreditation obtained by the institutions.

A third study is an in depth analysis of one Chilean university from the perspective of the hypothesis

that institutional accreditation is more likely a strategy to strengthen the role of self-regulation in the institutions' academic and administrative management, than a quality assurance mechanism.

The study concludes that, in some aspects, a greater capacity for self-regulation is attained, as in institutional strategic planning, provision of and access to transparent and updated information, curricular design, and students achievement monitoring. In other self-regulation aspects, less success was achieved: human resources organization, performance evaluation, selection and hiring of personnel, policies for human resources improvement, decision making structures, resource allocation graduates monitoring, and research development [75].

This paper works in the same direction as the above-mentioned studies in order to verify whether the effects of the Chilean variety of academic capitalism impacts the accredited institutional quality. To this end, a set of effects derived from the intense marketization processes of Chilean higher education were selected [2]: entrepreneurialism, managerialism, income attainment, outsourcing of services, on-demand focus, resource management, and competition (see Figure 1). These effects, measured as indicated in the next section, are well known in the literature, and were also researched in Chile.

The entrepreneurial character adopted by Chilean universities [76-77] implies the adoption of a type of organization that seeks to conduct itself with efficiency and effectively, continually adapting to changes in the political-economic context, and

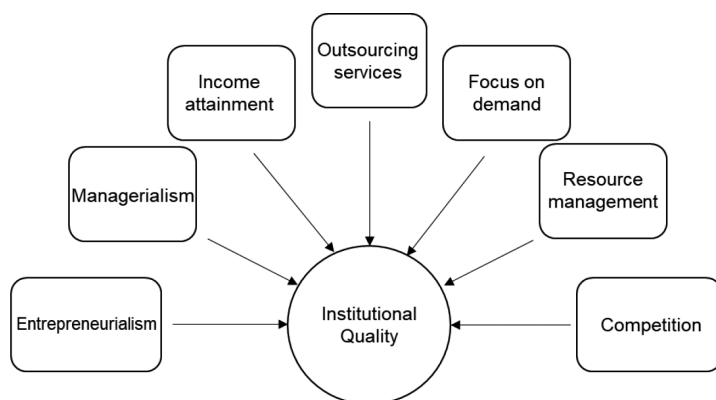


Figure 1. Academic capitalism and institutional quality.

in the regulatory environment defined by public policies [58].

In tight connection, managerialism appears as a concept, a style, a practice, and an instrument reaching all essential aspects of an institution's operation: first and foremost, faculty and research; strategic planning of development; self-government and self-management; financing and budget management; personnel recruiting and, most importantly, its administration and evaluation; the emergence of a new layer of managers and professionals that a professional bureaucracy oriented toward competency; and the connection of the organization to its environment [78-79].

One of the goals of university entrepreneurialism and of managerialism is income attainment, and the generation of a surplus, which has come to be seen as an imperative in the administration of contemporary universities [80]. In the case of Chile, the legislation warrants that institutions may apply their resources, including the “reinvestment of surpluses or profits generated, to attain their goals, and to improve the quality of the education they offer, notwithstanding acts, contracts, investments, or other operations they perform for the conservation and increase of their assets” [81]. In a similar direction, E. Rodríguez-Ponce, L. Pedraja-Rejas, M. Delgado-Almonte and F. Ganga-Contreras [70] show, in an exploratory study, that high quality institutions (according to accreditation years) “have better economic indicators for soundness and cost effectiveness than institutions with lesser quality levels”. Furthermore, the strategies for obtaining resources and investment decisions obey a clear design, and a more rigorous implementation in the former than in the latter.

As Ivancheva [82] points out on the outsourcing of services, other businesses are now in charge of universities services, as a result of their goal of concentrating activities in their core business, and reducing costs in other operations. Even online higher education, that grew recently in Chile and in the world, is often the object of partial or incomplete outsourcing, in a constant race to reduce costs and increase efficiency. Although such measures have been implemented in Chile more as a way to segment work rendering it precarious [83], on the contrary, in cleaning, security and gardening activities

reviewed by Downey and Portiño [84], as well as in cases closer to academic activity (faculty, research and digital services management), the rationale is one of internal rationalization, aiming at financial sustainability and competitiveness [85].

The on-demand focus, central component of new public management programs, is especially relevant in the area of student recruitment in the short-cycle, undergraduate, and master's degree markets. Much has been written about the commodification of university education –globally [86] and also in Chile [87]–, thus making it unnecessary to insist on the close relationships between the provision of higher education, its financing, and its accredited quality. We must point out, though, that in the case of Chile there is a tight connection between the logic of academic capitalism, and the public regulation of quality, seeking to protect students' interests, and compensate for the informational asymmetries of this market.

In general, resource management, human and financial, has become also a strategic element in developing entrepreneurial capabilities and the competitiveness of Chilean universities. Indeed, this double dimension – also important for the processes of internal and external evaluation of quality– acquires decisive importance for accreditation [88]. In fact, accreditation drives internal improvements in management, especially in the internal management of quality [89], while internal management of key resources –academic personnel [90], information [91], and budget [92]– became an essential condition to accredit quality.

Finally, each of the above-mentioned dimensions is activated by competition within the Chilean system of higher education. As a result of the Chilean political economy of academic capitalism, the Chilean system generates a constant flow of competitive interactions within the relevant markets for higher education. This phenomenon has been widely studied in the contemporary literature [15, 93-94], and specifically, in the literature on varieties of academic capitalism [32, 95-96]. Also, there is a Chilean literature that analyzes the connection between competition, as a way of system coordination, and the accredited quality in the sector [97-98].

In summary, it is possible to conceptually postulate a series of interrelationships between some academic

capitalism variables, and the quality of institutions, as presented in Figure 1 below.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

To evaluate the efficacy of the model presented in Figure 1, a descriptive quantitative research design is adequate. Consequently, this study selected the total population of Chilean universities. In order to limit potential measurement error, responses were required from rectors or key decision makers at the strategic level. The use of a single respondent may be an issue, but such an answer comes from the strategic level, which is precisely the level of interest here [99-101].

In an effort to improve content validity, and response rates, the survey was designed, formulated, and implemented to closely follow the recommendations of a variety of authors [102]. In particular, construct validity, questionnaire design and layout, survey piloting, and post-survey follow-up reminders were adopted [103].

A crucial aspect of survey methodology is the development of an appropriate questionnaire for its purpose. Consistently, a research instrument was developed, following the framework recommended on the earlier work of J.S. Conant, M.P. Mokwa and P.R. Varadarajan[104]. A review of existing theories, operationalization, and measures suggested that entrepreneurship, managerialism, income attainment, outsourcing of services, focus on demand, resource management, competition, and institutional quality could be reliably studied via the adoption of measures adapted from extant literature of authors as Shepherd [46], Kauppinen [105], and Kauppinen and Cantwell [106]. Surely, the conceptual construction also takes into account the systematic bibliographical research done here and in previous studies [2, 34, 107].

In this context, based on the concepts developed in the state-of-the-art, the researchers designed the questionnaire. Secondly, fifteen experts in the field of higher education validated the initial questionnaire, made qualitative observations, and also responded to it in order to evaluate its reliability (survey piloting). Finally, a definitive questionnaire, validated by the experts, was generated, its reliability proven by a pre-test

with 28 questions. We used a Likert scale from 1 to 7, which often improves reliability of variables [100].

After two follow-up reminders, 51 responses were received from the 55 universities polled. Unfortunately, five responses were ineligible due to an inadequate completion of the survey instrument. Thus, we had only 46 valid responses, corresponding to 84% of inquiries, the highest rate ever achieved in Chile for similar studies.

FINDINGS

Prior to examining associations between the variables of academic capitalism and institutional quality, a phase of reliability data analysis was necessary. Reliability was judged via the calculation of a Cronbach alpha coefficients, which ranged from 0,590 to 0,748 (see Table 1). Slater [108] suggests that 0.6 is the 'criterion-in-use'; thus six of the seven measures were above the criterion of 0.6, and one measure reached a reliability of only 0,590. This led to the conclusion that scales were well above the 'criterion-in-use,' and thus acceptably reliable, leaving the variable 'outsourcing services' in a limit situation.

The initial data exploration examined the descriptive statistics of measures of the seven variables, and the proxy for institutional quality was the official data for years of accreditation granted to universities by the National Commission of Accreditation. As stated earlier, all items were measured on seven-point scales, resulting in a mid-point of four (see Table 2).

Note that institutional quality has an average of four years of accreditation (consistent with Chilean understanding of advanced accreditation), although with a standard deviation of almost two years of accreditation, which suggests a significant dispersion in the quality levels of Chilean universities. All

Table 1. Reliability.

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha
Entrepreneurialism	0,643
Managerialism	0,679
Income attainment	0,636
Outsourcing services	0,590
Focus on demand	0,651
Resource management	0,675
Competition	0,748

variables configuring academic capitalism are significantly above 4 (median), with a high level of managerialism, entrepreneurialism, and focus on demand. This finding is consistent with previous research from J.J. Brunner, J. Labraña, E. Rodríguez-Ponce and F. Ganga [2, 34, 107].

An analysis of multiple regression used the following regression equation (1):

$$\text{Institutional quality} = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{entrepreneurialism} + \beta_2 \text{managerialism} + \beta_3 \text{attainment income} + \beta_4 \text{outsourcing service} + \beta_5 \text{focus on demand} + \beta_6 \text{resources management} + \beta_7 \text{competition} + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

General results of the model application can be found on Table 3.

The data obtained reveal that 48,4% of the variance in institutional quality is explained by the set of variables configuring academic capitalism. This result is generally expected, according to the discussion at the state-of-the-art; but this finding is empirically new, considering there are no studies specifically equivalent. Furthermore, it is interesting that the Chilean universities best adapted to academic capitalism are also the one with greater accredited institutional quality. This finding contributes to the research about

the connection between academic capitalism and accredited quality of universities that, at an international level, exhibited promising results [24-28]. Note that the general model analyzed is statistically significant ($p < 0,001$).

The variance analysis ratifies the importance of the model to explain variations in institutional quality from the variables configuring academic capitalism (Test $F = 7,031$; $p < 0,001$). Table 4 shows that information.

However, considering the specific importance of each of the analyzed variables, the results are as exhibited in Table 5.

Significant variables to explain institutional quality individually are: managerialism (Test $t = 2,595$; $p < 0,013$) and attainment income (Test $t = 4,628$; $p < 0,001$). In practical terms, these results indicate that as higher the level of managerialism in the university direction, and the focus in income to be generated, also higher will be the levels of accredited quality. Both results are coherent with many of the studies cited in the previous section.

CONCLUSIONS

The competitive coordination of higher education systems through relevant markets generates a process

Table 2. Descriptive statistics.

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation
Quality	4,152	1,988
Entrepreneurialism	6,044	0,769
Managerialism	6,580	0,564
Income attainment	5,419	1,130
Outsourcing services	4,768	0,740
Focus on demand	6,015	0,750
Resource management	5,761	0,891
Competition	5,217	1,158

Table 3. Model summary.

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0,751 ^a	0,564	0,484	1,428

a. Dependent variable: Quality b. Predictors: (Constant), outsourcing services, income attainment, focus on demand, resource management, entrepreneurialism, managerialism, competition.

Table 4. ANOVA^a.

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	100,410	7	14,344	7,031	0,000 ^b
	Residual	77,524	38	2,040		
	Total	177,935	45			

a. Dependent variable: Quality

b. Predictors: (Constant), outsourcing services, income attainment, focus on-demand, resource management, Entrepreneurialism, managerialism, competition.

Table 5. Coefficients.

Model		Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients		Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	
1	Constant	-4,502	2,996		-1,503	0,141
	Entrepreneurialism	-0,031	0,340	-0,012	-0,090	0,929
	Managerialism	1,257	0,484	0,357	2,595	0,013
	Income attainment	1,059	0,229	0,602	4,628	0,000
	Outsourcing services	-0,227	0,316	-0,084	-0,719	0,477
	Focus on demand	-0,429	0,329	-0,162	-1,303	0,201
	Resource management	-0,358	0,319	-0,160	-1,122	0,269
	Competition	0,105	0,237	0,061	0,445	0,659

of privatization of provision and financing of higher education, and also multiple actions tending to commercialize and commodify different academic functions, including undergraduate and graduate students' recruitment, research, development and innovation, and the links to relevant environments through services, among other dimensions. Universities must adapt to these circumstances, which stimulate competition and make it more difficult to endure without generating the essential institutional capabilities to achieve a strategic conduct that is coherent with external requirements. Such organizational responses configure what can be understood as academic capitalism at the level of universities.

Indeed, in organizational terms, academic capitalism is established by a set of responses given by universities to requirements from a more competitive environment, based on higher marketization levels. Some essential aspects of academic capitalism at universities include: entrepreneurialism managerialism, income attainment, outsourcing of services, on demand focus, resource management, and competition. This research analyzes the

existing relationship between these variables and the institutional quality of universities, according to years of accreditation granted by the Comisión Nacional de Acreditación, with the purpose of verifying to what extent academic capitalism may influence the accredited quality of institutions.

The model employed simplifies or reduces reality to a series of variables that are validated by experts, and that have, in general, an acceptable reliability. Naturally, the reductionism typical of this kind of study, along with the application of an instrument to just one representative by university (rectors), constitutes the main limitation. Notwithstanding, this research presents an original study, and empirical evidence relevant for the case of Chile, where the local variety of academic capitalism has a high degree of privatism [2]. Thus, the research describes, through a simplified approximation, the present state of academic capitalism in Chile, and the relationship of the studied variables with the years of accreditation of universities.

The explanatory capacity of the model employed suggests that the 56,4% variance in accreditation

years of analyzed universities may be explained by the set of variables configuring academic capitalism, through the university's response to external requirements.

As already signaled, quality assessment in Chile emphasizes a series of results and processes related to management, undergraduate teaching, and elective areas submitted to accreditation, such as research, postgraduate studies, and extension activities. In this way, accreditation requires universities to adopt strategic management and diversify their funding sources. Both variables are statistically very significant ($p < 0,001$), and have an impact, in the analyzed sample, in the number of years of accreditation obtained by universities.

The evidence corresponds to the reality of the Chilean system, which shows manifest responses to academic capitalism in its works. This is not strange to a system where there is competition for: students; financing of free admission, scholarships and credits, which are granted by demand, not by supply; faculty, at least in large urban centers; research funds, granted through the competition between research projects; and provision of services. The performance of universities in this set of markets generates the quality that is accredited, and determines the position of universities in the institutional prestige market.

These findings are original and novel. They suggest that those universities that have been more permeated by academic capitalism have behaviors consistent with higher quality and reach better accreditation results.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work was supported by Nacional Research and Development Agency. ANID-Chile, Fondecyt Grant 1180746 and Fondecyt 1221758.

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