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The horizontal stratification of the Catalonian university system: the role of the private university

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The horizontal stratification of the Catalonian university system: the role of the private university

The present paper explores the role the private university plays in the horizontal stratification of the university system in Catalonia, a context where, like in the rest of Spain, there has been little tradition of private universities but there has been a strong expansion in recent years. From a sample of 807 students who have accessed university and who we have been following since the last year of compulsory secondary education, we measure the importance attributed to two horizontal stratification criteria, the degree programme and whether the university is private. We then explore which socio-demographic and academic variables can explain the different assessments students make of the private university, differentiated by fields of study. The results show that in the Catalan university system, the degree programmes are more important than university ownership. Furthermore, students from higher sociocultural backgrounds and those with better marks do not value the prestige of the private university highly, except in the area of the social sciences and, to a small degree, the sciences. Thus, there has been a slight advance in the private university within the context of the university field in recent years, showing a weak capacity to generate horizontal stratification.

Keywords: horizontal stratification; private university; university field; Higher Education Institutions prestige; degree programmes prestige.

Introduction

Families from different social classes use the education system as one of the main means of social reproduction and mobility. Although there is no strict correspondence, the vertical differentiation of the education system in stages provides a structure which, to a certain degree, parallels that of the employment hierarchy in the labour market, thus generating inequality in access to economic, social, and cultural resources. As each educational stage expands, it is first occupied by the more advantaged social classes, but when access reaches saturation point at these stages, the lower classes begin to enter. Given that education is a positional good (Ortiz and Rodriguez-Menés 2016), more people try to access the next educational stage, causing its expansion. The privileged classes simultaneously seek new forms of closure through horizontal rather than vertical stratification, using the qualitative advantages that provide the what or where they study

within the same educational level (Lucas 2017, 2001; Raftery and Hout 1993).

Access to tertiary education for young cohorts is 50 per cent or more in almost all middle-income countries and in all high-income countries (Marginson 2016). Consequently, the process of moving from a vertical to a horizontal stratification has also reached this educational stage. This phenomenon is more pronounced in countries with a greater proportion of higher education graduates and where institutional differentiation is more relevant to access the best jobs in the labour market (Triventi 2013; Klein 2016).

University systems have generated different forms and degrees of horizontal stratification. This difference can be attributed to the fact that, depending on the history and the configuration of the field in the specific national environments (Marginson 2006), the system has responded more to the demands of the elites, the requirements of the middle classes or even, in some countries, to a greater social distribution of higher education (Marginson 2016).

However, in all the models the search for 'the best students' in either academic or social terms brings varying degrees of advantages given that universities can thereby become more effective and achieve a better reputation, which is becoming increasingly linked to obtaining more funding, especially in contexts where a quasi-market system has developed (Verger 2013; Ball 2003). This is explained by the fact that although the governments' intention in introducing the quasi-market in higher education is to make the institutions differentiate horizontally by specialising in different missions, it is in fact reinforcing the hierarchy around traditional academic values with universities entering a circle of positive or negative reputation (Marginson 2006; Raffe and Croxford 2015).

There is an enormous amount of literature devoted to examining how horizontal stratification is shaped within the university system, highlighting the fact that the hierarchy is characterised by different elements. Some examples of how universities are distinguished among them is by reputation or prestige, the number of students accessing the different types of institutions, the existence of double or triple tiers (with different institutions, durations, and degrees), and the organisation of fields of study and degree programmes, among others. Nonetheless, most research studies explore stratification based on just one of these elements, or they typically compare stratification due to hierarchies between fields of study (or degree programmes) and universities. Following this logic, international comparison draws the conclusion that when there is a marked hierarchy among universities then the fields of study are less important, and vice versa (Iannelli, Gamoran, and Paterson 2018).

As an example of the results obtained in this regard in different countries, and following the authors' analyses —which are sometimes incomplete because they only use some of the aspects of hierarchy— some countries such as the United States (Scott, Gallacher, and Parry 2016; Kim, Tamborini, and Sakamoto 2015), the United Kingdom (Iannelli, Gamoran, and Paterson 2011; Boliver 2011, 2013; Triventi 2013; Raffe and Croxford 2015), China (Liu 2018; Luo, Guo, and Shi 2018), Korea (Byun and Park 2017), Peru (R. Wells et al. 2018), Brazil and Chile (Quaresma and Villalobos Dintrans 2018), and France (Duru-Bellat, Kieffer, and Reimer 2008) are more towards the extreme of greater importance attributed to the selection of students and prestige due to the hierarchy among universities. Meanwhile, in countries such as Italy (Triventi, Vergolini, and Zanini 2017), Norway (Borgen and Mastekaasa 2018), Germany (Duru-Bellat, Kieffer, and Reimer 2008), and Sweden (Hällsten 2010), stratification based on fields of study has been shown to be more relevant.

The information provided by these and many other studies has led to the general view that the European model tends to be more stratified by fields of study than by institutions (Bloch et al. 2017). However, other more detailed analyses point to an interesting phenomenon of interaction that makes the reading more complex. Once within the most prestigious institutions in a university system, the fields of study they offer is not a criterion of the hierarchy. In contrast, stratification by field of study is of great importance in the rest of the universities. This is the case reported for France (Duru-Bellat, Kieffer, and Reimer 2008), Brazil and Chile (Quaresma and Villalobos Dintrans 2018), and Scotland (Iannelli, Gamoran, and Paterson 2018), although in the latter the hierarchical relationship is not expected in the less prestigious universities because they provide students from lower social backgrounds with greater access to degree programmes with higher expected economic returns.

In summary, the criteria for horizontal stratification are diverse, adopting an idiosyncratic configuration in each university system. The criterion of hierarchy between universities is widespread, but notably the criteria for distinguishing between these institutions may again vary. In some countries the old universities have more prestige than the new ones, while in others it is the metropolitan universities as opposed to the peripheral ones, and in another group of countries the main distinction is whether they are public or private. Historical reasons have shaped certain patterns in the university field.

The focus of this paper is the distinction between public and private universities. More specifically, the focus of the analysis is the situation of the university field in Catalonia with regard to the capacity of the private university to generate horizontal stratification, approaching the matter from the perception of the prestige attributed to the private university by university students.

The Catalan university system includes twelve universities (seven public, four private and a distance-learning university). The structure of the Catalan system follows the same rules as the Spanish system. First, all the degrees last at least four years, and some take up to six years (seven for dual degree programmes). Secondly, the main entry is from the upper secondary academic route, the baccalaureate, although there is also access from higher vocational training and other routes for mature students. Throughout the Spanish system, the 2012-13 academic year saw an increase in tuition fees and a toughening of the conditions for obtaining and retaining grants. However, it is in the Catalan system that the cost has increased the most and this has left the Catalan university system in the sixth most expensive in Europe in terms of the maximum prices of its degrees.

The higher education system as a field

The sociological term 'field' is defined as an autonomous space where restrictions are set for the agents in it, who occupy positions in a hierarchy and are constantly interacting with one another. There are always struggles in a field because the different agents try to redefine their positions in it, despite having unequal opportunities to do so. Better positioned agents hold more resources and so their chances of reproducing their advantage in the field are higher. Meanwhile, those in worse positions seek external alliances to redefine the structure of the field and achieve a better position. The structure of positions in a specific field is based on the worth conferred to each capital (symbolic, cultural, economic, social, and so on) at play, hence these are the resources at the agents' disposal (Martín Criado 2010; Bourdieu 2013; Bathmaker 2015).

The concept of field can be perfectly applied to the analysis of the education system. First, as the main stakeholders in the field, educators are professionals who have a lot of control over their work and deal with specialised knowledge. And second, because the system supplies educational credentials that have the power to provide a legitimate social closure to gain a social position. Many organisations, social groups, and institutions are interested in playing on a field with such power at stake (Martín Criado 2010).

The term field applies particularly well in the case of the higher education system because it is a part of the education system that is more autonomous than the rest (Bourdieu 2013). In addition, power from other fields penetrates into the higher education field through alliances made by the agents in it (Bourdieu 2008)(Bourdieu 2008)(Bourdieu 2008)(Bourdieu 2008)(Bourdieu 2008)(Bourdieu 2008)(Bourdieu, 2008) and because the advancing structure of the system as a quasi-market provides a playground of competition and interdependence. Within this new context, Evans et al. (Evans et al. 2019) show how the history of the institution and the ideas of its members regarding their own identity condition how they will try to position themselves in the field, although the more traditional academic values weigh heavily when it comes to seeking prestige (Raffe and Croxford 2015).

Accordingly, many universities play their assets to position themselves on the field and attract the best students, who in turn choose the most popular universities, thus creating a circular effect by giving the institution a selective character, capable of providing class closure. The assets involved are diverse in nature. Among the most important are a good position in international research rankings, given that students use this as a quality proxy, despite their being little evidence of the relationship between research work and the quality of teaching (Marginson 2006). There is also an argument

for the quality of the graduates, although this could be attributed to previous social, economic, or academic selection criteria to access the institution (Khan, 2015). Furthermore, good opportunities to social network among students and the promise of getting good jobs upon graduation are also referred to, although what part of the result is attributable to the social composition of the group of students and what part is due to the advantage provided by the institution itself in the labour market is not usually specified (Trivellato, Triventi, and Traini 2016; Sullivan et al. 2018; Klein 2019; Canal Domínguez and Rodríguez Gutiérrez 2020).

At times, the impossibility of competing for prestige or a specific institutional mission causes some universities to seek their own niches by specialising in particular fields of study or a particular type of student, for example mature students, students who combine study and work, students with previous complex itineraries, and so on. Its position in the field will also be defined by this strategy.

Private institutions on the university field

Following Levy (2012), this paper applies one of the relevant classifications to address the question of what role private universities play in the field and the consequences this entails for horizontal stratification. The idea is to consider that private universities can be elite, semi-elite, or demand-absorbing, the latter separated by Levy into serious institutions and institutions of dubious character. In the vast majority of countries, private universities charge much higher fees than public ones, giving them an economical selection tool to position themselves in the field as dispensers of a scarce good with positional value (Marginson 2016). However, they do not always play this role given that they are not always the preferred sector.

In the global framework, elite private universities preferred by students as a first choice are a minority and are concentrated mainly in the USA and some Latin American countries. The number of semi-elite universities is also modest. The universities that absorb demand are the most numerous, proliferating especially in developing countries and in Eastern Europe in the post-Soviet period, although in the latter the public university later regained ground (Scott, Gallacher, and Parry 2016; Marginson 2016; Levy 2012).

Focusing on the European context, it becomes evident how difficult it has traditionally been for private universities to advance in the field. Several authors attribute this difficulty to the fact that in Europe education is generally considered as a public good and it is the state's responsibility to provide it. In fact, the private university is not only subject to comprehensive state controls but also hires many of its part-time lecturers from public universities and seeks legitimacy by resembling the public institutions, making them little different from each other but, in all cases, with a lower academic and research reputation (Levy 2012; Teixeira et al. 2014).

Despite this situation derived from its history, in Europe there has been a constant growth of private universities in recent times, which can be attributed to various factors. Some governments have met the ever-increasing demand for access to higher education with a certain relaxation of the requirements for private universities, such as the national accreditation requirements. This has caused some of these private institutions to search for their own niches more linked to the immediate demands of the labour market, thus absorbing the exceeding demand (Teixeira et al. 2014). Despite this initial situation, some of these private institutions have managed to place themselves in elite positions —even in a bastion country of the public university such as Italy (Trivellato, Triventi, and Traini 2016)— or are clearly making progress in the field, as

Levy (2012) points out, particularly with regards to the professional schools in Germany, the business schools in France, Italy and Poland, and the new private universities in the United Kingdom.

The private university in Spain and Catalonia

Given that the presence of private universities has historically been very small, Spain is considered to respond to the model of the continental public university system (Levy 2012). The first private university dates back to the 19th century and for most of the 20th century there were only four private universities, all of them church-run with special permission from the state, and some private schools that depended on the public universities for official recognition of their degree programmes. Of these schools, there are at least three business schools that can be considered as prestigious or elite, one of which is in Catalonia (Soro Bonmatí and Archontakis 2007). Despite the 1983 University Reform Law (LRU), which transformed many aspects of the university structure including allowing for the existence and foundation of private universities, only the same four private universities existed until the 1990s.

Throughout the 1990s, demand for university access continued its strong growth, slowing up around the year 2000, having increased from 170,000 to 1.5 million students in just 40 years. It was also during this decade that private universities began to be founded, doing so at a rapid pace. Some of them were constituted through the association of already existing private schools that had been dependent on the public ones. In general, these new universities were designed to be demand-absorbing or semi-elite, although there were important variations among the schools from which they were constituted (Soro Bonmatí and Archontakis 2007; Rahona 2008). Thus, from 1990 to the present, Spain has gone from four private universities to 32, and Catalonia from

none to four, plus one distance university. In the same period, the percentage of students enrolled in private universities has risen from 3.2 to 18 per cent of the total number of undergraduate students in Spain, and to 14 per cent of undergraduate students in Catalonia in 2018 (Rodríguez 2017; Soro Bonmatí and Archontakis 2007; Idescat 2019; Secretaría General de Universidades 2019).

To position themselves in the field, the new private universities rely on the previous prestige of their schools which, as already mentioned, in some cases is high. In fact, the available rankings show how, in global terms, private universities occupy medium and low positions, while some of their degrees, taught in historically prestigious schools, are well or very well positioned (El·Mundo 2019). Some examples for the Catalan case are business administration, social education, advertising, and chemistry. The other degrees, schools, and institutions have a non-elite status, although notably in recent years some universities have managed to offer more prestigious degrees in the field of health studies, including pharmacy (5 years), dentistry, and medicine (6 years), which until recently in Catalonia were only taught at public universities. Hence, the position of private universities in the field may be changing.

A recent research study on the image projected by private universities concluded that overall their main characteristic is considered by students in general to be 'expensive', while among private secondary school pupils their image is more positive, relating private universities with the opportunity to 'find a good job' (Gutiérrez-Villar, Alcaide-Pulido, and Carbonero-Ruz 2017). However, it must be kept in mind that the traditional structure of the field of higher education in Spain is based on the varying prestige of the degree programmes offered, be it the perceived prestige (Alvarez Hernández 2014) or the resulting social composition (Fernández Mellizo-Soto and Salvo 2019), and any modification of the field may overlap this structure.

Thus, our question on the perception of the prestige of university will be framed within this context of the private university's unequal progress in the university field, which is superimposed on the attribution of prestige linked to the field of study or degree programmes. Given this specific configuration, it was considered that the perception of prestige would be relative, depending on the university field of study in which the student is enrolled. Furthermore, perception may be biased according to other individual social or academic characteristics, since students may share a certain vision or information with their network of family relations, social relations, school, friends, and so on, or because a level of academic ability may confer various advantages or disadvantages in terms of access and success in different paths. Consequently, we developed an analysis model with the aim of exploring the independent socio-demographic and academic variables that influence the assessment of the field of study and the public and private universities.

Methodology

Data and sample

This paper is based on data obtained from a longitudinal study of a sample of 2,056 students from 27 schools in the city of Barcelona in their last year of compulsory secondary education (tenth grade) during the school year 2013-14. The participants were surveyed each year up to 2017. The data comes from the International Study of City Youth and the sample was representative of the school ownership (public-private) and social background of schools in Barcelona. The sample attrition was corrected by the Inverse Probability Weighting (IPW) method.

The sample members who were studying at university in the last wave of the longitudinal study (2017) were selected for this study. The total number was 807 students, although the total N changes slightly for each analysis due to some individuals not answering some questions in the questionnaire.

Analysis strategy

The proposed analysis is of a descriptive and exploratory nature. First, we compare the distributions of the answers to two of the questions on the questionnaire, answered on a scale of 1 to 5, to assess two aspects: first, if what confers prestige on university studies is the specific degree programme; and, second, if what confers prestige is whether the degree is studied at a private university. The objective is to show the importance attributed to these two criteria of horizontal stratification by the sample of the university population on which this study is based.

Continuing in the same line of study, the progress of the private university in the field, we focus on the analysis of the responses to the attribution of prestige depending on whether the university is private. After providing descriptive information about the variables that have an impact on this assessment (means and standard deviations), we analyse the importance of these socio-demographic and academic variables to see which of them explain the different valuations of private universities, always taking the field of study into account. This last exploration is carried out by means of an analysis of variance in which the different variables are introduced as explanatory factors and variability is reduced by controlling the results for three covariates (ANCOVA), two related to the choices already made regarding studying in private centres, and one related to a small part of the population with signs of significant economic difficulties.

The explanatory factors we use of a socio-demographic nature are sex, sociocultural status (SCS) —constructed from the highest parental educational and

occupational level— financial problems in making ends meet (covariate), and social complexity (average socioeconomic status) of the secondary school attended, which is an indicator provided by the Catalan government. We also use academic factors, including marks obtained during the educational pathway - constructed from the marks provided by the students in each wave of the longitudinal survey - and field of study to which the degree programme being studied belongs. The two variables, ownership of the secondary school attended (private or public) and the university where the student is enrolled, are also used as covariates of the model.

To give an idea of the net effect of the variables that have been shown to be most influential in the analysis, we offer four graphs of the estimated marginal means of the students' evaluation of the private university according to these four variables (marks, sex, SCS and school average socioeconomic status) and the fields of study.

Simultaneously, a binary logistic regression using the same independent variables was performed. The dependent variable was constructed with the same variable of prestige given to the private university, considering high (scores 4, 5) versus medium and lower ratings (3, 2, 1). This complementary analysis allows clarifying the importance of the influence for each variable beyond the probability assigned to each combination of categories.

Results

Two items in the questionnaire measure the extent to which the students confer prestige on the type of ownership of the university (private or public) and the specific degree programme studied. Comparing the first two rows on Table 1, an opposite trend can be seen in the two assessments. While the attribution of prestige based on the degree programme is biased towards agreement, the attribution based on private ownership of

the university is skewed towards disagreement. The distance between one average and the other is one point, and while only 13 per cent of students disagree with the importance of the prestige of the degree programme, 54 per cent disagree with private universities conferring prestige on university studies.

A reading of these results shows that the strength of the degree programme as the main criterion for horizontal stratification continues to be far more important than university ownership. However, a quarter of students, a not inconsiderable number, agree or very much agree (scores 4 and 5) with the assessment of the private university as a source of prestige for university studies. This could provide clues about the changes that are taking place in the university field and about the possible differences in valuation that occur in the various fields of study.

Table 1. The prestige of a degree programme depends on ...

		Mean	N	Standard deviation
…the very degree programme attended.		**3.62**	**807**	**1.08**
…the university attended being private.		**2.61**	**807**	**1.35**
By:				
Sex	Man	2.60	358	1.30
	Woman	2.62	448	1.35
Sociocultural Status	High	2.52	615	1.30
	Low-Medium	2.87	184	1.44
Economic stress	Without economic difficulties	2.63	675	1.33
	With economic difficulties	2.49	121	1.44
Marks during secondary school	Very Good student	2.59	318	1.36
	Good or Student sometimes failing	2.64	475	1.34
School Social Complexity	Low Complexity	2.44	178	1.23
	Medium Complexity	2.56	559	1.32
	High Complexity	3.48	70	1.50
Secondary School Ownership	Public	2.54	161	1.38
	Private	2.63	646	1.34
University Ownership	Public	2.56	631	1.36
	Private	2.85	160	1.33
Field of Study	Humanities	2.47	95	1.39
	Social sciences	2.78	358	1.38
	Science	2.67	75	1.42
	Health	2.29	93	1.35
	Engineering and Architecture	2.51	185	1.81

Table 1 also shows how the groups assess the private university and how this evaluation varies depending on the different variables. These descriptive data reflect

how the highest evaluation of the prestige of the private university is made by people of lower sociocultural origin, in centres where this social origin predominates (high complexity schools), and among students with medium and low grades, provided they did not have serious economic difficulties. These variables interact with the choice previously made in the sense that while the majority of students in private centres are of a higher social origin, the fact that they have previously chosen to study there means they are already displaying a greater appreciation of the prestige of the private institutions.

Thus, the farther away from university the family is socially, and among less academically gifted students, the better the private university is valued. However, differences by field of study appear to indicate that there are important internal divergences. The two fields of study at the extremes and showing the smallest dispersions are social sciences and health sciences. The students studying social sciences value the private university more positively than the students in the rest of the areas, while those studying health sciences value the private university more negatively than the rest. Of particular note is the score obtained by the field of science, for which there is a school traditionally established in Catalonia where science-related subjects have been taught for some time and which has recently incorporated degrees in the new areas of biological development.

The ANCOVA multivariate analysis carried out to explore the net influence of the variables analysed is specified in a model that explains 23.3 per cent of the variance (see the complete model in the appendix, Table 2). The results of the model show the great importance of the interactions, such that the individual contribution of each variable largely depends on how it relates to the rest. For this reason, we further provide some of the outstanding results of the operation of the model: the estimated marginal

means of four of these important variables, differentiated by field of study, and with another three variables set at their means.

Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4. Estimated Marginal Means of: What gives a degree programme prestige is that the university attended is private by Fields of Study and other variables.

Figure 1. Estimated Marginal Means by Marks During Secondary School.

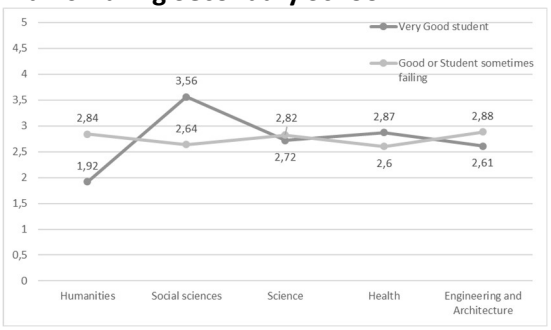


Figure 2. Estimated Marginal Means by Sex.

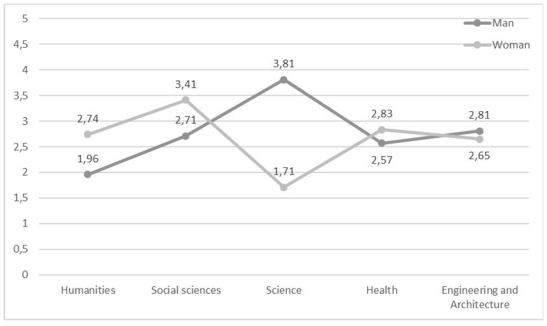


Figure 3. Estimated Marginal Means by Sociocultural Status.

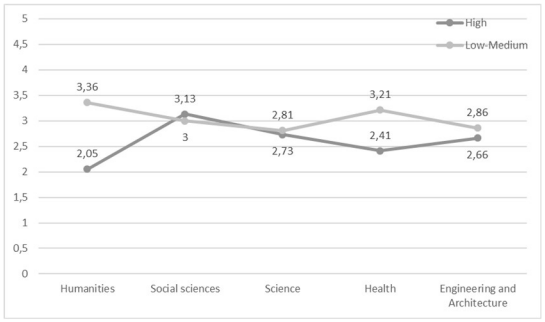
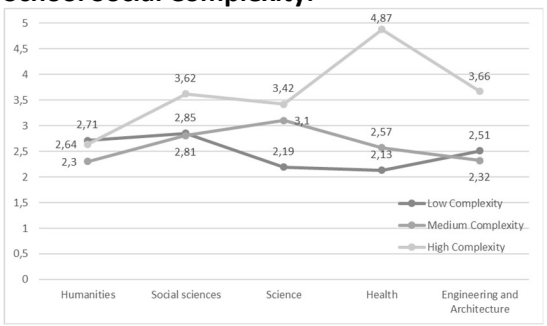


Figure 4. Estimated Marginal Means by School Social Complexity.



Note: Covariates appearing in the models are evaluated at the following values: University ownership = 0.2032 (private), Economic stress = 0.8688 (without stress), Secondary school ownership = 0.1917 (public).

As shown in figure 1, the effect of the marks is now reduced in the multivariate model. In all the areas except for the humanities and the social sciences, the scores given to the private university depending on the marks the students obtained during secondary school are very similar. In the humanities, the students with the worst marks give the private university a higher score, while in the social sciences those with the best marks score the prestige of the private university higher.

Considering the differences by sex (Figure 2), it can be seen how men and women score similarly, except for the field of science, where an important polarisation is observed, with men valuing the prestige of the private university very highly.

Figure 3 shows how the scores given to the private university by students from high sociocultural backgrounds are consistently lower than those given by students from other sociocultural levels in all areas except for the social sciences and science, where they catch up with the scores given by the latter group.

Last, depending on the complexity of the schools where they studied at the secondary level (Figure 4), it is shown that students with a lower sociocultural background (high complexity) consistently value the private institutions higher in all the fields of study, with the health sciences clearly standing out. From further analysis carried out with the dependent variable treated as a dichotomy (see Table 3 on the appendix), it emerged that these two variables, school complexity and fields of study, are the main factors to explain the differences in the appreciation of private universities.

In summary, the general pattern observed is that people from higher sociocultural backgrounds tend to attribute less prestige to the private university, the more representative example of this trend clearly being the field of study of humanities, where the students who obtained the highest marks also attached little value to the private university. There is an exception concerning the group with a high sociocultural background and high marks, which value the private university positively in the field of study of the social sciences.

In addition to this clear interaction between sociocultural status and field of study, we observe that the complexity of the school acts as a mediating variable (Table 3 in the appendix). The general opinion in schools of high complexity (low sociocultural status) would better value the prestige of a private university. This seems

to indicate that building and sharing opinions together is an important mechanism for explaining the students' assessment of the private university.

Conclusions

In recent times, we have witnessed an important expansion of private universities at the international level (Marginson 2016). The emergence of this sector may have contributed to the restructuring of the horizontal stratification of university systems in each country, but this will depend on how these universities have positioned themselves in the field and how they have been received by potential users in each context.

The results obtained in this paper show that the role of the private university in the horizontal stratification of the Catalan university field appears to be weak when compared to the role played by the degree programmes. Furthermore, it should be noted that the sociocultural elite value the private university less than the rest, except when they have already chosen to study secondary school or higher education in the private sector. Thus, it can be said that in spite of the important growth of these institutions, the private university is advancing slowly in the field, developing little capacity to stratify the system horizontally to its advantage.

Nonetheless, the students in this sample do value the private university to a certain extent and they do so in varying ways depending on the field of study. In fact, there are some fields of study in which the students with a high sociocultural background together with those with high grades value the private university more than the rest, thus reversing the trend. This is clearly the case for the social sciences and less intensely for the sciences, although this last pattern is not entirely clear, probably because it depends largely on the specific degree programmes involved. These two most

highly-rated fields of study also coincide with the schools that traditionally hold the best position in the Catalan university field, as has been observed in the previously compiled rankings. More specifically, some private universities are trying to expand their offer of traditionally prestigious degree courses in the fields of the social sciences and sciences with good insertion in the labour market.

The international literature already reports differences in the progress of the private university in the field, not only according to the university system in each country, but also depending on the history of the institution trying to make a place for itself. Basically, the existing higher education institutions with a consolidated position of prestige in the field find it easier to expand, while newly created universities face reputation problems and their quality is often openly questioned (Levy 2012; Marginson 2016).

This process reflects how the idiosyncrasies of the field depend on its history. In fact, the schools that historically have the best reputation, both socially and in the labour market, have this asset and use it to maintain or improve their position in times of change. The rest of the private universities, most of which were created in the 1990s, probably play a role as semi-elite or directly as demand-absorber institutions, especially in the fields of study with the lowest assessment.

Concerning the interaction between the two stratification criteria analysed, the ownership of the university and the degree attended, a particular form of overlapping has become apparent. This form does not respond so much to the pattern identified by some authors on how the hierarchy between degrees is reduced once we look at the most prestigious institutions (Duru-Bellat, Kieffer, and Reimer 2008; Iannelli, Gamoran, and Paterson 2018), but in other combinations that may result from specific strategies followed by the institutions. Firstly, we see how some private universities

achieve prestige in particular degrees, but not in others, and this is how students perceive them. Secondly, we have indicated the success in the field by some private universities in obtaining the corresponding authorisation in order to be able to offer, among their degrees, those corresponding to the most prestigious qualifications.

It is also observed that students with low and medium sociocultural status, and especially those coming from high complexity secondary schools, value the prestige of the private university more highly. The possibility of the student using contingent information according to their network of relationships was pointed out in the theoretical introduction, and it is indeed clear that this network gives rise to different perceptions of the prestige of the private university. It is evident that there is currently a lack of more refined and in-depth research on students' opinions of different degree programmes, in addition to a lack of knowledge regarding the sense in which and reasons why they are valued more positively, and according to what characteristics, in addition to what networks of the environment such notions are shared among.

Another limitation of this study derives from the fact that there are fundamental differences in the value of the prestige attributed to the various degree programmes within the fields of study, and of the various private schools that offer them. This implies that analysing this object of study requires disaggregating to the level of distinguishing between degree programmes in each institution, which means counting on a sufficiently large sample to reach this level of detail. Similarly, the diversity and protagonism of the stakeholders in the configuration of a field means that the supply sector must be taken into account and that the actions undertaken by the different schools and universities to advance in the field must be explored.

Beyond the study of the field, the analysis of what role the private university plays in the horizontal stratification of the university system involves analysing its

consequences. To this effect, the next step would be to see if there is a difference in the social composition of the various degree programmes according to whether the university is public or private. Given that the private university is much more expensive than the public university, despite price increases in the latter in recent times, the social composition in terms of socioeconomic status will clearly be different in the two types of institutions. Nonetheless, social composition can also be analysed in terms of academic capacity. If the private university becomes the first preference in a university system, this will be indicated by the best performing students among those who can afford it ending up there. Whether or not labour market insertion really is more advantageous for private university graduates also needs to be analysed, estimating this variable above and beyond graduates' social background.

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On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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Appendix

Table 2. Tests of Between-Subjects Effects
Dependent Variable: **The prestige of a degree programme depends on the university being private.**

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	495.342	84	5.897	4.142	.000
Intercept	565.884	1	565.884	397.435	.000
University ownership	10.851	1	10.851	7.621	.006
Economic stress	.533	1	.533	.374	.541
2ary school ownership	6.938	1	6.938	4.872	.028
Marks	2.076	1	2.076	1.458	.228
Field of Study (FoS)	2.200	4	.550	.386	.819
Sex	1.803	1	1.803	1.266	.261
Sociocultural Status (SCS)	3.512	1	3.512	2.466	.117
School complexity (Complex)	30.357	2	15.179	10.660	.000
Marks * FoS	9.662	4	2.415	1.696	.149
Marks * Sex	.360	1	.360	.253	.615
Marks * SCS	7.978	1	7.978	5.603	.018
Marks * Complex	13.137	2	6.569	4.613	.010
FoS * Sex	11.005	4	2.751	1.932	.103
FoS * SCS	15.441	4	3.860	2.711	.029
FoS * Complex	22.485	8	2.811	1.974	.047
Sex * SCS	2.218	1	2.218	1.557	.212
Sex * Complex	15.401	2	7.700	5.408	.005
SCS * Complex	10.575	2	5.288	3.714	.025
Marks * FoS * Sex	27.539	4	6.885	4.835	.001
Marks * FoS * SCS	13.571	3	4.524	3.177	.024
Marks * FoS * Complex	17.908	5	3.582	2.515	.029
Marks * Sex * SCS	.611	1	.611	.429	.513
Marks * Sex * Complex	11.529	1	11.529	8.097	.005
Marks * SCS * Complex	.000	1	.000	.000	1.000
FoS * Sex * SCS	19.869	3	6.623	4.651	.003
FoS * Sex * Complex	14.480	5	2.896	2.034	.072
FoS * SCS * Complex	10.562	3	3.521	2.473	.061
Sex* SCS * Complex	.000	0	.	.	.
Marks* FoS* Sex* SCS	2.255	1	2.255	1.584	.209
Marks* FoS* Sex* Complex	20.419	3	6.806	4.780	.003
Marks* FoS* SCS * Complex	.000	0	.	.	.
Marks* Sex* SCS * Complex	.000	0	.	.	.
FoS* Sex* SCS * Complex	.000	0	.	.	.
Marks* FoS* Sex* SCS * Complex	.000	0	.	.	.
Error	1119.140	786	1.424		
Total	7609.000	871			
Corrected Total	1614.482	870			

Rsquare = 0.307; Adjusted RSquare = 0.233

Table 3. Forward stepwise binary logistic regression analysis. Dependent Variable: The prestige of a degree programme depends on the university being private.

	Model 1			Model 2		
	B	***Sign.***	***Exp(B)***	***B***	***Sign.***	***Exp(B)***
Intercept	**-1.824**	**	**0.161**	**-2.188**	**	**0.112**
Secondary School Ownership (Ref.: Public)						
Private	0.235	ns	1.265	0.047	ns	1.048
University Ownership (Ref.: Private)						
Public	-0.154	ns	0.858	-0.236	ns	0.790
Economic stress (Ref.: Without economic difficulties)						
With economic difficulties	0.091	ns	1.095	0.060	ns	1.062
Marks during secondary school (Ref.: Good or Student sometimes failing)						
Very Good student	-0.007	ns	0.993	-0.145	ns	0.865
Sex (Ref.: Woman)						
Man	-0.095	ns	0.909	-0.021	ns	0.979
Field of Study (Ref.: Engineering and Architecture)						
Humanities	0.337	ns	1.401	0.316	ns	1.371
Social sciences	0.780	**	2.182	0.850	**	2.339
Science	0.902	**	2.465	1.031	**	2.804
Health	0.152	ns	1.164	0.361	ns	1.435
Sociocultural Status (Ref.: High)						
Low-Medium	0.715	**	2.045	0.397	ns	1.488
School Social Complexity (Ref.: Low Complexity)						
High Complexity				1.896	**	6.661
Medium Complexity				0.597	*	1.816
N		*871*			*871*	
% well classified cases		*74.8*			*76.1*	
Hosmer & Lemeshow Test						
Nagelkerke R^2		*0.062*			*0.117*	

Note: ns not significant; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$