

Multiple Inequalities at the Beginning of University Life: The Case of Southern Patagonia, Argentina

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Progress of the research "Cartographies of
Inequality in Higher Education"

Network of Research on the Initiation of
University Life - Argentina



1- Introduction and Significance of the Study

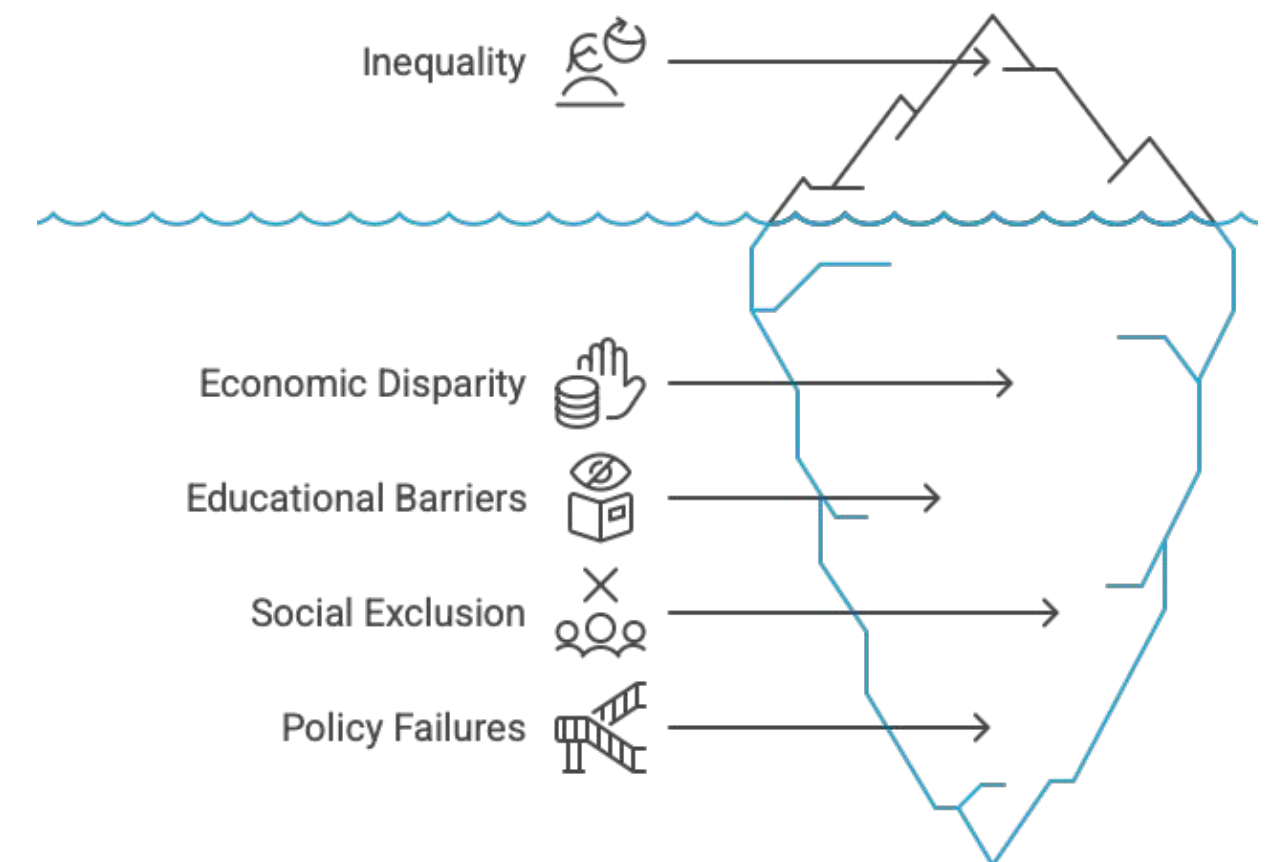
The transition to higher education represents a multifaceted threshold, characterized by aspirations, legacies, and structural limitations.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered access conditions and exacerbated existing inequalities.

Study Focus: Disparities in accessibility conditions at the National University of Southern Patagonia (UNPA) following confinement.

UNPA, owing to its role and geographical position in Patagonia, serves as a pivotal case for analyzing access and equity dynamics in peripheral environments.

Objective: To analyze the "footprints" of the pandemic and its interplay with structural inequalities in order to formulate effective equity policies.



“Origins” and “Diverse Inequalities”

From "University Beginnings": The proposal is to transcend the concept of "admission" as a mere administrative act, embracing "beginnings" as a complex, multifaceted, and time-intensive process.

Multiple Inequalities (Dubet, 2020): A fundamental concept for examining how diverse factors (socioeconomic, cultural, territorial, gender) influence the initial engagement with the university. It acknowledges the lack of a singular starting point.
Student Experience:

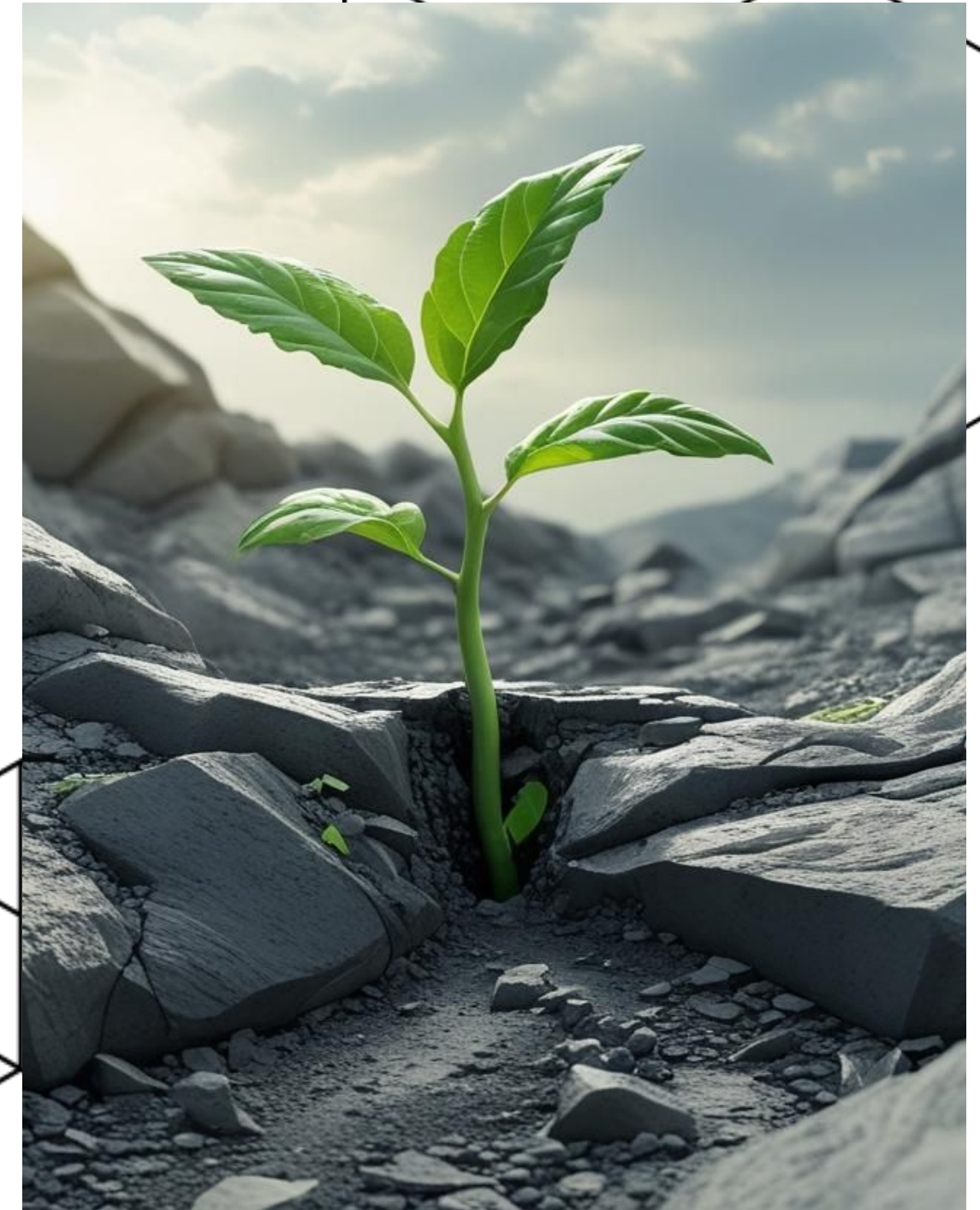
Understood in the plural form (Dubet, 1994, 2005).

Characterized by the distinctiveness of individual processes (Charlot, 2021).

Characterized by the "relationship with knowledge" (Charlot, 2008) within an institutional framework.

Argentine Context: Law 27.204 (free, unrestricted) democratizes access; however, it presents challenges regarding the quality and inclusion of "new students" who lack traditional symbolic capital.

The "beginnings" span from the conclusion of high school to the initial years of university (Di Piero, 2024), presenting challenges for educators.



Theoretical-Conceptual Framework (Section 2):

Dimensions of Social Justice

Key Dimensions of "Transitions to University Life":

Access and admission (policies, socioeconomic obstacles).

Articulation between levels (transition, "passage zone" - Bombini & Labeur, 2017).

Pedagogical accompaniment ("pedagogy of accompaniment" - Mancovsky, in Mancovsky & Más Rocha, 2019).

Acquiring the academic code ("academic literacy" - Carlino, 2002; Urus, 2023).

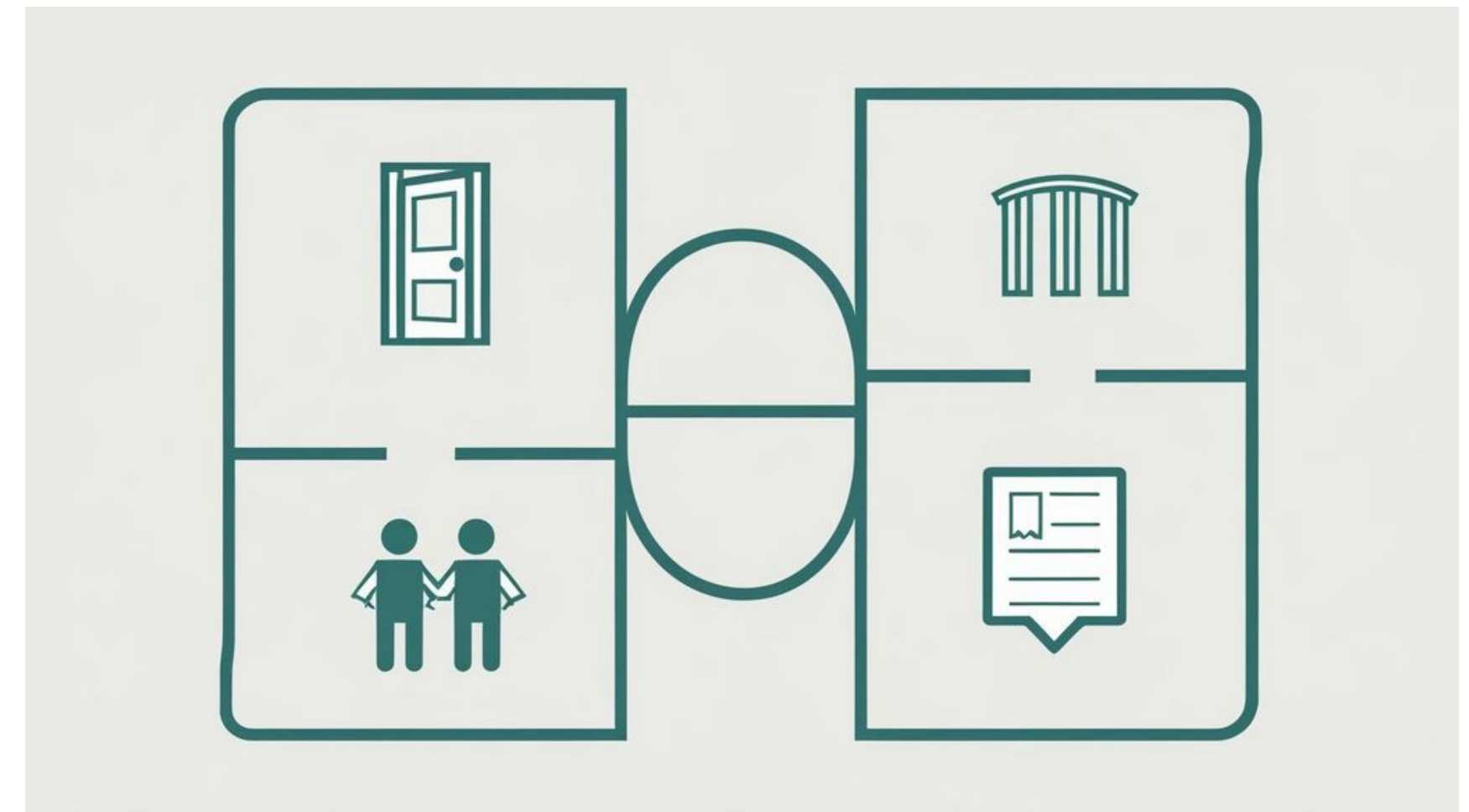
Supplementary Analytical Perspectives:

Accessibility Conditions (Burbules & Callister, 2006):

Extending beyond the material; encompasses the experiential and symbolic.

Social Justice in Education (Dubet, 2011): Frameworks for equality in access, opportunities, and outcomes.

Redistribution and Recognition (Fraser & Honneth, 2006): A critical tension in confronting socioeconomic injustice and cultural disrespect. The danger of "exclusionary inclusion" (Ezcurra, 2011).



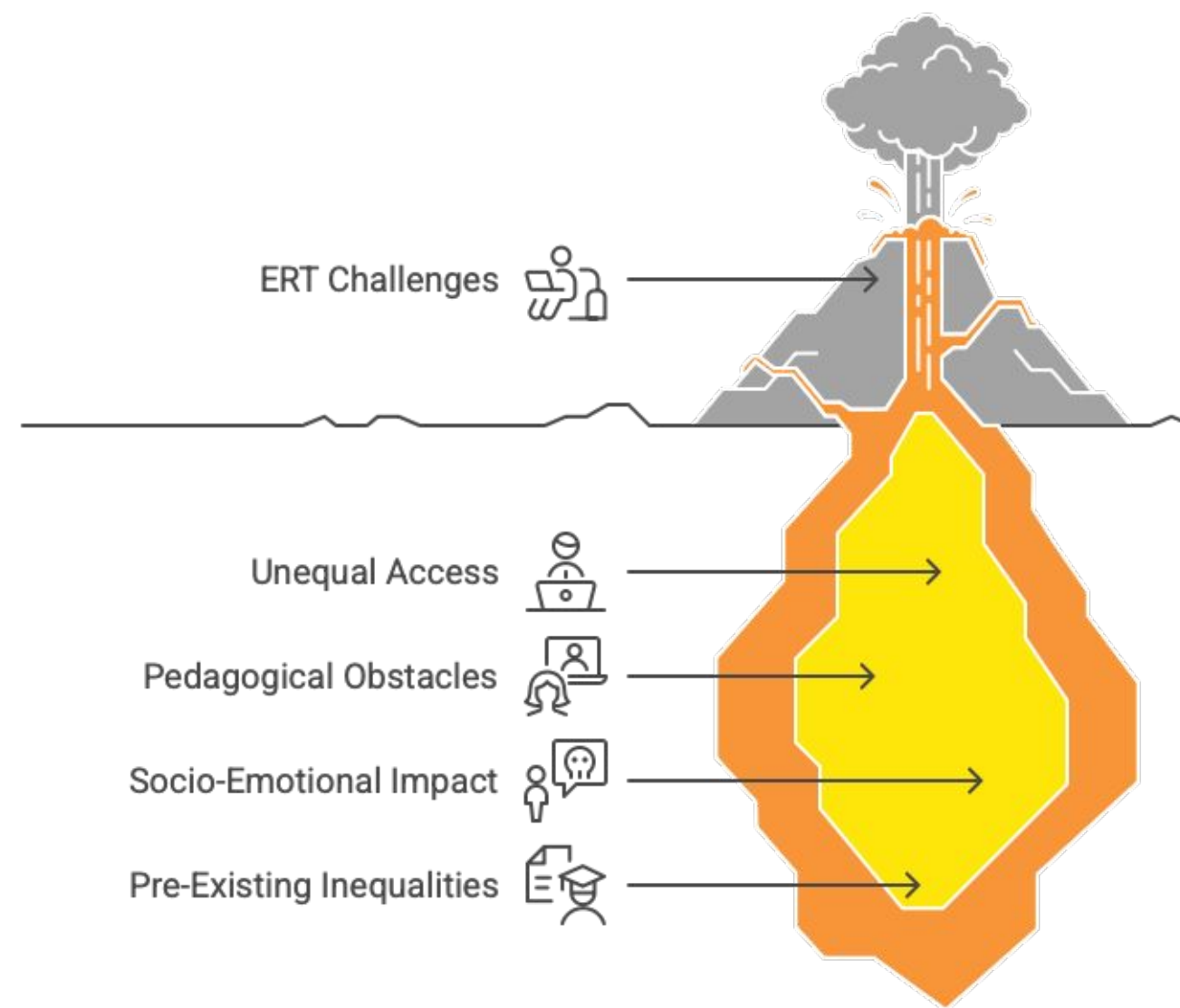
Methodological framework

1	Focus: A secondary analysis of data derived from the "Research Report: Motivations, Expectations, and Accessibility Conditions of University Students at UNPA."
2	Revised Baseline Study Design: Mixed methods utilizing a sequential explanatory framework.
3	Qualitative Element: Thematic analysis of student narratives (UNPA entrants, primarily 2023). Investigating motivations, pandemic experiences, and academic expectations.
4	Quantitative Element: Institutional survey data (UNPA, 2023) regarding accessibility conditions. Variables: sociodemographic characteristics, employment situation, financial assistance, connectivity.
5	Analytical Integration: Interpretation of qualitative and quantitative data via the conceptual matrix (Multiple Inequalities, Beginnings, Accessibility Conditions, Redistribution/Recognition). Contextualization of findings within the specific framework of Patagonia.



Results (1):

Student Profiles and Structural Inequalities in Patagonia



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UNPA Student Profile:

Predominantly female (~76%) and youthful (44% aged 18-22 years).

Over half (~54%) of the population is not originally from Santa Cruz; enrollment is predominantly local or regional, attributed to the UNPA campuses.

Provincial Socioeconomic Disparity:

High provincial IPCF (25.6% above the national average, Q3 2021).

However, the poverty rate in Río Gallegos stands at 30.0% (2S 2024), accompanied by a high cost of living (CBT Caleta Olivia March 2025: \$1,421,766).

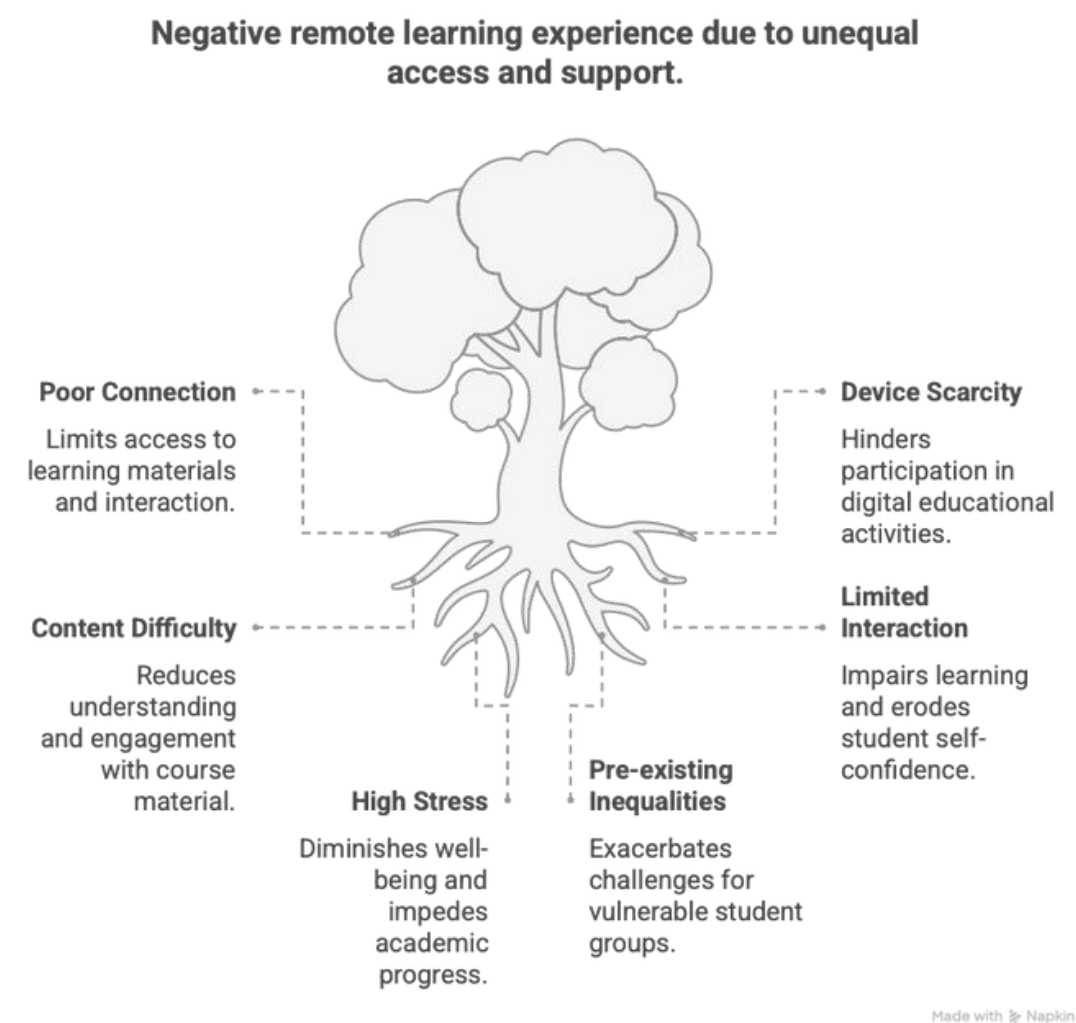
Student Conditions:

Nearly half of UNPA students are employed (~47%); 51% in the Patagonian region indicate that they work double shifts.

High reliance on financial assistance: 46% benefit from social programs, while 68% obtain scholarships. Many are first-generation university students, as nearly half of the parents in Patagonia possess only a primary education.

UNPA's role: A pivotal agent of redistribution and formal access (free tuition, proximity) in Patagonia. This aligns with the access and admission aspect of "university beginnings."

"Imprints" of the Pandemic (ERE) in the Early Stages of Patagonian Universities



- ➔ Overall Experience of the ERE: Predominantly negative based on narratives from UNPA students.
- ➔ Disparities in Technological Accessibility:
Despite a high overall home connectivity rate of approximately 94%, issues related to connection quality and the availability of personal devices posed significant challenges in the expansive region of Patagonia.
This illustrates a "second-level digital divide."
- ➔ Pedagogical and Symbolic Barriers (Articulation Dimension):
Challenges in comprehending content and insufficient engagement during the ERE.
Contextualized by the elevated secondary school dropout rate in Santa Cruz (10.86%).
The sensation of "not learning" undermines self-confidence in embracing the "student profession" (Coulon, 2017) and adhering to the academic code.
Socio-Emotional Influence (Pedagogical Support Dimension):
Elevated levels of stress, anxiety, and isolation have been reported.
It emphasizes the necessity for a "pedagogy of accompaniment" (Mancovsky, in Mancovsky & Más Rocha, 2019).
Intersectionality: The "traces" of the pandemic intersect and exacerbate existing multiple inequalities.

Results (3):

Motivations, Expectations, and Regional Challenges in Patagonia

Motivations for Pursuing Studies at UNPA:

A synthesis of pragmatism (career progression, employment) and personal growth.
Influence of the Patagonian regional context (labor market, reliance on extractivism, withdrawal of YPF).

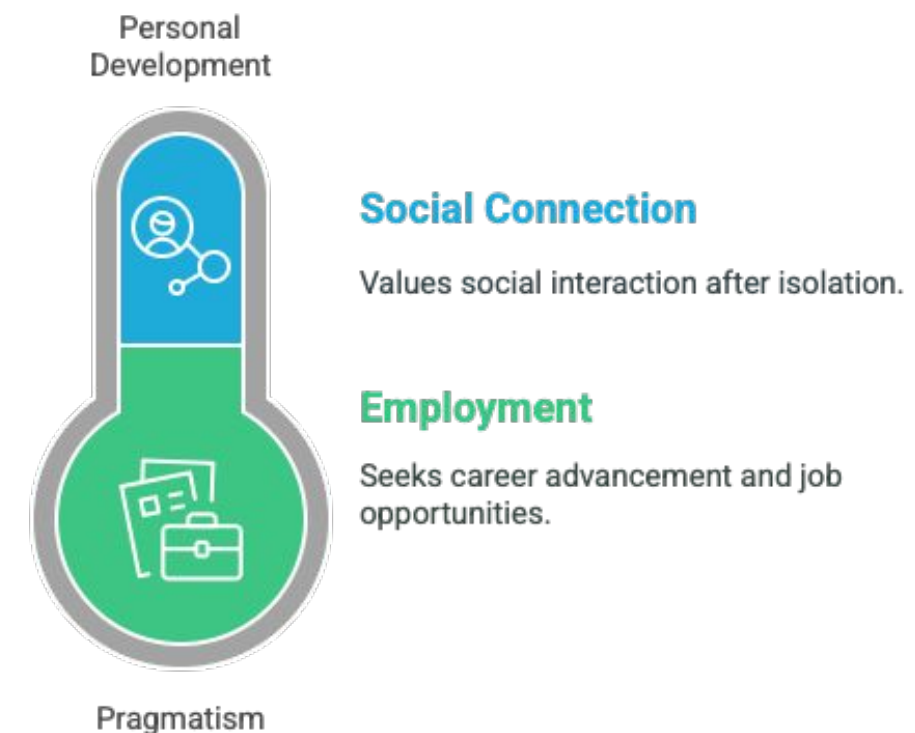
Ambiguous Anticipations:

A strong aspiration for academic achievement coupled with a renewed appreciation for social interaction following pandemic-induced isolation.
Recognition of the challenges and considerable weight of anxiety and fear of failure, potentially intensified by the ERE.
The necessity for institutional acknowledgment of this emotional vulnerability and potential deficiencies.

Idealized Presence:

A strong preference for in-person courses has emerged in response to the inadequate virtual experience.
Patagonian Territorial Challenges: In addition to digital connectivity, extensive distances affect physical access to UNPA campuses and the experience of the "beginnings."

Understanding student motivations through pragmatism and personal development balance.

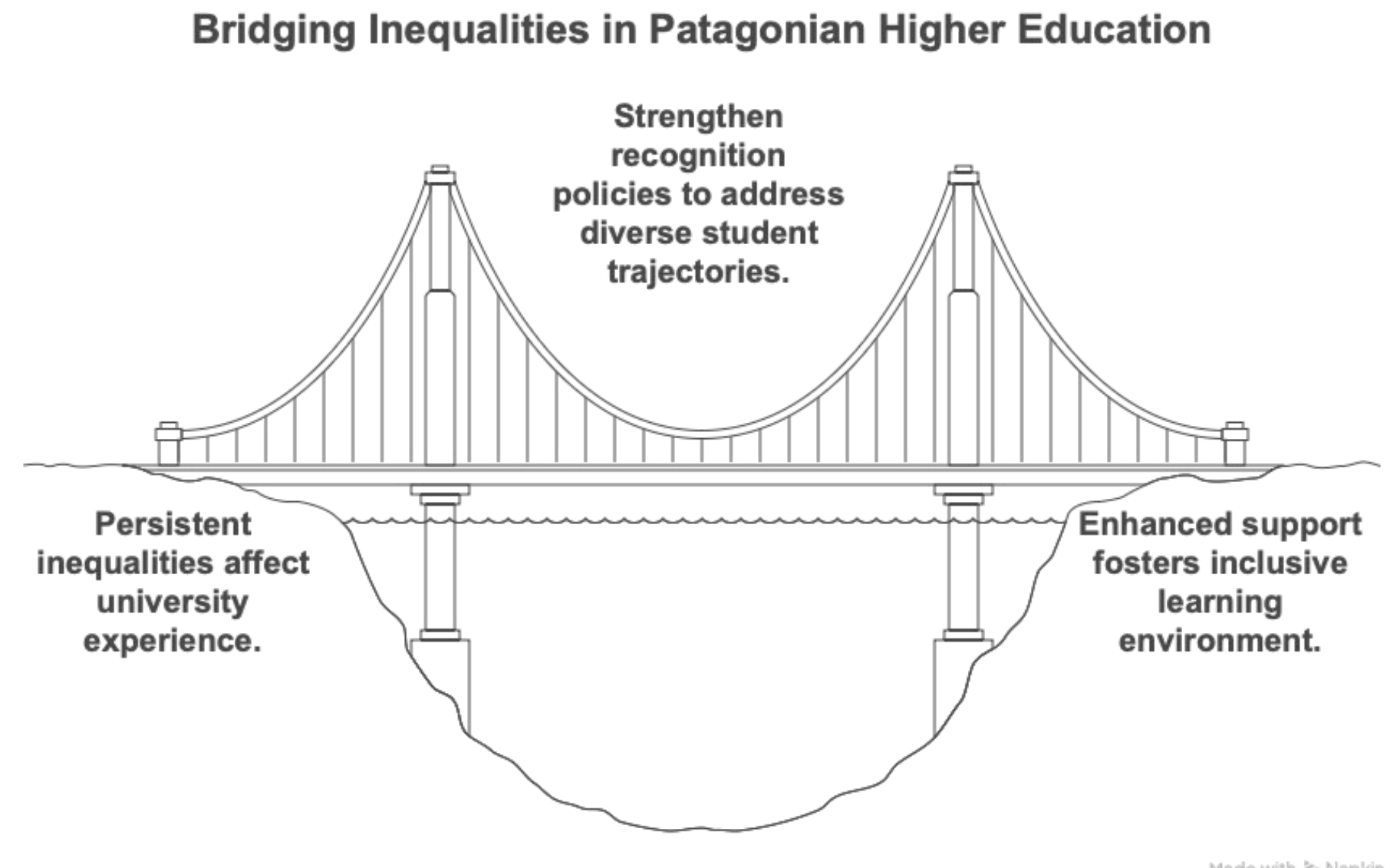


Weaving the Fabric of Inequality in Patagonian Higher Education

- UNPA plays an irreplaceable role in formal access equality and redistribution in a peripheral Patagonian region.
- However, this formal equality coexists with a complex web of multiple inequalities conditioning real accessibility and the experience of university inicios.
- Structural inequalities (socioeconomic, gender, cultural capital) persist and are exacerbated by the Patagonian context.
- ERT became a new axis of differentiation, leaving "imprints" on students' starting points (learning deficits, anxiety), critically affecting the pedagogical support and academic code learning dimensions of "inicios".

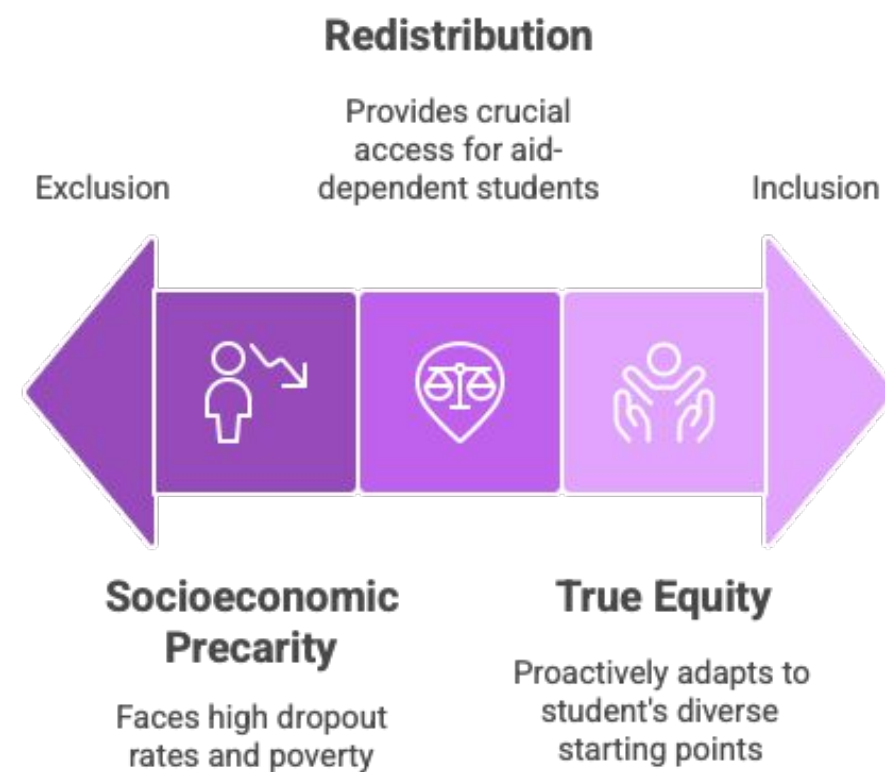
Central Tension: Redistribution vs. Recognition:

- UNPA enacts redistribution (free tuition, scholarships).
- The post-pandemic challenge is to strengthen recognition policies: of the singularity of trajectories (Charlot, 2021), pandemic after-effects, and diverse starting points in heterogeneous Patagonia.
- An approach solely based on equality of opportunity, without this recognition, risks meritocratic exclusion.
- The valuation of in-person learning is a response to a virtual environment that failed to ensure equity or socio-affective support, crucial in contexts of geographical isolation. This challenges the



Conclusion: Advancing Substantive Equity in the Foundations of Patagonian Universities

Understanding university student experience through levels of equity



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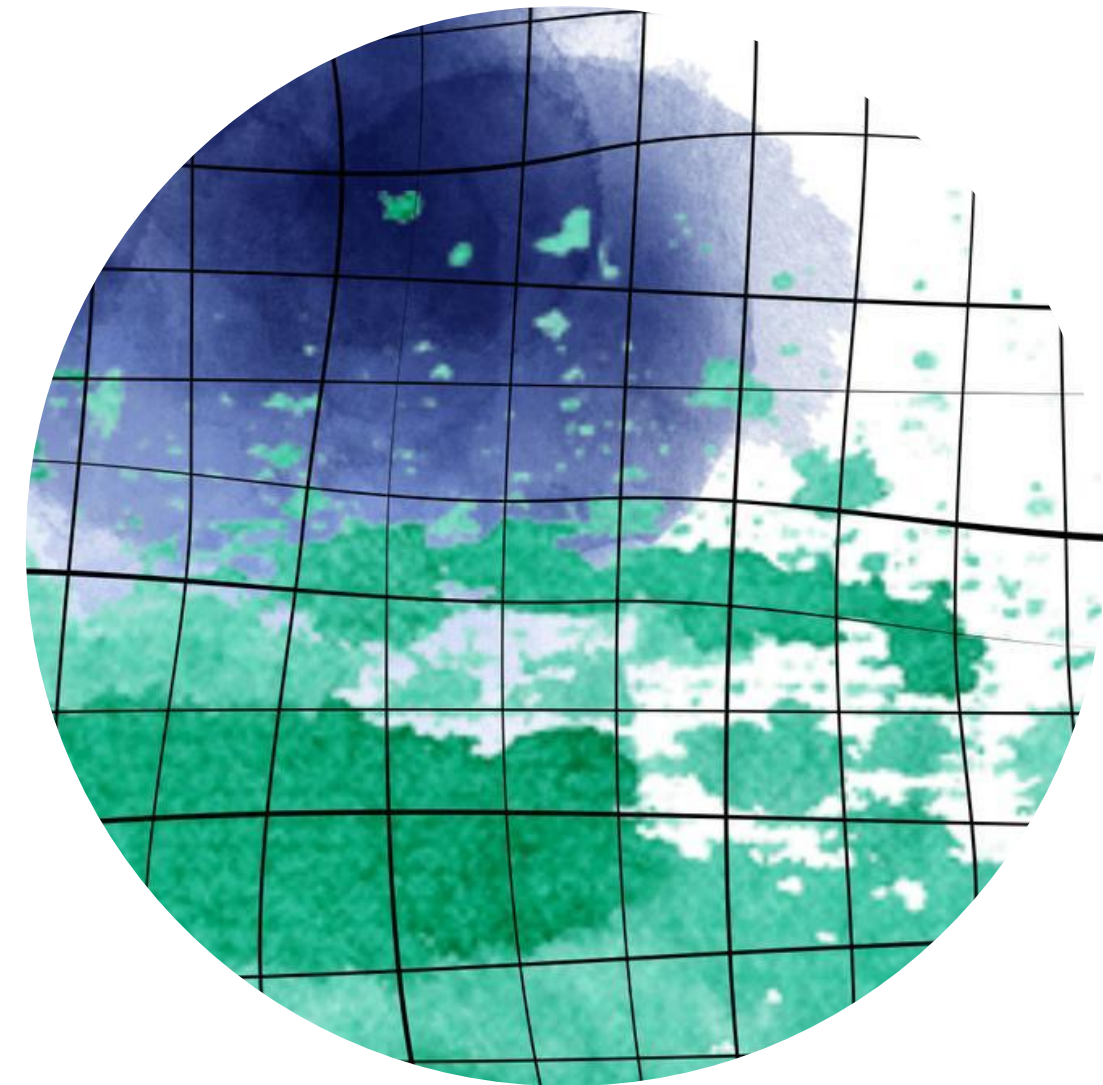
Post-pandemic university admissions do not signify a return to normalcy; rather, inequalities have been restructured and rendered more intricate in Patagonia.

Questions for Discussion

How can universities in peripheral and expansive contexts such as Patagonia enhance "recognition" beyond "redistribution"?

What pedagogical and support strategies are most effective in addressing the "traces" of ERE in the early stages of university life, taking into account various inequalities?

How can research on "college beginnings" enhance the development of more effective public policies to ensure the right to higher education in Argentina?



Thank you very much!

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