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# Academic Self-concept in University Students: Their Association with Parents' Educational Level and Previous Experience in Higher Education

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CONCETTO DI SÉ ACCADEMICO: ASSOCIAZIONE  
CON IL LIVELLO DI ISTRUZIONE DEI GENITORI  
E CON LE ESPERIENZE PRECEDENTI NELL'ISTRUZIONE  
SUPERIORE

## ABSTRACT

*The aim of this research is to associate academic self-concept with the educational level of the parents and previous experiences of students in higher education. It is a cross-sectional study that evaluated 1093 students from a private university in Chile. The instruments used were the academic self-concept scale (ASCS), the variables of educational level of the parents and students previous experience in higher education. Bivariate correlations were made using the Spearman coefficient, associations using Pearson's Chi-Square, and mean difference using the Mann-Whitney U between ASCS with the parents' educational level and previous experience in higher education. The outcomes indicate correlation, association and mean difference ( $p < .05$ ) between the ASCS and the educational level of the mother when she has university studies, as well as with the existence of previous experiences in higher education, being the father's educational level of no significant impact. In conclusion, academic self-concept is greater when students have a mother with university studies and when they have previous experiences in higher education.*

*Keywords:* Academic self-concept; Higher education; Parents educational level; University experience; University students.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The expansion of enrollment in education, along with technological breakthroughs and social demands in various countries, has brought about important changes in the educational system (Bernasconi, 2015; Ricchiardi & Emanuel, 2018). Higher Education (HE) in Chile has experienced the same trend due to the diversification of applicants' profiles, the diversification of institutions and study programs, and the permanent adjustments to educational policies that promote access and quality in higher education (Teixeira *et al.*, 2017; Lemaitre, 2018; Pulido & Espinoza, 2018). The rise in financial benefits for students has promoted the idea that university studies are an accessible pathway to improve their general living conditions (Espinoza & Gonzalez, 2016; OECD, 2020) thus configuring new scenarios in HE Institutions.

In this context, other trends have emerged associated with the rise in coverage and the appearance of new academic profiles, all of which are in need of evaluation and further research. Different approaches to learning in students, their self-perception through the notion of academic self-concept, as well as desertion and the implementation of retention strategies are among these trends (Donoso, Donoso, & Arias, 2010; Gedda, 2016; Méndez & Gálvez, 2018). Previous research (Donoso & Schiefelbein, 2007; Díaz, 2008; Larroucau, 2015; Carvajal, González, & Sarzoza, 2018) has identified the current persistence of these issues, as well as the urgency of creating new theoretical and empirical views based on thorough scientific analysis that may allow to understand the phenomena linked to college career. This will also help to develop concrete mechanisms towards the improvement of the academic career experience, which must be properly articulated (OECD, 2009) in order to yield permanent results of greater impact.

One way of contributing in the improvement of the students' university experience lies in the research and deep understanding of the experience of entry and permanence in higher education (Gedda, 2016). This may be achieved comprehending the psycho-educative profiles, aiming to promote actions that allow for more supportive academic and personal formative processes. Accordingly, there are researchers (Rodríguez, Fita, & Torrado, 2004; Donoso & Schiefelbein, 2007; Carvajal, González, &

Sarzoza, 2018) who assert that the levels of self-concept, self-efficacy, high school performance and grades, the importance of socio-affective variables as individual traits of the student, as well as the family background in relation to the academic life, are all important aspects that can determine an adequate development of the university career or, on the contrary, the risk of eventual desertion. Among these variables, one of the most studied socio-effective elements is self-concept (Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976; Cardenal & Fierro, 2003), defined as a set of perceptions, emotions, imagery, attributions, value judgements, all of which can be descriptive as well as evaluative when students refer to themselves (Schmidt, Mes-soulam, & Molina, 2008). Academic self-concept (Marsh & Shavelson, 1985; Marsh & Craven, 1997; Marsh & Hau, 2003; Marsh & Martin, 2011; Khalaila, 2015; Méndez & Gálvez, 2018) is one of the uses of this concept, considered as a means to express the way in which individuals represent, know and value themselves as impacting directly on the ways different academic situations are faced (Garaigordobil & Durá, 2006).

In this sense, academic self-concept has been related with the family's educational aspirations (Wolters, 2004). In the same line, Ojeda and Flores (2008) in their analysis of variables such as gender, parents' education level, and previous academic experiences, found there was a meaningful correlation between these variables and the expectations of academic success, as well as with the way in which students perceive their own capabilities to perform in that area. Moreover, family relationships are very relevant in the development of academic self-concept, as family support or the stimulation of family environments are considered mediators in the development of self-concept (Moyeda, Velasco, & Ojeda, 2013). This last approach, in general terms, is consistent with other studies that categorically attest to the possibility of determining the socio-academic profile of university students based on self-concept variables and certain sociodemographic variables (Hernández, 2018).

These different perspectives undergird the current investigation, which has the objective of associating academic self-concept with the parents' education level and the disposition of the evaluated students who had previous experience in higher education.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A descriptive and correlational study has been conducted, employing a cross-cutting and quantitative approach (Kerlinger *et al.*, 2002).

### *2.1. Participants*

The sample was constituted by 1093 students from a private Chilean university, which up to 2019 had an active enrollment of 23927 undergraduate students, of which 21324 were contacted by e-mail, corresponding to a contact rate of 89.1%. The answer rate was of 4.6%, the cooperation rate was of 5.1%, and the rejection rate was of 84.6%, according to the definitions of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR, 2016). The evaluated students were selected under an intentional non-probabilistic criterion. The sample represents a margin of error of  $\pm 2.9\%$  with a confidence level of 95%. 73.8% were women and 26.2% men, while the age of the respondents showed an average of 21.54 years old. Of the total students evaluated, 29.2% come from public high school institutions, 68.4% from state-subsidized institutions, and 2.4% from private institutions. 82.2% benefit from gratuity and 22.3% is supported by an educational credit from the state. The inclusion criteria were (a) be over 18 or more; (b) being a regular student with current enrollment in the analyzed university. The criteria of exclusion were (a) students in certification process; (b) students enrolled in evening classes; (c) students who responded only partially to the instrument.

All the participants were informed about the scope and the objectives of this investigation through a written consent form which authorizes the scientific use of the gathered information, emphasizing the confidential treatment of data and ensuring their anonymity. The investigation protocol was developed in lines with the Declaration of Helsinki (Velásquez-Cartes, 2013).

### *2.2. Academic self-concept*

The academic self-concept scale (ASCS) coined by Schmidt, Messoulam, and Molina (2008) was used for this research, adapted and validated according to the Chilean university context established by Méndez and Gálvez (2018). The instrument evaluates academic self-concept through a scale that contains two constitutive and correlated dimensions: academic self-efficacy and perceived performance. Academic self-efficacy (ASE) refers to the students' confidence regarding their own abilities. Students with high ASE score trust in their effort and capacities, assuming they have the conditions to obtain and maintain a good academic performance. The perceived performance (PP) refers to how students perceive the possible difficulties that appear on the way to achieve an optimal level of

academic performance. Students with high PP score indicate that they do not perceive having to face big obstacles reaching good performance and satisfactory learning levels.

The instrument is composed as follows: 12 items with a rating that goes from 1 to 5, presented through a Likert Scale type with answer categories that range from «totally agree» to «totally disagree». Regarding to each dimension distribution, we can find dimension ASE with 7 reactivities (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 10 and 11) and a top score of 25. The values for ASCS vary between 12 and 60 points, and both the ASCS and its dimensions are interpreted considering higher scores as a better result for self-concept, self-efficacy and perceived performance. Finally, items 1, 2, 3, 5, 10 and 11 are presented with a positive wording (higher the value, better the perception), while items 4, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 12 show a negative wording (higher the value, worse the perception).

### *2.3. Parents' educational level*

The parents' (or legal tutors) education level was extracted from the academic record of the students. This information was systematized and characterized in eight possible levels: no school education, incomplete primary school, complete primary school, incomplete secondary school, complete secondary school, incomplete higher education, complete higher education, post-graduate higher education. This record was differentiated in the case of the father and the mother, and for the purposes of this investigation, the variables were recoded to reach a nominal level, leaving the dichotomous attributes of the mother or the father «with higher education» (Yes = 1 and No = 0).

### *2.4. Previous university experiences in evaluated students*

This variable was obtained from the 2015-2019 academic record database, where compiled information is gathered during the process of induction for freshmen students. During this induction process, students are consulted if this is the first time entering higher education or if they have had previous university experiences, either in the same institution or in a different one. The possible answers are «Yes» or «No» (1 and 0, respectively), therefore, this variable has a dichotomous nature by default. This question is associated with the application of the survey «If you know me, it's better» (Bustos-González, 2018), which considers a set of other consultations that were discarded to focus in only one.

### 2.5. Procedure

ASCS was implemented by means of a voluntary self-administered online survey in which respondents were informed of the purpose of the study, as well as being asked to explicitly agree with stipulations on consent and criteria for the use and handling of collected data and the implications of taking part in the study. The data regarding parents' educational level and previous experiences in HE was obtained from the university academic record and individual characterization databases were collected from each cohort during their first year of entry. Characterizations of the evaluated students were elaborated drawing from these databases. Average performance in ASCS and its dimensions (ASE and PP) was also calculated in order to generate categorical ASCS variables.

### 2.6. Data analysis

The software SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) version 26.0 was used for data analysis. A descriptive analysis of frequencies, distributions, arithmetic mean, median, standard deviation, minimums, maximums and percentages was carried out according to variable types. Before performing the statistical analyses of correlation, association, and difference of means, the variables were subjected to the Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test. Bivariate correlations were established between ASCS, the educational level of the parents, and the presence of students' previous experiences in HE using the Spearman correlation test, inasmuch variables showed non-normal behavior. In order to perform Pearson's chi-squared association test we proceeded to recode ASCS and the variables associated with its dimensions as a way of presenting them as categorical variables (0 = below the mean and 1 = above the mean). The Mann-Whitney U non-parametric mean difference test was also carried out. For all cases, a significance level of  $p < .05$  was taken into consideration.

## 3. RESULTS

*Table 1* shows a descriptive summary on the variables used to contrast ASCS. 28.8% of the students evaluated enrolled at the studied university having had previous experience in HE. 13% of the students had mothers with university degrees and 17.3% had fathers who had completed university education.

Table 1. – Descriptions on characterization variables.

(N = 1093)	Yes	No
Mother with university degree	13%	87%
Father with university degree	17.3%	82.7%
Previous experience in higher education	28.8%	71.2%

Table 2. – Academic self-concept of evaluated university students.

(N = 1093)		SCALE					AVERAGE SCORE	SD
		1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)		
ASE dimension items	1. I am able to do jobs and tasks well, regardless if they seem difficult.	2.2	0.8	8.4	42.2	46.4	4.3	0.8
	2. If I tried hard enough, I could pass this semester's courses.	2.7	0.5	2.6	14.9	79.3	4.7	0.7
	3. I think I can get good grades this semester.	2.6	1.0	6.2	31.6	58.6	4.4	0.8
	4. No matter how hard I try, I'm always going to do badly at university	1.2	3.4	9.3	28.9	57.2	4.4	0.8
	5. I am able to maintain a good performance throughout a whole semester.	1.8	4.6	19.1	41.8	32.7	3.9	0.9
	10. I am able to do good work in class.	1.9	2.7	13.0	43.4	39.1	4.2	0.8
PP dimension items	11. If I put my mind to it, I can study any subject matter.	2.8	1.3	5.3	24.5	66.1	4.5	0.8
	6. I am a slow learner.	3.5	13.4	20.9	33.2	29.1	3.7	1.1
	7. I make a lot of mistakes when doing college tasks and homework.	1.8	12.2	24.0	42.3	19.8	3.7	0.9
	8. I easily forget what I learn.	3.8	10.4	29.7	35.3	20.7	3.6	1.0
	9. I find it hard to understand what I read.	3.2	8.5	20.6	37.9	29.8	3.8	1.0
	12. I find it difficult to study.	5.9	14.2	25.9	29.8	24.2	3.5	1.1
ASE total dimension	Total result of dimension items	2.2	2.0	9.1	32.5	54.2	30.4	4.7
PP total dimension	Total result of dimension items	3.6	11.7	24.2	35.7	24.7	18.3	3.8
ASCS total	ASCS total result	2.8	6.1	15.4	33.8	41.9	48.7	7.1
ASCS categorized variable	ASCS above-under average	Above average					Under average	
		56.4%					43.6%	

Note: ASE = academic self-efficacy; PP = perceived performance; ASCS = academic self-concept scale; SD = standard deviation. Answer categories: 1 = Totally disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Partially agree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Completely agree.

Table 2 shows the scores for ASCS. Evaluated students reach an average of 48.7 points in the ASCS, placing them in the upper-middle category. The ASE dimension achieved an average of 30.4 points, placing the students in the upper-middle category. The PP dimension achieved an average of 18.3 points, placing them in the upper-middle category as well.

Table 3 shows that there is a positive and significant correlation ( $p < .01$ ) between ASCS total and the feature of having previous university experiences, as well as with having a mother who has gone through higher education studies. Regarding the ASE dimension, it is noticeable that it positively correlates  $p$  value  $< .05$  with the first experience in higher education variables and with the educational level of the mother (having gone through some level of higher education). Likewise, PP dimension has a positive correlation ( $p < .01$ ) with the first experience in higher education and with the mother's educational level. The father's educational level is not statistically significant in regard to ASCS and its dimensions.

Table 3. – Correlation scale of academic self-concept with parent's educational level and student's previous higher education experience.

	ASCS		ASE-D		PP-D	
	<i>r</i> value	<i>p</i> value	<i>r</i> value	<i>p</i> value	<i>r</i> value	<i>p</i> value
Mother with higher education studies ( <i>n</i> = 1084)	.083**	.006	.071*	.020	.078**	.010
Father with higher education studies ( <i>n</i> = 1022)	.058	.065	.057	.068	.044	.158
Previous experience in HE ( <i>n</i> = 1093)	-.091**	.003	-.067*	.027	-.088**	.004

Note: ASCS = academic self-concept scale; ASE-D = academic self-efficacy dimension; PP-D = perceived performance dimension. \*\* = correlation is significant at the 0,01 level; \* = correlation is significant at the 0,05 level. *r* value = statistical intensity; *p* value = statistical significance, employing Spearman's correlation.

Table 4 shows a statistically significant association ( $p < .05$ ) between total ASCS and previous experience in HE. On the other hand, ASE dimension shows a statistically significant association ( $p < .05$ ) with the condition of whether the student's mother has higher education. PP dimension is associated with a  $p$  value  $< .01$  with the variable «Mother with higher education studies» and with a  $p$  value  $< .05$  in regard to the variable «first experience in higher education». The father's educational level is not related in a statistically significant manner with ASCS and its dimensions.

Table 4. – Association scale of academic self-concept alongside parents' educational level and students' previous higher education experience.

	ASCS		ASE-D		PP-D	
	<i>p</i> value	Cramer's V	<i>p</i> value	Cramer's V	<i>p</i> value	Cramer's V
Mother with higher education studies (n = 1084)	.058	.057	.020	.070	.006	.083
Father with higher education studies (n = 1022)	.428	.025	.081	.055	.332	.030
Previous experience in HE (n = 1093)	.013	.075	.082	.053	.028	.066

Note: Cramer's V = Association intensity; *p* value = statistical significance, employing Pearson's Chi-squared test.

Table 5 shows the result of non-parametric means difference test with Mann-Whitney U, indicating that there is a difference of means with a value  $p < .05$  between the total ASCS, the ASE dimension, and the PP dimension among those students who have entered university for the first time and those who have not, as well as in regard to those who have mothers with university degrees. The educational level of the father does not allow demonstrating a statistically significant difference in the scores obtained in the ASCS and its dimensions.

Table 5. – Mean difference of the academic self-concept scale with parents' educational level and students' previous higher education experiences.

	ASCS			ASE-D			PP-D		
	<i>p</i> value	U	Range Diff.	<i>p</i> value	U	Range Diff.	<i>p</i> value	U	Range Diff.
Mother with higher education studies (n = 1084)	.006	56968	77.56	.02	58449.5	65.48	.01	57579.5	72.57
Father with higher education studies (n = 1022)	.065	68203	44.96	.068	68297	44.32	.157	69751.5	34.37
Previous experience in HE (n = 1093)	.003	108367	-63.19	.027	112163	-46.26	.004	108903	-60.8

Note: U = Mann-Whitney U Test; Range Diff. = Difference between group ranges. Yes = 1 and No = 0; *p* value: statistical significance, using Mann-Whitney's U mean comparison.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

This research aimed to establish associations between academic self-concept, the educational level of parents, and previous experiences in HE on behalf of the students who were evaluated. Considering the obtained results, and according to previous propositions that support the present study, parents' educational level presented differentiated results regarding mothers and fathers, inasmuch only the educational level of the mother presented ratios, associations and differences of statistically significant means in terms of the ASCS (and its ASE and PP dimensions) of the students who were evaluated. Specifically, the mother's educational level presents a direct correlation and statistically significant mean differences with ASCS, ASE and PP; it is only associated with ASE and PP dimensions, however not so with the general ASCS. On the other hand, the educational level of the father is not related to ASCS or any of its dimensions, which is consistent with what some studies indicate (Ferrer, 2012; Guzmán & Pacheco, 2014; Padua, 2019). These studies have shown that the relative importance of the mother in terms of the academic aspects of the students is highly relevant. Specifically, it is argued that academic performance seems to improve when there is greater emotional closeness between the mother and the student, as well as a higher educational level of the former (Labarca & Fuhrmann, 2011).

In regard to ASCS and its relation to students' previous experience in HE, it can be noted that the tests carried out show an indirect correlation since  $r$ -scores were negative. This demonstrates that the ASCS score and its dimensions are higher when the student has already had some previous university experience at the time of his or her present enrolment. There was also an association between this variable and the ASCS and its PP dimension, but not so with the ASE dimension, which shows that the existence of previous experience in higher education mainly affects the prospects of solving problems and facing difficulties, rather than improving the self-perception of academic abilities. Moreover, the results of the mean difference test were statistically significant between ASCS and its dimensions and the presence of previous experience in HE, showing a difference between the mean ranges of a negative nature, which implies that students with previous experience in HE have greater ASCS, ASE and PP. This is consistent with other research that indicate that students who have some type of previous experience in higher education, either because they have studied other careers or because they have returned to higher education after some previous dropout experience (among others reasons) are better qualified, feel more capable of facing university life, and show better

academic results (Garzón & Gil, 2017; Blanco, Meneses, & Paredes, 2018; Langa-Rosado, Torrents, & Troiano, 2019). Therefore, in HE Institutions it would be relevant to promote the development and strengthening of students' academic self-concept through support and reinforcement programs based on the exploration of the image they perceive of their own basic performance in various tasks and on the perception of their capacities for identification, self-monitoring and problem solving. In the case of students with previous university schooling experiences, it would be relevant to use this information as a mechanism for self-evaluation of their coping behavior within the HE environment, as well as a means of supporting and strengthening them by proposing they become tutors for new students, after one or two years of their last university admission.

Thus, it is noticeable that ASCS, in its two constitutive dimensions, is related to the mothers' educational level and to previous experiences in HE. The dimension of perceived performance (PP), which refers to the students' perception of the obstacles they might have to face and their own abilities to overcome them, is linked to the two variables previously mentioned. However, in terms of the scale employed, it achieves a lower score than the dimension of academic self-efficacy (ASE), which refers to the confidence that the students have in their own abilities to perform within academic environments. This implies that the students considered for this study, although relying on their academic skills to perform in educational environments, perceive less favorably their ability to face academic obstacles and generate permanent structures to solve these situations. This may affect their university experience, possibly in terms of their academic performance or ability to remain in HE Institutions (Labarca & Fuhrmann, 2011; Ferrer, 2012; Véliz-Burgos & Apodaca-Urquijo, 2012).

The limitations of the present study were found to be associated with the following elements: (a) the survey reports information at a given point in time, whereas the conditions studied may vary due to their own dynamism; (b) students answered according to the realities of their own studies and subject matters, which may differentiate the specific characteristics and perceptions of each discipline. Among the main strengths of the study are: (a) a sample size that corresponds to 1,093 of the undergraduate students of the university taken into account; (b) the survey employed is methodologically validated within the Chilean higher education community, which entails it provides more accurate information of the phenomenon.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Students have a higher level of academic self-concept when they have had previous higher education experience. Likewise, academic self-concept is greater when the students' mothers have a university degree. On the other hand, the educational level of the father does not seem to have any impact on the students' academic self-concept.

Knowing the characteristics of the student population (for example, their previous learning experiences and their familiarity to university professional training models) opens a rapprochement to their social and academic conditions. In turn, this stimulates the elaboration of precise strategies that may intervene in the elements within the scope of action of the HE Institutions, for example, in the students' academic self-concept in order to improve academic performance or the ability to remain in HE Institutions.

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## RIASSUNTO

*Lo scopo di questa ricerca è associare il concetto di sé accademico con il livello di istruzione dei genitori e con le precedenti esperienze degli studenti nell'istruzione superiore. Si tratta di uno studio trasversale che ha valutato 1.093 studenti di un'università private in Cile. Gli strumenti utilizzati sono stati la scala del concetto di sé accademico (ASCS), il livello di istruzione dei genitori e le precedenti esperienze degli studenti nell'istruzione superiore. Le correlazioni bivariate sono state effettuate utilizzando il coefficiente di Spearman, le associazioni utilizzando il Test V di Cramer e la differenza media tra ASCS, il livello di istruzione dei genitori e la precedente esperienza nell'istruzione superiore utilizzando la Mann-Whitney U. I risultati indicano correlazione, associazione e differenza media significativi ( $p < .05$ ) tra l'ASCS e il livello di istruzione della madre, quando ha studi universitari, nonché con l'esistenza di precedenti esperienze nell'istruzione superiore. Il livello di istruzione del padre non risulta aver alcun impatto significativo. In conclusione, il concetto di sé accademico è maggiore quando gli studenti hanno una madre con studi universitari e quando hanno precedenti esperienze nell'istruzione superiore.*

*Parole chiave:* Concetto di sé accademico; Esperienza universitaria; Istruzione superiore; Livello di istruzione dei genitori; Studenti universitari.

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