

Belonging, Academic Stress and Intentions to Discontinue: The First-Year Experience in a Widening Participation Context

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Abstract

Many first-year students discontinue their studies, creating a concerning challenge for institutions, especially those with widening participation policies. Chilean higher education provides a case study for understanding the first-year experience (FYE) in a widening participation context and rapidly expanding university sector. This study examined the experiences of 179 first-year undergraduate students from two universities in Chile and explored FYE factors influencing students' intentions to discontinue their studies through quantitative survey data. Findings show low sense of belonging and high stress associated with managing academic demands influenced students' intentions to discontinue their studies. There were no differences between first- and continuing-generation students in their intentions to discontinue. Equity program participants reported significantly higher stress levels and were more likely to consider discontinuing their studies. These findings reinforce the need to support students' sense of belonging to their universities and management of academic demands to encourage their persistence in university.

Keywords: First-year experience; intentions to discontinue; sense of belonging; widening participation.

Introduction

The first year of university is crucial for students' transition and university adjustment. Students' first-year experiences influence academic progression and their potential decision to discontinue their studies at their institutions. Forming friendships in the first year, feeling supported by academic staff, managing their workload and academic demands, and feeling a sense of belonging at their institutions influence students' decisions to discontinue or continue university studies (Hausmann et al., 2007; Tinto, 1993; van der Zanden et al., 2018).

The first-year transition to university can be challenging for many students, especially for first-generation students and those from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds (Baik et al., 2019; Soria & Stebleton, 2012). While first-generation and low SES students often show a clear sense of purpose and awareness positively associated with university success (Macaulay



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et al., 2023; O'Shea, 2015), these students also tend to report difficulties in understanding transitional academic, personal and social changes (Gibbons et al., 2019; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). Furthermore, they often have difficulty developing a sense of belonging at university (Gopalan & Brady, 2020) and are more susceptible to discontinuing their studies in the first year (Kamer & Ishitani, 2021). This is especially concerning in widening participation contexts encouraging access for "underrepresented" students, including low SES and first-generation students.

Latin American higher education (HE) systems are shifting towards rapid expansion of student cohorts and widening participation policies (Chiroleu & Marquina, 2017). Most HE contexts in Latin America have shown increased inclusion of students from low SES and first-generation backgrounds following widening participation policies (Munizaga Mellado et al., 2019). These policies intend to improve access for students from diverse backgrounds as participation in HE is unequal, with low SES students still being underrepresented (Chiroleu & Marquina, 2017). Alongside this widening participation challenge, a pressing issue in the region is first-year attrition rates (Munizaga Mellado et al., 2019).

One country in this region, though understudied to date, is Chile. Chilean HE has expanded rapidly in the last 40 years and widening participation policies have enabled students from low SES backgrounds to access universities. While public investment through financial aid has played a crucial role in increasing student participation in universities, studies suggest that there is still unequal access for students based on their SES (e.g., Espinoza et al., 2022).

First-year attrition is an important issue in Chilean HE, where around 20% of students leave university in the first year (Higher Education Information Service [HEIS], 2025a). This attrition rate has remained constant since 2020 despite universities implementing academic and orientation programs to help first-year students continue in their studies (Ayala Reyes & Atencio Abarca, 2018). While this percentage is comparable with other Latin American countries (Munizaga Mellado et al., 2019), examining first-year attrition in Chile can provide insights into factors influencing students' decisions to discontinue their studies in a context of widening participation within a developing nation in Latin America.

Chilean students who discontinue their studies in the first year tend to come from low SES backgrounds and public secondary schools (Donoso et al., 2013; Valenzuela & Kuzmanic, 2023). Although Chilean widening participation policies have increased enrolments from underrepresented groups, they do not appear sufficient to support these students in finishing their first year, let alone progressing and completing their degree (Corradi et al., 2026). Therefore, an enhanced understanding of the first-year experience (FYE) at universities in Chile and the factors influencing students' intentions to discontinue their studies is key, especially for students from diverse backgrounds.

This study contributes to HE literature in two ways. First, this study contributes to the understanding of first-year students' experiences in Chile, a Latin American country with a growing economy, and therefore provides potential insights into the FYE outside the Global North and English-speaking countries. Second, this study evaluates FYE factors and sociodemographic factors to understand students' intentions to discontinue their studies, providing insights into the FYE of students from diverse backgrounds. Focusing on first-generation students and those participating in equity programs, this study highlights differences between the potential effects of economic and cultural capital on the student experience, which may be obscured in other systems (Bourdieu, 1986). More specifically, this study provides insight into the relationships between FYE factors and first-year attrition, highlighting the importance of workload stress and sense of belonging in continuation decisions.

Students' Intentions to Discontinue Their Studies in the First Year

Student attrition, especially during the first year, has been theorised about by many scholars over the past few decades. One of the most influential theoretical frameworks has been Tinto's student departure model (1993). The model proposes a sociological perspective of students' transition to university, emphasising the influence of students' academic and social experiences at university on their decisions to discontinue their studies. According to Tinto's model, students' intentions to discontinue their studies are strongly associated with their perceptions of academic and social integration at university. In the academic domain, how well students' expectations and values align with their university experiences and the institution's values is particularly important, including interactions with supportive academic staff and peers in and outside classrooms. In the social domain, students' perceptions of their university experience depend on whether they feel part of a group or community within university, their "sense of belonging", as Tinto refers to in his later work (2017).

Another key aspect of students' intentions to discontinue relates to coping with often new and complex academic demands during their transition to HE. Bean and Eaton's psychological model of student retention (2000), revisiting Tinto's sociological theory, proposes that students' ability to cope with stress associated with academic demands can support academic and social integration into university, and intentions to continue in studies. These two theoretical frameworks informed the FYE factors evaluated in this study and reviewed in the next section.

FYE Factors Influencing Students' Intentions to Discontinue Their University Studies

The first year is crucial in university adjustment. First-year students' understandings of and experiences with new academic and social environments influence their decisions to continue or discontinue their studies (Bowles & Brindle, 2017; Willcoxson, 2010). In recent decades, abundant research has explored factors that contribute students' intentions to continue or discontinue university studies. Based on the aforementioned theoretical frameworks (Bean & Eaton, 2000; Tinto, 1993) and empirical studies on first-year attrition (e.g., Naylor et al., 2018), four FYE factors were examined in this study: *sense of belonging*, *academic staff support*, *workload stress* and *intellectual engagement*.

Students' *sense of belonging* can be defined as feeling accepted, valued, respected and included within the university community (Strayhorn, 2018; van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020). For first-year students, sense of belonging also involves becoming familiar with the university environment and perceiving their chosen degree is right for them (Kahu et al., 2022). Developing a sense of belonging in the first year supports students' transition to university (Meehan & Howells, 2019) and improves students' motivation (Pedler et al., 2022), engagement (Gillen-O'Neel, 2021; Kahu et al., 2019) and intentions to persist in their university studies (Hoffman et al., 2002; Naylor et al., 2018; O'Keeffe, 2013).

Academic staff support positively impacts students' successful transition to university. Interacting with educators (i.e., lecturers and tutors) who are perceived as approachable and available enhances students' academic interest in their course content, their understanding of the academic environment and the development of strategies for dealing with academic workload (Bell, 2022; Lundquist et al., 2002). Therefore, supportive student-staff interactions contribute to first-year students' academic outcomes and intentions to persist (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Willcoxson, 2010). A lack of supportive interactions can influence students' intentions to discontinue their studies (Nieuwoudt & Pedler, 2023).

Students' transition to university involves academic, personal and social challenges that test their ability to cope with stressors. van der Zanden et al. (2018) argue that first-year students who can cope with stressors and manage diverse challenges better adapt to university. An example of these first-year challenges is managing workload (Trautwein & Bosse, 2017). *Workload stress* or stress associated with difficulties managing academic demands can negatively impact students' ability to engage in their studies (Kahu & Nelson, 2018), academic performance (Amirkhan & Kofman, 2018) and intentions to continue their studies (Naylor et al., 2018; Nieuwoudt & Pedler, 2023). Stress can also lead to mental health issues, like depression and anxiety, potentially affecting students' decisions to leave their institutions (Lipson & Eisenberg, 2018; Zajac et al., 2024).

Finally, experiencing *intellectual engagement*, or challenging and interesting learning experiences, improves students' motivation and engagement in their studies (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Kuh et al., 2010). Interesting learning experiences are often those relevant to students' interests and goals, and clearly related to their fields of study (Kahu et al., 2017). Academic experiences in the first year are associated with students' intentions to persist at university, especially when those experiences match their expectations and interests (van Rooij et al., 2018). According to Tinto's (1993) student departure model, these academic experiences contribute to students' academic integration, which is key to persistence at university.

Widening Participation Policies and Students Discontinuing Their University Studies

Research on student attrition also suggests that certain sociodemographic groups often present a higher risk of discontinuing university studies. Equity groups, including first-generation and low SES students, students with disabilities and Indigenous students, are more likely to discontinue in the first year (Baik et al., 2019; Li & Jackson, 2024). Difficulties adjusting and lacking a sense of belonging at university influence students' academic outcomes and decisions to discontinue (Soria & Stebleton, 2012). Although institutions are increasingly aware of their students' adjustment needs, these students from diverse backgrounds still experience difficulties adjusting to university and are more likely to leave (Baik et al., 2019). This can be particularly concerning in widening participation contexts that encourage equity groups like low SES and first-generation students to enrol in universities, as in Chile. Chilean studies suggest that first-generation and low SES students report difficulties managing their workload and study skills, engaging with peers (Koljatic & Silva, 2013; Treviño et al., 2014) and

adjusting to university, and are less likely to complete their studies (Valenzuela & Kuzmanic, 2023). These findings align with international evidence reporting first-generation students' difficulties in adjustment (Pratt et al., 2019; Soria & Stebleton, 2012).

Chilean HE Context

Chilean HE has expanded rapidly since 1980, similar to trends in other countries in the region. Currently, there are 57 universities in Chile and over a million students participating in HE (HEIS, 2025b). Private institutions dominate the HE sector, consistent with other Latin American systems (Brunner & Miranda, 2016; Sáinz González & Barberá de la Torre, 2020). Recently, widening participation policies have focused on providing access for students from low SES backgrounds through government loans and scholarships. Thus, financial aid has provided access to public and private universities and enabled students to stay at their institutions in Chile (Blanco et al., 2018; Celis et al., 2013). The latest financial aid program, called "free tuition" (*gratuidad*), promotes access for students from the most disadvantaged socioeconomic groups by covering their tuition fees (Ministry of Education Chile, n.d.).

Although Chile has expanded tertiary education participation, one in five students leave university in the first year (González-Campos et al., 2020). Attrition has financial consequences for public and private investment in Chilean education (González et al., 2005); it impacts the financial investment of families paying expensive tuition fees, universities relying on this investment, and the government supporting these widening participation policies (Munizaga Mellado et al., 2019). In a developing country with a growing economy and limited resources, first-year student attrition is a pressing concern for Chilean HE and can provide insights for other countries with similar issues and conditions.

However, limited studies offer understanding of student attrition from an FYE perspective in Latin America (Santelices & Celis, 2022). Studies have focused on sociodemographic and pre-enrolment factors, including type of secondary school, and admission test scores (e.g., Barahona, 2014; Matheu et al., 2018). Importantly, many of these previous Chilean studies exclude relevant FYE factors influencing students' departure, such as course experiences (e.g., Bowles & Brinde, 2017; Nieuwoudt & Pedler, 2023). The current study builds on prior evidence on the FYE and student retention and interprets this specifically in the Chilean HE context, a highly topical context in terms of widening participation, large student cohort and high attrition. The study aims to understand first-year students' experiences at universities and the factors influencing their intentions to discontinue their studies. Two research questions guided this research:

RQ1: What is the impact of first-year students' *sense of belonging*, *academic staff support*, *workload stress* and *intellectual engagement* on their intentions to discontinue their studies at university?

RQ2: Are there any differences between first-year students' *sense of belonging*, *academic staff support*, *workload stress* and *intellectual engagement* and intentions to discontinue their studies, based on first-generation status and equity program participation?

Method

This study examined the Chilean FYE and factors influencing first-year students' intentions to discontinue their studies. Based on a previous empirical study on first-year student attrition (Naylor et al., 2018), we selected four FYE factors (*sense of belonging at university*, *academic staff support*, *workload stress* and *intellectual engagement*) and two sociodemographic variables associated with the widening participation context (being first generation to attend university and being a participant in an equity program to access university).

We used a translated and adapted version of the First Year Experience Survey (FYES) that has been administered to first-year undergraduate students in Australia over four decades to evaluate the FYE (Baik et al., 2015). We measured four FYE factors associated with first-year attrition, based on the FYES (Naylor et al., 2018), on a five-point Likert scale (from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree): *Sense of belonging* (seven items, e.g., "I feel I belong to the university community"), *Academic staff support* (seven items, e.g., "Most of the academic staff are approachable"), *Workload stress* (seven items, e.g., "I find it really hard to keep up with the volume of work in this course") and *Intellectual engagement* (seven items, e.g., "I enjoy the intellectual challenge of subjects I am studying") (Table 1). Cronbach's alpha coefficients (Table 2) suggested good internal consistency, similar to the scales developed by Naylor et al. (2018).

The survey evaluated students' intentions to discontinue their studies in the first year ("Did you seriously think of deferring or discontinuing in the first semester?"), as measured by the FYES (Baik et al., 2015). We considered two sociodemographic variables that are of interest in widening participation contexts: (1) being a first-generation student and (2) being a participant of an equity program (targeting low SES students in Chile) that included a) being part of any equity program to access university and/or b) being part of the free tuition program.

Table 1*Variables and Items Evaluated in This Study*

Variables evaluated	Item	Response
Intentions to discontinue	Did you seriously think of deferring or discontinuing in the first semester?	1 = yes; 0 = no
Sense of belonging	I feel part of a group of students and staff committed to learning	Likert-type. 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree
	I think university life really suits me	
	I really like being a university student	
	I really like being on my university campus	
	I have made at least one or two close friends at university	
	I feel I belong to the university community	
	It is exciting to be at university	
Academic staff support	I was given helpful advice when choosing my subjects	Likert-type. 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree
	Most of the academic staff are approachable	
	Staff are usually available to discuss my work	
	Teaching staff are good at explaining things	
	Staff made it clear from the start what they expect from students	
	Teaching staff usually give helpful feedback on my progress	
	Staff make a real effort to understand difficulties students may be having with their work	
Workload stress	I find it quite difficult to comprehend a lot of the material I am supposed to study	Likert-type. 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree
	I have had difficulty adjusting to the style of teaching at university	
	Worrying about money has made it difficult for me to concentrate on study	
	University just hasn't lived up to my expectations	
	I often find it stressful managing my study with other commitments in my life	
	I find it really hard to keep up with the volume of work in this course	
	I have worked out how to manage my study workload	
Intellectual engagement	I get a lot of satisfaction from studying	Likert-type. 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree
	I enjoy the intellectual challenge of subjects I am studying	
	My subjects this year are providing a good base for my future studies	
	The subjects I am studying are relevant to my interests	
	I can see the connection between my subjects and future career prospects	
	Overall, the subjects I am studying fit together well	
	I am finding my course intellectually stimulating	
First-generation status	Are you first in your family (i.e., parents and siblings) to attend university?	1 = yes; 2 = no
Equity program participation	Did you access university through an equity program (e.g., "Gratuidad" (free tuition) program?	1 = yes; 2 = no

Note. The four scales used in this study—Sense of belonging, Academic staff support, Workload stress and Intellectual engagement—are based on the scales published by Naylor et al. (2018). The item "My course workload is too heavy" from the Workload stress scale was excluded from this study to reduce the number of survey items.

The study received ethics approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee at The University of Melbourne (ID1852837) and from the Ethics Committee at the private university (ID78-2019-20). The research-focused university did not require additional ethics approval. First-year students were invited through email to participate in the online survey by their course coordinators. The survey was administered over six weeks during the second semester of the first year in 2019.

Participants

The survey was administered in two large metropolitan universities in Chile, one research-focused university and one private university. The response rate was low (0.5% for the private university; 3% for the research-focused university), and 179 first-year students participated. Most students were enrolled in the research-focused university (80%). Students were, on average, 19.8 years old ($SD = 3.1$); 62% were women and 30% were men. Students were enrolled in science and engineering (34%), health (31%), social sciences (16%) and management and commerce (8%). In terms of their first-generation status, 36% self-identified as being first in family to attend university, and 40% indicated they had participated in a program to access university and/or were part of the free tuition program.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis examined the variables evaluated and their interrelationships. To respond to RQ1, a binary logistic regression model examined the impact of the four FYE factors—*sense of belonging*, *academic staff support*, *workload stress* and *intellectual engagement*—on students' intentions to discontinue their university studies in the first year (1 = yes; 0 = no). To respond to RQ2, a *t* test examined differences between student groups based on first-generation status and equity program participation in terms of their *sense of belonging*, *academic staff support*, *workload stress* and *intellectual engagement*. Chi-square tests of independence were conducted to analyse associations between the student groups and intentions to discontinue their studies.

Results

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics and correlations. The mean score for intellectual engagement was the highest among the factors evaluated, suggesting that students perceived their academic experiences as highly engaging and challenging. Sense of belonging presented the second highest mean, suggesting that on average students perceived they belonged to the university community. Pearson's correlation coefficients indicated strong correlations between variables. Intentions to discontinue were significantly correlated with low sense of belonging, low perceived academic staff support, low intellectual engagement and high workload stress.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Cronbach's α	1	2	3	4	5
1. Intentions to discontinue ^a	-	-	-	1.00	-.50**	-.31**	.49**	-.37**
2. Sense of belonging	3.64	0.66	.81		1.00	.57**	-.56**	.63**
3. Academic staff support	3.51	0.61	.75			1.00	-.50**	.49**
4. Workload stress	3.01	0.74	.77				1.00	-.44**
5. Intellectual engagement	3.97	0.63	.82					1.00

Note. 1. Intentions to discontinue; 2. Sense of belonging; 3. Academic staff support; 4. Workload stress; 5. Intellectual engagement.

^a 1 = yes, 0 = no.

** $p < 0.001$.

First-Year Students' University Experiences and Their Intentions to Discontinue Their Studies at University

A binary logistic regression model assessed how students' perceptions of *sense of belonging*, *academic staff support*, *workload stress* and *intellectual engagement* influenced their intentions to discontinue their studies (Table 3). The model was significant in explaining the variance of students' intentions to discontinue their university studies, $\chi^2(4) = 64.76$, $p = < .001$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .437$. As seen in Table 3, *sense of belonging* and *workload stress* were the only variables significantly contributing to the

variance of students' intentions to discontinue their studies. Students who reported higher levels of workload stress and lower levels of belonging had increased odds of intending to discontinue their studies.

Table 3

Binary Regression Model for Intentions to Discontinue Their Studies at University

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	Wald	<i>p</i>	Exp(<i>B</i>)
Constant	-0.60	2.61	0.05	.818	0.54
Sense of belonging	-1.44	0.44	10.26	.001	0.24
Academic staff support	0.22	0.41	0.29	.586	1.25
Workload stress	1.38	0.39	12.63	< .001	3.97
Intellectual engagement	-0.13	0.41	0.11	.745	0.87

First-Generation Status and Equity Program Participation

There were no statistically significant differences between first-generation and continuing-generation students regarding their perceptions of *sense of belonging*, *academic staff support*, *workload stress* and *intellectual engagement* (Table 4).

Table 4

Between-Group Differences Based on First-Generation Status

Variable	First-generation status				<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	Yes (<i>n</i> = 65)		No (<i>n</i> = 102)				
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Sense of belonging	3.62	0.66	3.62	0.68	0.016	.988	0.002
Academic staff support	3.51	0.69	3.52	0.56	-0.135	.893	-0.022
Workload stress	3.16	0.77	2.95	0.72	1.746	.083	0.281
Intellectual engagement	4.07	0.57	3.91	0.66	1.684	.094	0.258

Note. 12 (7%) students did not specify whether they were first-generation students.

Conversely, equity program participants presented a significantly higher mean score in *workload stress* than students who did not participate in equity programs, constituting the only significant difference between the groups (Table 5).

Table 5

Between-Group Differences Based on Equity Program Participation

Variable	Equity program participation				<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	Yes (<i>n</i> = 71)		No (<i>n</i> = 92)				
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Sense of belonging	3.54	0.62	3.68	0.70	-1.325	.187	-0.206
Academic staff support	3.53	0.62	3.52	0.61	0.045	.964	0.007
Workload stress	3.20	0.67	2.90	0.80	2.581	.011	0.399
Intellectual engagement	3.91	0.60	4.03	0.63	-1.274	.205	-0.200

Note. 16 (9%) students did not specify whether they participated in an equity program.

Regarding students' intentions to discontinue their studies, Chi-square (χ^2) analysis revealed a small significant association between equity program participation and intentions to discontinue ($p < .05$). Students who participated in an equity program were more likely to indicate their intentions to discontinue than non-participants. No significant associations were found between first-generation students and continuing-generation students and their intentions to discontinue their university studies (Table 6).

Table 6

Students' Intentions to Discontinue Their Studies Based on Student Group

Variable	Category	Intentions to discontinue				χ^2	p	Phi
		Yes		No				
		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%			
First-generation status						0.06	.803	0.019
	Yes	19	29	46	71			
	No	28	27	74	72			
	Total	47	-	120	-			
Equity program participation						5.97	.015	0.191
	Yes	27	38	44	62			
	No	19	21	73	79			
	Total	46	-	117	-			

Note. 12 (7%) students did not specify whether they were first-generation students, 16 (9%) students did not specify whether they participated in an equity program.

Discussion

This study examined the impact of first-year students' perceptions of *sense of belonging*, *academic staff support*, *workload stress* and *intellectual engagement* on their intentions to discontinue their studies. Critically, this study was conducted in a developing, non-English-speaking country in the Global South, providing insights into theoretical understandings of the student experience outside the research domination of the Global North. Extending our understanding in this way has been identified as essential to theory development and usage to create effective, ethical and practical insights in education (Greene, 2022; Stage & Wells, 2014).

Responding to RQ1 of the study, the findings identify the influence of high *workload stress* and low *sense of belonging* on students' intentions to discontinue their first-year studies. These findings coincide with previous empirical literature suggesting the links between low sense of belonging and intent to discontinue (Hausmann et al., 2007; Naylor et al., 2018; O'Keeffe, 2013), and workload stress and continuing at university (Nieuwoudt & Pedler, 2023). Thus, they reaffirm the relevance of sense of belonging, managing academic demands and coping with stressors for students' adjustment to university (van der Zanden et al., 2018). The current study highlights the critical role of these FYE factors in influencing students' intentions to discontinue that have been widely discussed in international contexts (e.g., Bean & Eaton, 2000; Tinto, 1993) but have received limited attention in developing countries with increasingly diverse student cohorts, such as Latin American countries (Santelices & Celis, 2022).

This study highlights the pressing issue of managing academic demands, a crucial dimension of students' transition and adjustment to university. The findings support the connection between understanding and managing academic demands and stress reported in the literature, which has emphasised the serious consequences of stress, including low satisfaction with studies, disengagement and discontinuing studies (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Lipson & Eisenberg, 2018). Previous studies have also suggested that workload stress could impact first-year students' sense of belonging. For instance, Kahu et al. (2022) describe academic belonging or feeling in the right course as one of the dimensions of sense of belonging in the first year of university. Managing their academic demands and feeling on top of their workload can contribute to students feeling that they are in the right course. Therefore, feeling stressed and overwhelmed in coping with those demands could negatively impact

first-year students' academic belonging and thus their overall sense of adjustment to university. Considering the relevance of managing academic demands, the present study offers recommendations for HE contexts with limited resources and growing undergraduate student cohorts. University policy strategies should focus on providing clear expectations of academic demands at university and strategies to manage the workload in the first year, supporting students' transition to university.

Considering RQ2, the study found that first-generation students were no more likely to intend to discontinue their first-year studies. First-generation students did not report significant differences in terms of their *sense of belonging*, *academic staff support*, *workload stress* and *intellectual engagement* compared to continuing-generation students. However, participants of an equity program (i.e., typically students identified as from low SES backgrounds) reported significantly higher levels of workload stress and were more likely to indicate their intentions to discontinue their studies. This finding suggests that, in the Chilean context, there is potentially a greater impact of economic capital than cultural capital on students' HE experiences (Bourdieu, 1986). This may be more obscured in developed countries by a greater degree of overlap between first-generation (low perceived cultural capital) and relatively low SES backgrounds, which may be less the case in a developing country. Chile's preponderance of private institutions may also have led to the creation of policy imperatives to respond to first-generation students' expectations. Alternatively, first-generation students may have developed strategies to adjust to university, like relying on peer support to adjust and engage in their studies (Mishra, 2020), and benefitted from their strong sense of purpose and determination, as some studies have suggested (O'Shea, 2015). It should also be remembered that attrition rates in Chile are high (approximately 20%; González-Campos et al., 2020) regardless of background, potentially confounding this point.

This study suggests that first-generation and low SES students may have different needs, skills and experiences at university (first-generation students reported higher rates of *intellectual engagement*, for example; Table 4). In widening participation contexts within growing economies like Chile, it may be relevant to consider these groups of students as heterogeneous and diverse. Although first-generation students often come from low SES backgrounds, that distinction does not necessarily apply in countries like Chile with developing economies, low university completion rates and a relatively low proportion of adults with tertiary education qualifications. In countries with widening participation policies, the rapid growth of university student cohorts contributes to a diverse population enrolled in university. This suggests the need to consider diverse student groups separately in widening participation contexts, rather than assuming homogeneity among underrepresented students. This could lead to more effective retention strategies that target specific students' transition needs and better outcomes for diverse student populations in HE systems worldwide.

Equity program participants might be more at risk of experiencing mental health and wellbeing issues. This may impact their studies, increasing their likelihood of disengagement, poor academic performance, low satisfaction and discontinuing their university studies (Amirkhan & Kofman, 2018; Kahu & Nelson, 2018). These findings coincide with other studies highlighting low SES students' difficulties coping with the academic demands of university both internationally (e.g., Baik et al., 2019; Naylor et al., 2018) and in Chile (e.g., Koljatic & Silva, 2013). While coinciding with previous literature, these findings emphasise the crucial role of understanding and managing academic demands to enhance low SES students' experiences and support their persistence at university within widening participation contexts. Thus, this study suggests that institutional efforts might focus first on supporting low SES students in managing their academic demands, which may lead to a successful transition to university, especially in widening participation contexts.

While providing insights into the FYE in a widening participation context, this study has some limitations. The study evaluated students from two universities and achieved a low response rate; the sample size is small and potentially unrepresentative of Chilean student cohorts. While this limits the generalisability to other contexts, it provides insights into first-year students' experiences in universities in a developing country, a currently understudied area. Therefore, this study contributes to the current understanding of enablers and barriers to students' persistence in the first year in widening participation contexts. Future research might consider different institutions and contexts that can provide valuable contributions to the literature on diverse student cohorts. The FYE is complex for all students, but especially for those accessing university in widening participation contexts, and multiple factors influence students' decisions to continue their studies. This study examined only four relevant FYE factors, identified from the literature. However, there are other institutional, individual and contextual factors that influence students' experiences at university, such as self-efficacy (e.g., Kahu & Nelson, 2018) that can be explored further with empirical studies.

Conclusion

This study highlights the impact of the FYE on students' intentions to discontinue their university studies in the first year. It reaffirms that difficulties developing a sense of belonging at university and feeling stressed by academic demands can influence students' intentions to discontinue their studies. It also demonstrates heterogeneous factors affecting intentions to discontinue for students from diverse groups, who are included by means of widening participation policies. These contributions expand understanding of first-year student experiences in a developing country context and highlight important nuances in how different student groups may experience HE in widening participation settings. Therefore, it is even more critical to develop targeted strategies that address first-year students' specific needs in adjusting to university life to support them in successfully completing their degrees.

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