



Original article

## Expectations and fears of working adult students in higher education at a public university in Chile

**Expectativas y temores de estudiantes adultos trabajadores de educación superior en una universidad pública en Chile**

**Expectativas e medos de estudantes adultos que trabalham no ensino superior em uma universidade pública no Chile**

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### ABSTRACT

Students enrolled in evening continuation study programs at a higher education institution face an academic world with expectations and fears throughout their entire training process. With their different family and work responsibilities, the students who are most prepared and adapted to the new times will advance and finish their educational instruction. Others will make the decision and give up their career, throwing away the possibility of obtaining a professional degree and better job prospects. The study explored the meaning that working adult students construct, regarding the expectations and fears during the development of their study program, in the Business Administration Engineering career, at the Teaching and Linking Center of the Arturo Prat University in Santiago de Chile, in the year 2021. A qualitative methodology was used, at an exploratory level and with a design with a case approach. The information was collected through an unstructured interview via email. The processing of the information was carried out using an Excel spreadsheet. The main results showed that the highest expectations of working adult students are to improve job performance and obtain a professional degree. Regarding the main fears, they expressed the lack of time to study and the level required by the university. The most relevant conclusions were aimed at developing higher education programs, according to the academic needs of a working adult and support plans throughout the program on emotional and mental health issues.

**Keywords:** higher education; adult education; emotional health; expectations and fears.

## RESUMEN

Los alumnos, que cursan programas de continuidad de estudios vespertinos en una institución de educación superior, se enfrentan a un mundo académico con expectativas y temores durante todo su proceso de formación. Con sus distintas responsabilidades familiares y laborales, los educandos más preparados y adaptados a los nuevos tiempos avanzarán y finalizarán su instrucción educativa. Otros, tomarán la decisión y renunciarán a su carrera, desechando la posibilidad de obtener un título profesional y mejores perspectivas de trabajo. El estudio exploró el significado que construyen los estudiantes adultos trabajadores, respecto a las expectativas y temores durante el desarrollo de su programa de estudios, en la carrera Ingeniería en Administración de Empresas, en el Centro Docente y Vinculación de la Universidad Arturo Prat en Santiago de Chile, en el año 2021. Se utilizó una metodología cualitativa, de nivel exploratorio y con un diseño con enfoque de caso. La información fue recopilada a través de una entrevista no estructurada vía correo electrónico. El procesamiento de la información se realizó mediante planilla Excel. Los principales resultados mostraron que las mayores expectativas de los estudiantes adultos trabajadores son mejorar el desempeño laboral y la obtención de un título profesional. Respecto a los principales temores, manifestaron la falta de tiempo para estudiar y el nivel exigido por la universidad. Las conclusiones más relevantes se orientaron a desarrollar programas de estudios superiores, acordes a las necesidades académicas de un adulto trabajador y planes de acompañamiento durante todo el programa en temas de salud emocional y mental.

**Palabras clave:** educación superior; educación de adultos; salud emocional; expectativas y temores.

## RESUMO

Os alunos matriculados em programas noturnos de continuação de estudos em uma instituição de ensino superior enfrentam um mundo acadêmico com expectativas e medos ao longo de todo o seu processo de formação. Com as suas diferentes responsabilidades familiares e laborais, os alunos mais preparados e adaptados aos novos tempos avançarão e terminarão a sua formação escolar. Outros tomarão a decisão e desistirão da carreira, jogando fora a possibilidade de obter um diploma profissional e melhores perspectivas de emprego. O estudo explorou o significado que os alunos adultos trabalhadores constroem, sobre as expectativas e medos durante o desenvolvimento de seu programa de estudos, na carreira de Engenharia de Administração de Empresas, no Centro de Ensino e Vinculação da Universidade Arturo Prat em Santiago do Chile, no ano 2021. Foi utilizada uma metodologia qualitativa, de nível exploratório e com um design com abordagem de caso. As informações foram coletadas por meio de entrevista não estruturada via e-mail. O tratamento das informações foi realizado por meio de uma planilha Excel. Os principais resultados mostraram que as maiores expectativas dos alunos adultos trabalhadores são melhorar o desempenho no trabalho e obter um diploma profissional. Quanto aos principais receios, expressaram a falta de tempo para estudar e o nível exigido pela universidade. As conclusões mais relevantes apontaram para o desenvolvimento de programas de ensino superior, de acordo com as necessidades acadêmicas de um adulto trabalhador e planos de apoio ao longo do programa em questões de saúde emocional e mental.

**Palavras-chave:** ensino superior; educação de adultos; saúde emocional; expectativas e medos.

## INTRODUCTION

The Arturo Prat University is a House of Studies that offers technical careers, undergraduate, postgraduate and specifically programs of continuity of studies for working adult students for more than thirty years. One of them is the one corresponding to the Engineering in Business Administration career of the Teaching and Linking Center in Santiago de Chile.

The students who attend the study plan are between thirty and fifty years old, all of them belong to the Faculty of Business Studies. They come from technical careers in the area of administration or related. They have been away from the formal system for a period of ten years and made the decision to return to the classroom, under the conviction that work experience is no longer enough to pursue a career in the company, more instruction and academic preparation is required.

The program is demanding and demands that the students, for two years, study on Fridays from 7:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. and on Saturdays from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. During eighty weekends, the students They carry out various activities such as presentations, case studies, assistantships, evaluations, various tasks, etc.

The cold, the heat, the tiredness, the hunger, the physical discomforts, the boredom and the different biological, emotional and psychological complications typical of an adult make it difficult, at times, to advance in their study program. Additionally, the long commutes on Fridays to the university affect attendance, concentration and continuity in the educational process.

The above scenario is complex for working adult learners. They deal with personal, family and mainly work problems that arise while they are studying. On some occasions, they attend their classes for a couple of hours

and then leave, because they have to solve a last-minute problem at work. This occurs because a large number of them hold leadership positions of high responsibility in their companies. Others are entrepreneurs and cannot neglect their businesses, since they represent their source of remuneration.

It should be noted that the various study schedules and academic activities demand a high level of responsibility from students, autonomy for their learning and progress in their training process. On many occasions they end up modifying their daily routines in the social, personal, family, work, food, transportation and friendship areas, among other variables. Some of them fall behind and others fail branches or definitively abandon their educational training and the dream of being professionals. The student's academic scenario changes as he progresses in his studies, the same happens with his expectations and fears.

An expectation is something that a person estimates that something may or may not happen in the future. On the other hand, if the expectation is not supported by a strong argument, then it will only become a hope supported by faith. If the expectation is not met, the individual will be disappointed. However, expectations mentally prepare us for action. In essence, we must always be vigilant so that nothing takes us by surprise. Thus, they fulfill the mission and allow us to assume responsibilities, separate desires from duties, take advantage of the present, among others.

The construction of expectations, in the educational field, are influenced from many perspectives. One of them is the socio-familiar (profession and level of education of the parents) and personal (gender, age, marital status), also the school ones such as academic achievement and the trajectory of the student. The family with a good economic level begins to play an important role in the future performance of the student, since it

provides security and support to face different vicissitudes. From an academic point of view, planning and teaching strategies, added to a good work environment by classmates and teachers, influence the vision that the student has about his future educational process. In this sense, the effectiveness of the educational model of the institution acquires a relevant level for the student in terms of the construction of their motivations (Hernández and Padilla, 2019).

Likewise, for Campos (2022), fear implies for the subject to escape from everything that he considers could cause harm to his person. It is an imaginary or also real damage, a defense mechanism, against a threatening situation that may occur in the future. This article adopts the position from a psychological and social view of fear, which indicates that it is built based on a learned reaction, product of threatening situations in the context of a society or culture.

An interesting qualitative study carried out by Alfonso et. al (2019) groups the expectations and fears of students into categories on subjects, career and social aspects. Regarding expectations, he points out the importance of creating classroom spaces between teachers and students, working on contents that are close to the working world of their career. Regarding fears, what they will do as future professionals in economic sciences appears.

In turn, an investigation carried out in Chile by Martínez (2020) to a group of 4th and 5th year pedagogy students, reflects the importance of acquiring experience, relationships and of course cultural capital. In this sense, they expect the university to give them the necessary tools to be subjects of social changes. They also like that teachers teach using didactic methodologies. On the side of fears, there are those related to the world of work and the little practical experience acquired during the degree.

On the other hand, Avendaño (2020), concludes that the participants of an entrepreneurship program manifest as expectations to improve opportunities. As fear appears the fear of failure and facing intentional entrepreneurs once they enter the world of work.

However, Suarez et al. (2021) indicate in their descriptive study carried out on 150 students from the social field, that the highest expectations of university students are oriented towards altruistic aspects, teamwork and leadership. For their part, among the fears are low remuneration and job instability.

García and Gaviria (2021) conclude in their study interesting aspects regarding expectations and fears. Students express interest in the teacher developing collaborative work methodologies. Their fears are due to the lack of time and organization of the teaching and learning processes, as well as obtaining good grades.

The phenomenon of expectations and fears is also addressed during the Covid 19 pandemic, its respective confinement in Chile in 2020. This is evidenced by an investigation by Reyes and Baeza (2021) to 58 first-year students of tertiary education at the University de Concepción and the Virginio Gómez Professional Institute. In this regard, they point out that their highest expectations regarding their career and the institution were the rise in social terms, obtaining recognition and the imaginary of a world of opportunities. In the framework of their fears is the uncertainty of the future and lack of motivation.

After carrying out an exhaustive search on the subject, no publications were found on the expectations and fears of working adult students in careers of continuing studies in areas of business sciences. They do exist in undergraduate programs for health professions, education, and psychology. This

opens a space for a gap in scientific research, taking into consideration that this type of plans for students who work and study have become more and more popular in Chile at the level of private and state universities. Only in the context of the Arturo Prat University, where this study was carried out, the students represent a third of the annual enrollment.

The research has a social relevance, since its results benefit the students of the career by creating intervention projects that allow them to mitigate their fears and improve their expectations while they are studying. It also has a methodological utility, developing new instruments to collect information and analyze empirical data from a qualitative approach. Finally, the study manifests a theoretical implication, since it allows the academic body to reflect on the relevance of training a working adult student in accordance with a comprehensive perspective, not only cognitive, but also in relation to their emotional health.

The objective of the study is to explore the meaning that working adult students construct, regarding the expectations and fears during the development of their study program, in the career of engineering in business administration, at the Teaching and Linking Center of the Arturo University. Prat in Santiago de Chile in the year 2021.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The focus of the study was qualitative and exploratory level. It is descriptive (by the students' account) and interpretive (by the reflection of the researchers). A design with emphasis on a case study was applied, since it was intended to understand a phenomenon in depth of a group of working adult students, regarding the expectations and fears when entering their engineering career in business

administration at the University. Arturo Prat in Santiago de Chile (Medina et. al, 2014).

The study considered a population of 213 students of the career. An intentional sample of 100 students was used, equivalent to two courses, belonging to the cohort of working adult students, men and women who enrolled and entered the engineering continuity program in business administration.

Given the characteristics of the methodological approach and the design used, the instrument designed to collect the information was an unstructured interview, sent via corporate mail to the students. Once the information was collected, the researchers proceeded to process the data, grouping the ideas of the students into large groups, yielding 11 categories divided into 6 for expectations and 5 for fears. The analysis was carried out through the use of Excel spreadsheets with comparative tables and descriptive statistics such as sums and percentages.

The project had a spatial delimitation corresponding to the Teaching and Linking Center of the Arturo Prat University, in Santiago de Chile. Its temporary delimitation was located in the first semester of the year 2021.

Only students who studied the engineering degree program in business administration during the year 2021, first semester, were considered as inclusion criteria. For the thematic analysis, search for documents and publications in the field of education, the Unesco Thesaurus was used. Finally, bibliography from indexed higher education journals in the university environment and validated databases such as Scielo, Dialnet, Erihplus, Google Scholar, among others, were used.

Within the exclusion criteria, graduate students or graduates from other career cohorts were left out of the research.

greater participation than women in their responses.

## RESULTS

The descriptive exploration of the data provided by the interview yielded the following results regarding the investigated phenomenon:

**Table 1-** Expectations of working adult students

Respuestas	Hombres	Mujeres	Total	Participantes	%
Mejorar mis expectativas laborales.	46	40	86	100	86%
Obtener el título profesional.	39	34	73	100	73%
Lograr un mejor desempeño laboral.	32	29	61	100	61%
Reforzar conocimiento ya adquiridos.	16	8	24	100	24%
Aplinar lo que aprenda en mi trabajo actual.	12	5	17	100	17%
Terminar en el tiempo previsto.	5	5	10	100	10%

Over 60% of working adult students evidenced that improving job prospects, obtaining a professional title, and improving job performance are the greatest expectations aroused by continuing higher education once they have entered the world of work. On the other hand, under 60%, revealed as less recurring expectations the reinforcement of knowledge, the application of what has been learned and the expected time for the end of the degree. Men presented greater participation than women in their responses.

**Table 2-** Fears of working adult students

Respuestas	Hombres	Mujeres	Total	Participantes	%
Que me falte tiempo para estudiar.	32	24	56	100	56%
No alcanzar el nivel exigido por la Universidad.	24	17	41	100	41%
Tener dificultades laborales para dar las pruebas o exámenes.	22	15	37	100	37%
Que los profesores no sean hábiles para enseñar a adultos trabajadores.	13	13	26	100	26%
Que los profesores no expliquen bien.	13	12	25	100	25%

About 37% of the students expressed the lack of time to study, not exceeding the level required by the university and having time difficulties to take the tests or exams. Under 37% declared that the main fears of students are having teachers who are not suitable to teach working adult students and teachers who do not explain well. Men presented

## DISCUSSION

Adults who have embarked on an academic path at middle age are advancing in their personal lives and in their world of work, accompanied at all times by insecurities and uncertainties regarding what the future holds for them. They will succeed or fail to the extent that their skills and abilities, added to their experiences, make sense with what is required by reality. Otherwise, your expectations will not be fully met and your fears will increase even more.

Both variables, expectations and fears, will be favored and diminished respectively, to the extent that the student pursues a professional program according to his employment situation and his own demands. Otherwise, it will be a resounding failure, not only professionally, but also personally and family. (Daza et. al (2022)

Regarding expectations, it is clear that non-compliance with them causes a labor inconvenience and, professionally, in your workplace. On many occasions, their expectations differ from the reality they are faced with and they decide not to continue with their studies and drop out as a result of their poor performance and its impact on their work aspect. Many of them enter tertiary education thinking only that their experience will be enough to finish their studies. As time goes by, they realize the demands of the program and how difficult it is to reconcile family, the academic world, and work. Along the same lines, the companies where they work require them to have a higher education degree and this pressure influences the emotional part of the students, increasing their stress and incidentally affecting their relationship with their family nucleus. (Gamboa et al., 2021)

The results show the relevance of their significant learning and its relationship with the experience they bring from their world of work. In this regard, in their research, Espinar and Viguera (2020), argue the importance of the prior knowledge that a subject has to face a new educational context. They also point out that these are crucial to ensure meaningful learning and its relationship with the world of work and comprehensive training.

One of the main results regarding the fears of working adult students is related to time. On a few occasions, due to their different family and work responsibilities, they are unable to fulfill their academic activities. This issue is also directly related to the difficulty in responding to the demands of the university.

A study carried out by Baquero and Ruesga (2020) point out that "The fact of working while pursuing higher studies, when there is no control of the relationship between both activities, has negative effects on both types of shifts" (p.46). In some instances, working adult students do not have the necessary time to attend their assistantships outside of class hours or, failing that, they cannot comply with a normal load of activities. Some of them hold leadership positions and do not attend their evaluations to comply with their professional duties. An example is the case of adults who work in banks or institutions of the State of Chile. The bureaucracy and the demands of their jobs force them to meet priorities and schedules of more than 8 hours a day, hindering their academic performance.

Studies carried out by Reyes et al. (2022) conclude that a large part of the non-compliance with the academic activities of university students is due to precarious planning strategies, non-prioritization of time and inadequate formulation of objectives. Other research shows that men present greater procrastination behaviors

versus women who better organize their goals, their time management and school subjects (Garzón and Gil, 2017).

Working adult students, product of work fatigue, begin to present some cognitive limitations and incidentally insecurities and demotivation. In part, it is because they have been out of a formal education system for a long time and have lost motivation and practice of what it means to keep up with classes, exhibitions, assignments, debates. Their short-term memory, inductive and deductive reasoning begin to be affected, the same happens with the development of higher skills such as analysis, synthesis, and decision-making.

One strategy, in order to safeguard the problematic situation raised, is asking teachers for suitability and willingness to explain their subjects within an andragogic scenario. In this context, Aguilar et al. (2019), are emphatic in pointing out the importance of using teaching and learning strategies according to an adult who studies and works. They argue that, within an academic environment of higher education, the teacher must become a facilitator of learning, allowing to increase thinking and improve the quality of life of adults, in addition to developing their innovative creation within the classroom. In essence, there must be a relationship in teaching of a theoretical-practical nature, where real life cases are developed that are familiar to students. In this way, it facilitates a greater acquisition of knowledge and improves attention and commitment to the educational act. Additionally, group work helps develop the intellectual capital of the team, since everyone contributes to the final result.

Delgado et al. (2020), reaffirm the above by pointing out in their study the importance of the work of the university professor, not only from the point of view of their professional skills and experience, but also from the perspectives of affective relationships and

concern for the human profile of the university student. Under this context, the professor would attend to the most intimate needs of his personality, motivation, leadership, decision-making in his world of work, and university participation. All these aspects help to reduce fears and increase expectations so that students generate a greater feeling of belonging to their house of studies and avoid early dropout as a way out of the system.

The study presented some limitations in its implementation:

Several students considered it inappropriate to answer questions for research, taking into consideration that their main priority was to study at a certain time and not waste time on other topics that were far from their academic activity.

Another limitation was exposing, on the part of the students, topics as personal as their expectations and mainly their fears. The latter, as they stated, represent something very sensitive about human beings to be exhibited in an investigation, despite the fact that the interview responses were anonymous. This caused a large part of the questions not to be answered in a high percentage, specifically by women.

A third drawback was the complication that certain students had in responding to the instrument via mail, since they presented difficulties in technological matters.

Finally, an obstacle arose in terms of a reluctance to conduct research with students inside and outside of class hours.

The study allowed to generate the following research interests:

Development of active-participatory methodologies according to the reality of a

working adult student of a continuing education program.

How a working adult student learns from a continuing education program.

How to evaluate a working adult student of a continuing education program.

Development of higher education policies aimed at working adult students continuing their studies.

Understanding who is the working adult student in a continuum of studies from a cognitive, emotional, biological and social point of view.

Development of accompaniment programs on emotional health issues for working adult students of a plan of continuity of studies.

Training for the institution's academics in understanding what it means to train and educate a working adult student in a continuing education program.

Mental health and its adaptation to the academic curriculum of a working adult student of a continuing education program. Implication of educating students under the wing of andragogy and constructivism.

Development of workshops that improve aspects related to the fears and expectations

of working adult students in a continuing education program.

Information on the expectations and fears of working adult students in a continuity of study program and its relationship with leveling processes.

The affectation of the expectations and fears of the working adult students of a program of continuity of studies in the enrollment rates. The participation of the family in the decision and support during the study program. The working adult students expressed a large number of meanings to their expectations and fears when facing their academic program. A high percentage was inclined to improve their working conditions and obtain their professional title. Instead, their fears came from the time dedicated to their studies and compliance with the demands of the academic plan, in addition to adequate preparation and patience on the part of the teachers when teaching. The results obtained show the importance of creating higher education programs aimed exclusively at working adult students. A different understanding was also achieved, by the administrative and academic management, regarding what it means to educate a human being with different cognitive, social, and biological factors than another group of traditional undergraduate students.

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### Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

### Contribution of the authors

The author author participated in the writing of the work and analysis of the documents.

### Quote as

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