

ARTICLE

## Knowledge production in the master's in Social Work at the University of Chile: A thematic and methodological analysis

### La producción del conocimiento del magíster en Trabajo Social de la Universidad de Chile: análisis temático y metodológico

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Received: 09/08/2024

Accepted: 11/03/2025

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#### How to cite

T, Krüger (2025). Knowledge production in the master's degree in Social Work at the University of Chile: thematic and methodological analysis. *Critical Proposals in Social Work* *Critical Proposals in Social Work*, 5 (9), 182-211. DOI: 10.5354/2735-6620.2025. 75637.

#### Abstract

The text aims to identify and produce a critical analysis of the thematic emphasis, methodological and theoretical reference of the Theses and Equivalent Formative Activities (AFE) produced as a course conclusion work by students of the Master of Social Work at the University of Chile. This is a bibliographic investigation using the systematisation of two titles, keywords, abstracts and fluid reading of theses and AFE published in the institutional repository of the library of the University of Chile between 2020 and July 2024. It is a brief look at 6 years in the life of the Master of Social Work. We identify that there is a qualified expansion of scientific production in the area of social service linked to social policies in the areas of childhood, gender, education, and the prison system, in particular, followed by issues related to changes in the world of work. Social work as a training area and occupational social space has been poorly studied. Finally, we consider a punctual and localised study of scientific production in social work necessary for research on post-graduation in Chile and Latin America.

**Keywords:**  
social work;  
postgraduate  
studies; knowle-  
dge production;  
research

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## Resumen

El texto tiene como objetivo identificar y promover el análisis crítico del énfasis temático de las referencias metodológicas y teóricas de las Tesis y Actividades Formativas Equivalentes (AFE) elaboradas como trabajo de graduación de los estudiantes del Magíster de Trabajo social de la Universidad de Chile. Se trata de una investigación bibliográfica realizada por medio de la sistematización de los títulos, las palabras clave, los resúmenes y la lectura oscilante entre las tesis y las AFE publicadas en el repositorio institucional de la biblioteca de la Universidad de Chile desde 2020 hasta julio de 2024. Resulta ser solo una breve revisión de los seis años de vida del Magíster de Trabajo social. Se identificó que en el programa está ocurriendo una expansión calificada de la producción científica en el área del servicio social, vinculada con las políticas sociales específicas de infancia, género, educación y sistema carcelario principalmente, así como también, con temas relacionados a los cambios en el mundo laboral, aunque el área de formación y espacio socio-ocupacional han sido poco estudiadas. Finalmente, se le considera como un estudio específico y enfocado en la producción científica en el área del servicio social, en el que existe la necesidad de que el alcance de las investigaciones indique lo que ofrece el posgrado en Chile y en América Latina.

**Palabras Clave:**

*servicio social;  
posgrado;  
producción de  
conocimiento;  
investigación*



## Introduction

Producing scientific and technical knowledge in social service through postgraduate programmes and institutional and inter-institutional research networks has expanded significantly since 1990 (Yamamoto, 2021; Schwartzman, 2022). “Current productions are already part of our professional development and research, in turn, is part of our professional culture; nowadays, we do not have to argue about whether it is necessary to do research” (Pagaza, 2024, p. 138). This maturity of the area results in the socialisation and dissemination of scientific and technical knowledge and what is obtained from this product, which increased considerably during the period and occurred through scientific events (local, regional, national and international), academic journals and the specialised publishing market.

The undergraduate and postgraduate training of the last decades of Latin American social service created the conditions to carry out dialogues with other social sciences and overcome a perspective that limited the professional practice of social work only to immediate or individual actions. Such intellectual maturity allows us to think critically, providing us with elements for intervention and training, which condense aspects of the present and the past understood in the accumulation of the debate with critical theories (Lara and Martins, 2023; Pagaza, 2024). Undoubtedly, these are the determining elements for the strengthening of the disciplinary debate and the consolidation of the knowledge produced by generations of social workers who opened fields of study together with universities and development agencies, building spaces for the dissemination of knowledge and theoretical, political and methodological debate (Brazilian Association of Social Service Teaching and Research, 2017; Lewgoy and Maciel, 2021; Muñoz-Arce et al., 2021).

Postgraduate studies in Latin American social service date back to the 1970s in Brazil and the 1980s in Argentina, for example. Both currents give value to the work of science and higher education based on a framework of training and academic production that responds to the social and technical demands of the different territories and institutions (Lara and Martins, 2023; Pagaza, 2024). During its academic trajectory, social service in Latin America, far from any linearity, has been influenced by the University Reform of Córdoba, by the regulations imposed by the military dictatorships, by the regional socio-political climate of the democratisation of the 1990s, as well as by the neoliberal programming of the recent period (Suasnábar et al., 2018).

In different periods of the 20th century, Latin American public universities were under pressure to develop knowledge that was capable of generating solutions to the socio-economic problems faced by the countries of the region, to collaborate with regional and national development, as well as to promote the democratisation of access to higher education (Prolo, Lima, Moniz, 2019). In the 21st century, on the other hand, despite all the territorial and regional differences, there was a decline of a good part of the progressive governments and, in particular, there was the rise of right-wing forces that promote an agenda of “neoconservative” changes aimed at limiting or reversing the redistributive policies and the expansion of rights that took place in the previous stage. In higher education, the global trend is towards universalisation, which replaced the traditional formulation of the right to education conditional on merit and is once again in paradigmatic conflict with neoliberalism (Suasnábar et al., 2018). Likewise, one emerges from neoliberal references:

*Obscurantist era, in which a new theology of the market dominates everything and in which the public, anaesthetised by mass media, is incapable of understanding what is happening and of reacting against those who, shamelessly and brazenly, when they exercise power, weaken and destroy the institutions of higher education and research that are fundamental for the construction of sovereign and independent nations (Díaz, 2018, p. 31).*

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At the same time, in the field of human and social sciences, postgraduate studies in social service suffer and resist the economic tensions of the disqualification and negationism of science, especially those already mentioned, as well as the public defunding of research and the attack on the autonomy of public universities. In this context of affirmation and tensions of postgraduate social service in South America and the Caribbean, this article aims to identify and elaborate a critical analysis of the thematic, methodological and theoretical structure of the Theses and Equivalent Formative Activities (AFE) carried out as graduation work by the students of the Master's in Social Work at the University of Chile<sup>2</sup>. It turns out to be a determined and specific study. Still, it intends to show the importance of postgraduate research rather as creators of knowledge for social service and to elaborate questions for broader future reflections. The production of postgraduate knowledge is the fundamental element investigated in this work because visibility, legitimacy and potential social impact are obtained in the final works of this

<sup>2</sup> The development of this article occurs under the condition of Visiting Professor Abroad - Senior (PVE), between May and July 2024. The possibility of exercising this position at the University of Chile occurred through the registration and subsequent approval of the postdoctoral fellowship in the Notice 27/2023 PROPG/UFSC (publication of the Federal University of Santa Catarina), with the results of the selection of candidates for the remaining quotas of visiting professor abroad - senior level - of the CAPES project (Coordination of Improvement of Higher Level Personnel).



level of academic training (Carvalho, Stampa, Santana, 2020). It can be added then that it is an aspect that is highlighted in the Regulations of the Master's Degree in Social Work: "The Degree Thesis and Equivalent Formative Activity are the most important activities of the Master's Degree Programme in Social Work" (Reglamento Magíster Trabajo Social Universidad de Chile, 2017).

This programme was created by University Decree No. 0042081 of 8 November 2017, subsequently approved by the Regulations and Training Plan (University of Chile, 2017) and began its academic activities in 2018, linked to the Department of Social Work at the University of Chile. It is located in the Faculty of Social Sciences (FACSO), and its "mission is to train graduates in the academic and professional field of Social Work, who possess knowledge and skills to research and intervene in complex social phenomena from a critical and reflective perspective" (Reglamento Magíster Trabajo Social Universidad de Chile, 2017).

The general objective of the master's degree is "to train graduates in the field of Social Work, who understand and deepen the disciplinary discussion, with the ability to carry out basic research and applied intervention, based on the social problems existing in contemporary society" (Regulations of the Master's Degree in Social Work, University of Chile, 2017). Based on this objective, the programme is attributed a mixed character, i.e. academic and professional, allowing "students to opt for a profile oriented towards scientific research or the improvement of social interventions, choosing in each case a research thesis or an Equivalent Training Activity (AFE) as the final graduation product<sup>3</sup>".

To present some elements of Higher Education in Chile, of which the Master's programme in Social Work forms part, some indicators for the year 2024 are described. Total enrolment in Higher Education is 1,385,828, considering the undergraduate and postgraduate levels *lato sensu*<sup>4</sup> and *stricto sensu*<sup>5</sup>, respectively. The enrolment of people belonging to one of the Indigenous peoples is 150,953, although, at the postgraduate level, it reaches 2,820 (1.9%). Percentage-wise, undergraduate studies account for

<sup>3</sup>Article N°26: "The Thesis must contribute creatively to the deepening of a subject of scientific knowledge, using epistemological, theoretical and methodological resources, in a coherent manner with the approach assumed and whose elaboration considers in a balanced way, if required, an empirical component. The Thesis must be developed mainly within the Programme's research lines, in the proposed structure of nuclei".

Article 27° - "The Equivalent Training Activity refers to a work of knowledge application, supported by the central epistemological, theoretical and methodological resources taught in the Master's Programme in Social Work. It is

<sup>4</sup>Latin expression referring to "in a broad sense".

<sup>5</sup>Latin expression referring to 'in the strict sense'.

92.2%, and postgraduate studies *strictly account* for 3.8% of total enrolment. In the case of *stricto sensu* doctoral studies, between 2020 and 2024, it increased by 14.5%, of which 85.6% corresponds to enrolments in master's programmes and 14.4% to postgraduate programmes. Regarding gender distribution, women represent 53.2% at the undergraduate level and 48.8% at the postgraduate level (Under-Secretary for Higher Education, 2024).

In the 21st century, higher education in Chile is moving from focusing on educating elites to a mass system. During the last decades, access to higher education has increased for previously excluded socio-economic and cultural groups, which has implied a diversification of the social origin of the student population. As an example, the University of Chile (2025), by national policy guidelines, has since 2014 adopted Special Admission Processes with offers of places for various social segments, as well as for people belonging to indigenous groups, people with disabilities, and gender equity, among others. On the other hand, "The expansion of enrolment and institutional diversification of Chilean higher education has occurred under a particular modality of development, characterised by the intense operation of an educational market, with strong pre-eminence of private supply, predominance of subsidies to demand and low capacity for state regulation (Cepeza, Bizama, Casanova and Olivia, 2019).

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Suppose the programme is situated in the context of segmented access to higher education. In that case, ignoring the historical fractures the service suffered in the country is impossible. The training of Chilean social workers, particularly the Department of Social Work at the University of Chile, was hit for years by the measures taken by the dictatorship. The School of Social Work activities were closed during the second half of the 1970s (Sepúlveda, 2016) and thanks to a collective effort to promote training in a public university, the course was reopened in 2014.

*The reopening was painful, gradual and undoubtedly foundational. It involved a process of recognition and memory of those students who were detained and disappeared during this period and the altered trajectories of many others who were exonerated, expelled from university classrooms or whose educational processes were truncated. It is a legacy we live with, with all its contradictions and expectations as a Public University (Universidad de Chile, 2024).*

In March 2015, the first group of undergraduate social work students entered the university after almost four decades without students in the university halls. With the





same impetus to qualify for social work in Chile and at the University of Chile, a group of academics, teachers, and students came together:

*In May 2018, the first cohort of Master's students did the same, joining the graduates of the University of Chile, which shows that Social Work is a discipline that takes place in the logic of the times of transformation in which we live. This allows us to confront, once again, with renewed knowledge, the inequality that inhabits us and to open the way to better forms of social redistribution and public recognition of legitimate and plural forms of life (Universidad de Chile, 2024).*

In this context of young undergraduate and postgraduate careers in social service (with an extensive historical trajectory of training and social intervention – from the commemoration of the centenary of Social Work in Chile in 2025), this work is concerned with describing and analysing the thematic, methodological and theoretical structure of the Theses and Equivalent Formative Activities (AFE) produced by students as graduation work for the Master's Degree in Social Work at the University of Chile. Therefore, the production of this text considers only six years of the Master's programme. Still, it also reflects on the production of social work knowledge throughout Latin America.

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The development of this work is presented as follows: as a first item, the methodological procedures used for the assessment and evaluation of the Theses and Equivalent Formative Activities (AFE) are presented, as well as the profiles of these final works. Next, the Theses and AFE topics were grouped and counted according to the thematic axes of the XXIII Seminar of the Latin American Association for Teaching and Research in Social Work (ALAEITS), which took place in 2022. In this sub-theme, the 168 keywords were grouped into 18 thematic categorisations. The third item refers to the studies' methodology or methodological framework, subdivided into a) approach and type of study, b) data production/collection technique, c) participant selection criteria, and d) data analysis techniques. Finally, the fourth item systematises the theoretical-conceptual elements, the normative and documentary references of the public policies underpinning the formulation of the problem, the research question, and the contextualisation of the state of the art of the Theses and AFE.

I - Methodological procedures for the analysis of Theses and Equivalent Formative Activities (EFAs)

To respond to the general objective of this research, which is to identify and carry out a critical analysis of the thematic, methodological and theoretical structure of the Theses and Equivalent Formative Activities (AFE) prepared by students of the Master’s Degree in Social Work at the University of Chile, access was gained, through the digital repository, to the public information of the final works related to the Programme. For this exploratory study, elements for systematisation and analysis were sought in the titles, keywords, summaries, methodological references, search techniques and theoretical-conceptual elements of the theses and EFAs.

To begin with, we sought to identify and characterise the Degree Theses and the EFAs, as “they are the most important activities of the Master’s Degree Programme in Social Work”. This means that both “the Thesis work and the Equivalent Formative Activity will culminate in an individual written document in which academic-research (Thesis) and professional (AFE) competencies are demonstrated using epistemological, theoretical and methodological resources, consistent with the conceptual approach assumed” (Universidad de Chile Reglamento Magíster Trabajo Social, 2017).

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**Table 1.** Number of Theses and Equivalent Formative Activity (AFE) per year between 2020 and 2024 in the Master’s programme in Social Work, U. de Chile.

Year	Theses	AGE
2020	2	1
2021	6	1
2022	11	6
2023	5	1
2024 <sup>6</sup>	8	
Total	32	9

**Source:** Universidad de Chile. Institutional Repository. Library. Theses and AFE of the Master’s programme in Social Work FACSIO. Consultation between May and July 2024. Own elaboration.

It can be seen from the table that the students have prioritised academic training over professional (technical) training since 32 (78.0%) of the works presented are theses and 9 (21.9%) were AFE.

<sup>6</sup> The 2024 theses and AFE considered were those published up to July.





All of the work, i.e., the 41 previously individualised assignments, was divided among 14 lecturers, thus providing the Master’s students with ample theoretical references for teaching and research activities.

It should also be noted that this programme is organised into systematic curricular activities, which correspond to what is established in the study plan, i.e. visits to subsidise the preparation of the Thesis or respective AFE, as well as the degree exam. The R&D Nuclei (Research and Development of Intervention Proposals) stand out among these compulsory curricular activities.

*The Nuclei are structured to dynamise and strengthen research and intervention. This instance has been conceived as a space for small groups of academics where a team that relates directly to the students is formed, offering a space for research and intervention.*

*In this sense, this space operates as a pedagogical system where students will be guided in selecting topics in terms of the project and developing the Thesis or Equivalent Formative Activity. This solves a persistent difficulty in terms of adequate pedagogical support, a consistent academic discussion, and favouring the completion of the thesis or equivalent training activity within the timeframe established by the programme (Universidad de Chile Reglamento Magíster Trabajo Social, 2017).*

The relation of the R&D Nuclei and the number of linked theses and FEAs are presented in the sequence.

**Table 2.** Several theses and AFE following the R&D Nuclei, between 2020 and 2024, in the Master’s Programme in Social Work, U. of Chile.

R & D Cores	N. Thesis or AFE
Effective public policy innovations	13
Complex territorial systems	5
Diversity and Gender: Intersectional Feminist Approaches	3
Interdisciplinary studies in social work	13
Socio-economic relations and social struggles	7
Total	41

**Source:** Universidad de Chile. Institutional Repository. Library. Theses and AFE of the Master’s Programme in Social Work. FACSOC. Consultation between May and July 2024. Own elaboration.



The R+D Nuclei, in terms of spaces for professional and academic training in social service, both for undergraduate and postgraduate students, present a quite diverse amount of work associated with them. For this reason, the number of teachers linked is vast. The thematic demands of the students and other internal elements of the course organisation are beyond the scope of this study.<sup>7</sup>

The information on the final works was collected based on the author's name and whether female or male authors wrote the work. Thus, the number of theses and FEAs written by women reached 29 (70.7%) and 12 (29.2%) by men. Therefore, congruencies were found in the percentages obtained in the sample of the study by Reyes, García and Donoso (2018):

*In the Master's programmes analysed, the majority of students are women. The responses of the respondents continue the trend: 80 per cent (out of 32) in the Master's program in Social Work and Social Policy at the Universidad de Concepción and 64 per cent (out of 28) in the Master's program in Social Work at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (p.409-410).*

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In Brazil, for example, data from 2022 suggest that the gender composition of the teaching staff was 500 female (76.1%) and 157 male (23.9%). For the student body, the gender distribution was 2,265 (77.41%) for females and 661 (22.59%) for males (Fundación Coordinadora para el perfeccionamiento del Personal de Nivel Superior, 2023).

The data from both countries are relatively similar. However, the male presence in postgraduate social services in Chile seems to be slightly higher. However, the numbers are somewhat different when looking to characterise the female and male presence in social service in general in the two countries. When considering social service training and graduation in Chile, the percentage of women at this level of training is higher, according to Aspeé and Campos (2018, p.178):

*Of the number of people enrolled and graduated from 2007 to 2016 in all levels and types of institutions where social work certifications are taught in Chile. The study concludes that 81% of social work students (Technical and Professional) were women and 19% were men, a proportion closely replicated in degrees that accentuates the gender gap.*

<sup>7</sup> For more information on the cores, see: <https://www.trabajosocialuchile.cl/nucleos-id/>



Studies in Brazil indicate that women's presence is more significant than in Chile. In the mid-2000s, the percentage of female social workers was 97% (Federal Council of Social Services, 2005), while in the search for a new professional register in 2022 (Federal Council of Social Services, 2022), 92.92% of professionals identified themselves as female, as opposed to 6.97% who identified themselves as male. "Other gender expressions" accounted for 0.10%.

A study at the University of Buenos Aires (UBA) on the gender demographics of students in 2012 identified that 93.6% were female and 7.3% were male, out of a total of 2014 people. In 2017, females accounted for 89.2% and males for 10.7% out of 2112 students. As for the social service faculty, in 2012, it corresponded to 330 professionals, 74.5% women and 25.46% men (Nebra, 2018).

This set of data on the group of social service professionals, made up mostly of women, continues to reveal the historical feminisation of the profession, which has implications for the construction of the profile, cultural valuation and insertion in the labour market. However, it is striking that when it comes to postgraduate studies and teaching, the presence of men is proportionally more significant than the number of students and professionals in general, which leads to social values considered masculine and feminine.

After this quantitative survey of the works, we sought to qualify the themes of the Theses and FEAs by analysing the title and keywords, which are presented as a description of the methodological instruments and the theoretical foundations of the works.

## 2- Systematisation of Theses and AFE topics

To better systematise and analyse the themes of the Theses and AFE of the Master's Degree in Social Work, references were sought from the Chilean Association for the Teaching of University Social Work (ACHETSU)<sup>8</sup>. As it was impossible to find the guidelines for formulating the thematic axes for social work research and intervention in the ACHETSU, such references were sought in the Latin American Association for Teaching and Research in Social Work (ALAEITS), unfortunately without success. Thus, it was decided to extract the thematic axes from the XXIII ALAEITS Seminar, which took place in Montevideo in November 2022 (ALAEITS, 2022).

<sup>8</sup> The Asociación Chilena para la Enseñanza del Trabajo Social Universitario (ACHETSU) was preceded by the Corporación Chilena para la Enseñanza del Trabajo o Servicio social (ACHETS), created in 1999.

Table 3 presents the systematisation that followed the thematic axes of the above-mentioned ALAEITS seminar, i.e. the criteria requested for the registration of papers. As these axes are very broad, the table below links the Theses and the AFE by thematic approach; moreover, for identifying the themes, the Theses were not separated from the AFE, so the table is representative of all the academic and professional works.

**Table 3:** Thematic linkage of the Theses and AFE elaborated by students of the Master’s Programme in Social Work, U. of Chile, between 2020-2024, with the thematic axes of the XXIII ALAEITS Seminar, 2022.

N°	Thematic Themes of the XXIII ALAEITS Seminar	Quantity	%
1	Globalisation, nation-states and reform processes	2	4,8
2	Social Inequalities, Poverty and Social Protection	10	24,3
3	Broadening citizenship, power and human rights	9	21,9
4	The use of space	3	7,3
5	Social work social policies and subjects of intervention	9	21,9
6	Undergraduate training	-	-
7	Postgraduate training	-	-
8	Research in Social Work	7	17,0
9	Social work occupational space	1	2,4
To- tal		41	100

**Source:** Universidad de Chile. Institutional Repository. Library. Thesis and AFE of the Master’s Programme in Social Work. Faculty of Social Sciences. Consultation between May and July 2024. Own elaboration.

The table shows the thematic centrality of the Master’s degree students’ final projects in issues related to social policy, social rights, citizenship and social service intervention. The subject of undergraduate and postgraduate training without social service has not been the subject of study and the socio-occupational space, only timidly.

In the sequence, the systematisation corresponds to categorising the keywords of the theses and FEAs. These, in addition to representing the thematic emphasis, indicate, according to the study of the summaries, the perspective and direction of the theoretical, political and technical references of the analyses contained in the works. One hundred and sixty-eight keywords were identified in the theses and AFE of the Master’s Degree in Social Work at the University of Chile. An artisanal exercise was carried out to categorise this set of elements so that the systematisation was representative of the works analysed. In this way, each keyword was assigned according to the context of each thesis and topic and AFE, resulting in the categorisation shown in Table 4.



This wide range of keywords was grouped into 18 categories that are reasonably representative of the scope of the research and the Chilean social service intervention, as well as the theoretical and empirical references of the Master’s work.

**Table 4:** Categorisation of the keywords of the Theses and SFAs elaborated in the Master’s Programme in Social Work, U. of Chile, between 2020-2024.

N°	Keywords grouped by theme	MTS/UCHile	%
		Theses and AFE	
1	Justice, penal and prison system	21	12,5
2	Work and technology	19	11,3
3	Social service, performance and vocational training	17	10,1
4	Women, feminism, gender and masculinity	14	8,3
5	Research and intervention methodologies	13	7,7
6	Social rights, Human rights and social policies	13	7,7
7	Childhood and adolescence	12	7,1
8	Education, university and rights policy	11	6,5
9	Habitability, territory, urban and rural space	8	4,7
10	Health policy and services	6	3,5
11	State, capitalism, poverty and inequality	6	3,5
12	Family	6	3,5
13	Geopolitical and economic reference (continent, countries and states)	4	2,3
14	Functional diversity, people with disabilities, universal accessibility	4	2,3
15	Social movements, trade unions	3	1,7
16	Social welfare policy and services	3	1,7
17	Migration (Human Mobility)	2	1,1
18	Other	6	3,5
Total		168	100

**Source:** Universidad de Chile. Institutional Repository. Library. Theses and AFE of the Master’s Programme in Social Work. FACSOC. Consultation between May and July 2024. Own elaboration.

The quantitative organisation of the keywords of the theses and SFAs in this table reveals a wide range of studies and professional social service interventions. It shows its link with public policies, social programmes, and the protection of the social rights of the most impoverished and vulnerable segments of the population. These aspects coincide with the emphasised axes in Table 3 of social policies and rights but also detail the services and social segments of the social policies privileged in the studies, highlighting the judicial, penal and prison system; women and gender; children and adolescents; and education.



In relation to the themes considered as foundations in the contemporary social service debate, the following percentages are found: 11.3% of the keywords are related to work and technology, 3.5% to the state, and 3.5% to capitalism, poverty and inequality. With regard to social service, the Master's training area, only 10.1% of the keywords were linked to the systematisation of social service, performance and professional training.

Looking at this table of thesis topics and AFE (limited to the title and keywords), it can be affirmed that the Master's in Social Work responds to some aspects of the mission and general objective of the programme, such as "to train graduates in the academic and professional field of social work, who research and intervene in complex social phenomena", as the work is linked to "social problems existing in contemporary society" (Universidad de Chile Reglamento Magíster Trabajo Social, 2017).

When considering the systematisation of the topics reviewed in Tables 3 and 4, it can be seen that there is harmony and predominance of the topics dealt with in the final works of the Master's Degree in Social Work. In this way, we can observe research linked to various beneficiary segments of public policies, due to the historical inequality and lack of social protection, as well as the non-recognition of social rights in Chile and Latin America.

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In both tables it is possible to recognise empty spaces and/or timid references to issues that underpin social policies in social relations and the capitalist mode of production; for example, globalisation, the state, neo-liberalism, reform processes, privatisation of public assets and the financing of social policies. Other issues, which also cut across multiple policy services, but which are absent, are: ethical and racial issues, indigenous peoples, ageing, social security and pensions, environmental issues, famine.

### 3- Methodological references and research techniques

By means of a reading of abstracts and an oscillating reading among the papers, we tried to identify the methodologies and techniques included in the elaboration of the theses and AFE. Both types of work, elaborated by the Master of Social Work candidates, presented in their abstract an individualised item for the methodology or methodological framework. There is no difference in the structure of the presentation of the two types of final work in the programme.

In general, the presentation of the methodology or methodological framework consists of the following elements: a) approach and type of study; b) data production and collection technique; c) participant selection criteria; d) sample design; e) data analysis techniques; and f) ethical aspects.

It is important to mention that this item of methodological references and research techniques does not represent the overall totality linked to the 41 Theses and SFAs studied. The quantitative result of the tables below is what could be identified, since the elements of the methodology have a quite diverse text; for example, in the methodological approach, some of them present two or more indicators of approach. Thus, Tables 5, 6, 7 and 8 show what was characterised as an approximation of the methodological references and research techniques.

**Table 5.** Focus and type of study of the Theses and AFE elaborated by the students of the Master’s Programme in Social Work, U. of Chile, between 2020-2024.

Methodology or Methodological Framework of Theses and SFAs	
Approach and type of study	Quantity
Qualitative approach	28
Quantitative and qualitative approach	2
Quantitative approach	2
Biographical approach or life stories	6
Descriptive study or narrative approach	6
Exploratory research	8
Non-experimental research	4
Systematic literature review	2
Case studies	2
Evaluative research	1
Dialogical knowledge construction perspective	3
Phenomenological perspective, interpretative phenomenological approach	5
Systems theory perspective. Constructivist systems perspective	3
Epistemological contributions from a post-structural and feminist perspective	1
Comparative analysis, Charles Ragin: QCA <sup>9</sup> (qualitative comparative analysis)	1
Methodologies that allow for more in-depth research: Policy framework analysis (Bustelo and Lombardo, 2007), <sup>10</sup> which identifies the explicit or implicit internal logics of the interpretative frameworks behind policies and process tracing (Collier, 2011), <sup>11</sup> a fundamental part of qualitative analysis, which defines it as a systematic examination.	1
The Boolean method	1
Hanlon Method (uses technology by means of a problem and resource ranking tool)	1

**Source:** Universidad de Chile. Institutional Repository. Library. Theses and AFE of the Master’s Programme in Social Work. FACSOC. Consultation between May and July 2024. Own elaboration.

<sup>9</sup> Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA)

<sup>10</sup> Policy frame analysis

<sup>11</sup> Process tracing





It can be seen from Table 5 that, as an approach and type of study, qualitative research predominated with a total of 28 papers, in contrast to the two that indicated a predominantly quantitative study. Regarding the qualitative nature of the works, many theses or AFE were conducted as biographical, narrative or exploratory studies. Therefore, the authors, when indicating the type of research study, proceeded to explain the form and the theoretical-methodological perspective of its realisation. The table above shows a wide variety of approaches, perspectives and methods of study, predominantly qualitative, followed by exploratory and biographical.

To continue with the systematisation of the methodology or methodological framework of the Theses and AFE, Table 6 below describes the techniques for the production/ collection of information and the criteria for the selection of participants.

**Table 6:** Technique of production/collection of information and selection criteria of participants in the Thesis and AFE of the students of the Master’s Programme in Social Work, U. Chile, between 2020-2024.

Methodology or Methodological Framework	
Data collection/production technique	Quantity
Open-ended, in-depth, semi-structured interviews (taped, face-to-face or remote, electronic form)	30
Desk study, secondary data and publicly available registration systems	10
Biographical experience	3
Group interview	1
Academic search engines: Google Scholar and Redalyc	1
Criteria for the selection of participants	Quantity
Non-probability, purposive probability sample	7
Professionals, activists or people with representative trajectories in institutions, neighbourhoods or social movements	8
Managers, experts and public policy planners	4
Professional and technical controllers	3
Snowball	3
Source triangulation technique	1
Selective transcription	1

**Source:** Universidad de Chile. Institutional Repository. Library. Theses and AFE of the Master’s Programme in Social Work. FACSOC. Consultation between May and July 2024. Own elaboration.



For the collection of empirical research material, the interview was the most frequently used method by 30 postgraduates. Those with a semi-structured guide proved to be the most recurrent. During the period of the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as in the post-pandemic context, the use of digital platforms (Zoom, in particular) seems to have facilitated the process for both the researcher and the social subject being interviewed. Documentary research proved to be unrepresentative as a primary form of empirical data collection, but as a secondary source, it was used in 14 of the studies. With regard to the selection of participants for the research sample, this was intentional, that is to say, it was aimed at the social subjects who could potentially respond better, as well as representing the study’s main objective, including: professionals; activists; people with representative trajectories in institutions, neighbourhoods or social movements; directors; experts and public policy planners, among others.

**Table 7:** Data analysis technique presented in the Theses and AFE of the Master’s Programme in Social Work, U. of Chile, between 2020-2024.

Methodology or Methodological Framework of Theses and SFAs	
Data analysis techniques	Quantity
Content analysis	18
Categories coded using Atlas.ti software	11
Thematic analysis technique or elaboration of categories. Organisation of the stories into categories and through a process of saturation of concepts	10
Triangulation of information	3
Analysis based on symbolic interactionism, a theory inspired by meanings and social interaction	3
Statistical test, statistical test of correlations	2
Discourse analysis	2
Methodology of analysis with a feminist character. Qualitative analysis from an intersectional feminist perspective	2
Interpretative theories	2
Critical Narrative Analysis - conjunction of discourse analysis (CDA) with narrative analysis	1
Typology of reason	1
Charles Ragin’s Comparative Qualitative Analysis (CCA), Boolean Algebra, Boolean Multiplication of Combinations and “Combinatorial Logic” <sup>12</sup>	1
Analysis of measures of effectiveness – form of RNR model mediation associated with reintegration with recidivism or risk of recidivism	1
Inductively constructed analysis matrix	1

**Source:** University of Chile. University Repository. Library. Thesis and AFE of the Master’s Programme in Social Work. FACSO. Consultation between May and July 2024. Own elaboration.

<sup>12</sup> Combinatopical Logic.



Content analysis and category development are among the most frequently used data analysis techniques: 11 and 18 papers, respectively. The use of the Atlas.ti programme (and other artificial intelligence tools – AI) as support for the analysis of empirical and documentary material is also significant, as the *software* was cited in approximately 25% of the studies.

The Equivalent Formative Activities (AFE), which correspond to 9 (21.9%) of the final works of the master’s degree in the period of analysis, differ from the theses especially in the methodology, with regard to the item of data analysis, as they describe the form of the elaboration of protocols, typologies, intervention procedures and evaluation of social programmes. In this case, in the production of intervention tools, a predominance of this option was not identified, so the table below describes the methodological process present in the AFE.

**Table 8:** Data analysis technique presented in the AFE of the Master’s Programme in Social Work, U. of Chile, between 2020-2024.

Methodology or Methodological Framework of EFAs	
AFE - Techniques for data analysis and protocol development	Quantity
Mixed methodology for service design	1
Typological Distinctions for Effective Intervention (DISTIE)	1
Construction of action protocols, definitions of procedures and tools, areas of application, descriptive indicators of Crisis Intervention and critical points	1
Building the Effective Social Innovation Prototype	1
Evaluative research on Management Indicators of Legal Aid Corporations and evaluative research from a human rights perspective	1

**Source:** Universidad de Chile. Institutional Repository. Library. Theses and AFE of the Master’s Programme in Social Work. FACSO. Consultation between May and July 2024. Own elaboration.

Finally, care with ethical protocols in the research process was not the subject of special analysis for this study. However, it is noted that the Theses and AFE dedicated sections in the text to make references to how the research process provided for requests for permission for the participants (different social subjects) to continue the study, by means of informed consent.



4- Foundations of the Theses and EFAs: theoretical-conceptual elements, normative and documentary references of public policies

In the continuity of the reading of the summaries and the oscillating reading between the Theses and the AFE, we sought to map the theoretical-analytical elements that underpinned the elaboration of the final works of the programme. In this process, it was identified that the works have three types of foundations: a) theoretical-conceptual elements (literature); b) references to laws and regulations; and c) public policy documents (programmes, projects).

These three modes of substantiation are present simultaneously in the Theses and SFAs; however, one of them predominates in the texts.

In order to better observe and analyse the thematic approaches to the foundational modalities of the final papers of the course, the findings were once again systematised by thematic blocks and sub-themes. These were organised according to their incidence: a) theories or analytical perspectives; b) state, neoliberalism, labour and conjuncture; c) social policy; d) justice and prison system; e) population/users and social segments; f) women and gender; g) territory; and h) social work.

Once again the quantitative in the table below was what was identified, therefore it was characterised as an approximation of the theoretical-conceptual elements present in the Theses and AFE.

Table 9. Theoretical-conceptual elements presented in the Theses and AFE of the Master’s Programme in Social Work, U. of Chile, between 2020-2024.

Theoretical-conceptual elements	Quantitative
Theories or analytical perspectives	
Niklas Luhmann’s Systems Theory. Functional systemic theory. Systemic perspective and the notion of complexity, complex and multidimensional thinking.	9
Social field theory, symbolic discrimination and violence (Pierre Bourdieu)	4
Vulnerability theories	3
Phenomenology	3
Theoretical Risk Model	2
Hanlon Method (a technology, a tool to classify issues and resources)	1
Subtotal	23



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The state, neoliberalism, labour and the current situation	
Inequality in Latin America and Chile, poverty, dynamics of inclusion and exclusion	8
Neoliberalism, Capitalism, working class	7
Work, work process, transformation of the world of work. Precarisation of labour. Employability and Entrepreneurship in Chile, labour empowerment.	6
Covid-19 pandemic	5
State and Citizenship, Human Rights, Disciplinary Populism	4
Technological revolution, digital government. Technology	4
Social movements, socio-political participation and activism, company unions and civil servants' associations	3
Affections. Emotions. Resistance. Violence	3
Subtotal	40
Social policy	
Social protection, social programmes and social assistance programme	9
Child protection system. Servicio Nacional de Menores (SENAME) <sup>13</sup> and Servicio Nacional de Reinserción Social Juvenil. National Service for the Specialised Protection of Children and Adolescents. Specialised Programme on Sexual and Commercial Exploitation of Children. Protocols for action in the face of child sexual abuse and crisis situations. Protocol for Effective Social Innovation (IS) and Accredited Collaborators (OCAS).	6
Public Policies and Intersectionality, Equity and Inclusion	4
Higher education, University	3
Front-line professional	3
Primary health, Mental Health	3
Education Policy, National Policy on School Coexistence	2
Management of social intervention	2
Social policy: outsourcing and privatisation	1
Subtotal	33
Judicial and penitentiary system	
Reintegration and Effective Reintegration, concepts of re-education, rehabilitation, re-personalisation, re-adaptation, post-penitentiary concern.	5
Criminology and levels of public security	3
Prison system	3
Access to justice	1
Restorative Justice	1
Subtotal	13

<sup>13</sup> This service will only be available in the regions of Valparaíso, Metropolitana and O'Higgins.



Population/users and social segments	
Functional Diversity. Person with disabilities and universal accessibility	5
Families living in poverty, care	4
Profile of “naturally” at-risk carrier populations	1
Street population	1
Subtotal	11
Women and gender	
Women and work, women and family	4
Feminist movements, feminist theories	3
Sexism and social corporealities	2
Feminisation of poverty	1
Gender and intersectionality	1
Gender diversity (LGTBIQ+ community)	1
Sexual division of labour	1
Subtotal	13
Territory and habitability	
Territory and community	1
Transition from rural to urban	1
Territory and daily mobility	1
Camps and settlements in Chile	1
Housing policies and housing shortages	1
Subtotal	5
Social work	
Social work (intervention modality and space)	9

**Source:** Universidad de Chile. Institutional Repository. Library. Theses and AFE of the Master’s Programme in Social Work. FACSO. Consultation between May and July 2024. Own elaboration.

The so-called ‘thematic blocks’ in Table 9 express a broad set of foundations underpinning the Masters in Social Work Theses and AFE. Similarly, they are understood to express a broad range of social work interventions and research. As mentioned above, the keywords reveal the proximity to a general objective of the programme; with the references to the foundations described in the previous table, it is possible to indicate that the Master’s degree is, in fact, building the paths to realise its general objective:

*To train graduates in the field of Social Work, who understand and deepen the disciplinary discussion, with the ability to carry out basic research and applied intervention, based on the social problems existing in contemporary society (Universidad de Chile, Reglamento Magíster Trabajo Social, 2017).*



However, the part of the objective “understand and deepen the disciplinary discussion”, as far as the field of social work is concerned, still seems to us timid or fragile. In this direction, specific objectives 2 and 4 of the same Regulation indicate the need for the programme to broaden studies in the area of social work:

*2. To contribute to the understanding of some debates, controversies and critical approaches of contemporary social work, which enable a complex theoretical-methodological approach to social issues.*

*4. Develop competences for professional practice, being able to generate a more dense understanding of public policies and social intervention (Universidad de Chile, 2017).*

In the analysis of the Theses and AFE, either in the key words or in the conceptual foundations, social work is the object of study or its analysis in approximately 25% of the final works; however, the presence of social work in the theoretical-conceptual references was rather reduced.

On the other hand, the theoretical references or analytical perspectives of the works include: Niklas Luhmann's Systems theory; the perspective of complex thinking; Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social fields and phenomenology.

Likewise, there is a predominance of works on subjects related to social policies, as this has been the historical and privileged working space (labour/employment market and intervention space) of social workers. In the Theses and AFE reviewed, the social programmes of social assistance, childhood and adolescence, women, family and gender, as well as programmes related to functional diversity, people with disabilities and accessibility problems are the most studied. In this broad set of topics that encompasses social policies, the main references that support the development of the topics are the texts and legislations of the public policies themselves. There were few works in the field of social policies that based their research on the literature related to the set of themes (Table 9) referred to as: state, neo-liberalism, neo-liberalism, public policies, social policy and social policy: State, neoliberalism, labour and conjuncture.

On the other hand, a significant amount of research deals with the judicial and prison system, with a special focus on social reinsertion. The emphasis on this topic in the Theses and SFAs as a whole allows for an interrogation/reflection on the extent of the criminalisation of poverty in Chile and Latin America. This reflection is determined by



the fact that the issue of poverty and social inequality was the subject of a theoretical-conceptual study in almost 20% of the works. This would appear to be not enough, considering that social inequality and poverty, both in Chile and in other Latin American countries, are transversal to all the themes of the Theses and AFE, especially those revealed in the systematisation of Tables 3, 4 and 9.

Quickly, when considering the study of titles, keywords, summaries and oscillating reading, it is possible to point out that there is a cross-cutting demand for several of the social policy services and social service foundation themes.

Despite the efforts of the Social Service visible in the academic production studied, carried out with the aim of understanding and explaining the nature of national and Latin American problems in relation to the contradictions between the State, society and the market in relation to capitalism, it is perceived that the professional work and the responses to these social contradictions continue to be the challenges, in the sense of unveiling the invisible content. There is indeed, in the Theses and AFE, a broad identification of social needs, as well as of the fragile and insufficient social protection aimed at countless social segments, but these reflections seem to question little the particularities studied in their relation to the determinations of the unequal structure, of the concentration of wealth, and which, on the contrary, end up appropriating the demonisation of the state public service, disseminated in these decades of neo-liberalism (Boron, 2000).

The Theses and AFE point out that the link between Social Service and socio-political processes are inseparable, that the context is what determines our professional practices, despite the relative autonomy (Pagaza, 2024) and, in this sense, the economic, ethical-political, social and cultural relevance of the postgraduate programme is evident, since it trains human resources and produces knowledge to respond to the expressions of the social question. This requires that the planning and self-evaluation process of the Postgraduate Programmes – area of concentration, lines and projects of research and the insertion of graduates in the labour market – be well articulated with the needs of society, which means, articulated with the local, regional and national reality (Carvalho et al., 2020).

This profession has been constantly accused by other professionals of having a marked empiricist character; with regard to this, the production of knowledge in postgraduate studies produces subsidies to eliminate the relative pragmatism of social service

and promotes a theory that strengthens the development of knowledge based on its practice and the reality of social work. In this way, social research is an inherent task of the social service profession, in terms of professional work and, in this case, for the generation of knowledge and its strengthening in the academic-scientific debate (Aro, 2023). As Pagaza (2024) states, it is not necessary to return to the centre itself, nor to subalternity: it is necessary to dare, and the postgraduate course is fertile ground for discussion and debate, to work in an interdisciplinary way, to expand the discursive and interdisciplinary relations, always with a critical and historical look to read the context and its determinations.

In this direction of Latin American social service in the 21st century, it is necessary to overcome a purely instrumentalist or technical view of knowledge, rejecting the reductionism inherent in the linearity and fragmentation of knowledge. The task then is to build and strengthen postgraduate programmes that are democratic and socially committed to a public university, to promote human rights and to contribute to the promotion of the quality of education, science and culture.

## Final considerations

Remembering that the general objective of this research was to identify and analyse the thematic, methodological and theoretical structure of the Theses and Equivalent Formative Activities (AFE), which constitute the final work of the students of the Master's programme in Social Work at the University of Chile, the preceding text presented here has a rather descriptive character and is only a partial analysis of the six years of existence of the Master's programme.

As a legacy of the fractures that the Department of Social Service of the University of Chile experienced with the dictatorship, it was possible to observe, from the development of this text, the effort of the academic body of social workers and their students in the recovery of the university status of the career of Social Work, as well as the overcoming of the fragilities that the authoritarian and regressive history caused in theoretical training and research, which deepened an old dichotomy between theory and practice in the area. That is to say, such an effort is witnessed in the analysis of the Theses and AFE elaborated within the scope of the Master in Social Work, since the final works are a reflection and expression of the actions to strengthen the academic and scientific status of Social Work within the scope of the public university.

Considering the purposes of the Master's Programme in Social Work, presented in the Self-evaluation Report (University of Chile Self-evaluation Report, 2020, p. 4):

*The Master's Degree in Social Work at the University of Chile is a training programme that aims to contribute to the disciplinary consolidation of Social Work in the country, from a perspective that emphasises academic excellence, the design and implementation of innovative interventions, and a commitment to the social, economic, political and cultural challenges that the country demands in the contemporary context.*

The study developed up to this point allows us to affirm that the Master's degree in Social Work has been fulfilling its educational purposes with academic excellence. Although it also highlights, in particular, the aim of "contributing to the disciplinary consolidation of social work in the country", as this aspect still seems fragile in the field of final course work. However, the systematisation carried out reveals an extensive set of themes, of contemporary context, which are situated in the day to day of social intervention, such as the social, economic, political and cultural challenges that go beyond social policies and the actions of social workers, and therefore become the subject of research.

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In evaluating what the Department and the Master's Degree in Social Work of the University of Chile have as an assumption: that Social Work has the public responsibility to confront inequality and the lack of access to the services of social programmes and rights, this mission is fulfilled with the development of the Thesis and AFE. In the same way, it is considered that a qualified expansion of the scientific production in the area of Social Work is taking place, as well as its academic recognition as an area of knowledge by the scientific community and by the organisms that promote research.

It is well known that the Chilean and Latin American social service faces technical, operational and political challenges, due to the reality of social inequality and poverty produced by the capitalist and exploitative relations to which we have been historically subjected. In this context, social policies are, in general: underfinanced, punctual, focused and face resistance to achieve the social rule of law; with a principle of universality, free of charge and state management. These challenges are not separate from the theoretical and methodological perspectives that underpin postgraduate social work training and research.

In order to preserve the democratic and pluralistic nature of the academic and scientific development that underpins the Master's in Social Work, some terms, references and approaches that are repeated automatically and without reflection are left as an indication of the most appropriate characterisation of its pedagogical proposal and its regulations: complex social phenomena, complex theoretical-methodological approach to social issues, critical perspective, basic research and applied intervention, social problems, social innovation, effectiveness. These are the perspectives that manifest controversies and contrasts in the dialogue between authors and conceptual traditions from long ago, and which add to the theoretical, political and methodological accumulation of Latin American social service.

It is important to emphasise that the survey of titles, summaries, key words and oscillating reading among the texts, in order to identify the methodological and theoretical-conceptual references of the Master's Theses and AFE, is only an apparent fact of the reality of the course, which, as such, needs to be shown in its historical-concrete determinations in order to seek a qualitative deepening of the curricular contents of the programme, of the scientific productions (students and teachers), of the activities of the Master's activities, of the activities of the R+D and I Nuclei, and of the policy of promotion of teaching and student research, such as study grants, for example.

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With this delimited study, an invitation is made to expand research on postgraduate programmes in social service in Chile and Latin America, taking into consideration the gathering of subsidies for the analysis of their challenges, limitations and potential in the world of scientific knowledge production and intervention in social reality.

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## Acknowledgements

This article was developed as a visiting professor – senior abroad during May and July 2024. The possibility of becoming a visiting professor at the University of Chile came about through the approval in the Notice 27/2023 PROPG/UFSC, selection of candidates for visiting professor abroad – senior – CAPES/Print project (<https://propg.ufsc.br/cin/print/>). From this brief visit was born the research project entitled Social Service for Latin America: training and professional intervention to be developed between 2024-2028. I am grateful for the kind welcome and the academic-scientific exchanges with the teachers and professionals of the Department of Social Work. I would also like to thank the Department of Social Services and the Rectorate of the Federal University of Santa Catalina for authorising this period as a visiting professor.

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