

In times of greater demands for justice, what is the role of academic mentors in higher education? A critical analysis from Chile

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Within the last four years, the world not only experienced a pandemic, but it has also witnessed the rise of international social movements asking for greater justice to women (#metoo in 2018) and black populations (#blacklivesmatters in 2020); groups that have been historically excluded from positions of power in academia and other sectors. Chile (19 million) was not indifferent to these social movements. In 2018, women university students denounced the sexual and gender violence experienced on campus in one of the greatest feminist student movements ever seen. A year later, Chile had violent social protests, literally known as a social outburst. These protests stopped the country for around six weeks and revealed the blindness of elite groups, who did not foresee the discontent of low and middle-income groups that denounced the precarity of their living conditions in a country with high income inequality.

In Chile and elsewhere, academia tends to respond to these societal movements mainly through the organization of academic events and publication of articles that cognitively analyze the implications of these social crises in different arenas. But then, the question that follows is *to what extent* the demands of social movements get to permeate the “roles” of academics in their main functions, as teachers, supervisors, and academic mentors.

In this research, I explore this question by examining the perceptions of 16 senior academics in economics, who have a reputed research career and have served as academic mentors in their supervisors’ roles. Drawing from the scholarship of Professor Amanda Hlengwa on mentorship of black and women academics in South Africa and her keynote piece of the HECU’s conference, I argue that academics in their role as mentors may intentionally trigger changes in higher education that disrupt some of the gender, racial and class inequalities.

Preliminary findings show that the feminist movement heavily influenced the discourses in economics departments. Participants in this study (N=16, women=2) indicate that the field has acquired a greater awareness of the discrimination that women face in economics. As one of the academics explains, "economics is a historically male dominated field, and the protests of 2018 installed a new sense of urgency in the field". Yet, when participants are asked about their practices as academic mentors, several participants report to have practices of students’ recruitment that favor homophily relationships with little awareness of the impact of these practices in the reproduction of gender inequality in the field.

Key words

Academic mentors, economics, inequality, social movements