



UTS  
ePRESS

PORTAL Journal of  
Multidisciplinary  
International Studies

Vol. 20, No. 1/2  
December 2024



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**Citation:** Wyndham, M. 2024. El Estallido Social and ICS Chile 2019. *PORTAL Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies*, 20:1/2, 29-31. <https://doi.org/10.5130/pjmis.v20i1-2.9450>

ISSN 1449-2490 | Published by UTS ePRESS | <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/ojs/index.php/portal>

ESSAYS

## El Estallido Social and ICS Chile 2019

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5130/pjmis.v20i1-2.9450>

**Article History:** Received 07/11/2024; Accepted 07/11/2024; Published 26/12/2024

### Abstract

This reflection recounts the extraordinary experiences of the 2019 In-Country Study (ICS) Chile cohort during Chile's *Estallido Social*, a period of intense social and political unrest. Despite facing immense challenges, including civil unrest and disruptions to their studies, the students demonstrated resilience, adaptability, and a deep commitment to their host communities. Through their collective efforts and independent explorations of Chilean society, they exemplified the global citizenship and intercultural skills nurtured in the International Studies programme.

### Keywords

**UTS; BAIS; Chile; Estallido Social; Resilience; Global Citizenship**

Reflecting on my over twenty-years at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), first at the Institute of International Studies and then the School of International Studies and Education, one extraordinary period stands out. The context is Chile's 'Estallido Social'—or 'Social Outburst'—of October 2019 to March 2020 in response to a host of long- and short-term social and political issues in that society. Massive demonstrations, acts of civil disobedience, rioting and looting brought the whole of the country to a standstill, paralysing and traumatising the population. The Carabineros' (national police force) brutal and counterproductive attempts to crack down on the estimated almost four million protesters led to dozens of deaths, over eleven thousand injuries and some thirty-thousand detentions.

To this explosive cocktail of widespread civil unrest and violent police crackdown insert twelve In-Country Study (ICS) Chile students spread around three different parts of the country: the capital Santiago, Viña del Mar, and Concepción. That is the bad news. The good

news is they had already been in Chile for some nine months and thus had acquired relative fluency not only in the Spanish language, but perhaps even more importantly, in Chilean culture and contemporary society. Not surprisingly, most look back on it now as a time of great adventure and group solidarity, which indeed it was. But as their ICS Chile supervisor, I well remember a constant stream of correspondence with me counselling ultra caution and absolutely minimal excursions from their places of residence to nearby shops, and them sharing daily concerns of how to acquire basic essentials of food and medicine; and when and how to venture into the violent streets while ensuring their safety. Back in the relative calm of Sydney, my imagination went back to my own childhood experience with social and political turmoil during the early days of Cuba's Communist Revolution in the early 1960s. How had I survived it and how might I best turn that traumatic experience to a positive gain for my ICS Chile students? On my side, as a child of ten, I not only had an extended circle of family and friends to protect and advise me. We were also on native soil: our homeland, language, and culture. As frightening an experience as it was, I can't remember a time when I felt alone and exposed. Now it was my prime responsibility to collectively wrap my students with similar feelings of comfort and security—all the way from Sydney.

As ICS Coordinators, we always hope for and try to facilitate warm and supportive relationships amongst our students. Whilst encouraging them early in their ICS posting to step outside their comfort zones and reach out to their new local communities, to avoid the temptation to 'hang around' and share accommodation with English-speaking peers, it was always on the understanding that the one and dependable solid thread running throughout their ICS experiences would be their own ICS colleagues' web of support. In normal times, this web would serve as a reassuring backdrop to their ICS lives and experiences, not all that dissimilar to the role that, as UTS students in Sydney, their families and school friends might play: a network of kindred spirits from whom they felt able to venture into new ICS experiences and adventures. And 'normal times' is what as ICS Coordinators we've grown to expect and witness—thankfully!—throughout most, if not all, our ICS years. Individual crises, some with profoundly serious implications, unfortunately arise all too often. But collective crises—ICS-wide crises—are thankfully very rare. And this Estallido Social of October 2019 was one such crisis.

Despite my own childhood experiences with cyclical political upheavals of all sorts, this was, for me, uncharted territory in terms of its sudden and urgent nature. Fortunately, I had my own support network at UTS: my Head of School, Human Resources and multiple other university agencies, the Accessibility Unit staff, the Dean, and even the Vice-Chancellor to whom each and every one of my students was directed to write daily—even if just a few words—in order to account for their well-being. This particular directive didn't last more than a week given my students' unanimous revolt. Appreciative as they were of the VC's concern for them, floods of messages appealed for my intercession on the grounds that they already had enough on their hands keeping themselves—and each other—safe, fed, cared for and supported! The VC's office graciously released them from their bond to their—and my—great relief. Within a space of a few weeks, in mid-November, UTS offered all ICS Chile students the option to return home, without penalties (of course!) and with the possibility of finalising their ICS year from home. The option was also left open to those choosing to remain, to later change their minds.

At no point did I apply any pressure on their choice to stay or leave. It was strictly their and, in many cases, also their families' decision. At some level, I suppose I had quietly hoped for a 'mass exodus' that would guarantee their safety back home—'back to normal.' And for me, the appealing prospect of no more 24/7 monitoring of the news in Chile; daily briefings to the various support levels at UTS; constant flow of correspondence and Zoom meetings with my students and their teachers at partner universities. In short, no more sleepless nights and anxious days.

Of the twelve students, only three took up the offer. Now there were nine ...

The vast majority's choice to remain did not come as a surprise to me. Almost as soon as the Estallido Social had begun—and in the weeks following—several of them had already made their positions very clear.

Under no circumstances did they want to be ‘removed’ from their ICS postings. Some even asked me to preempt any UTS general leave order, by appealing on their behalf to the university’s authorities. Fortunately, UTS’ timely offer—rather than the dreaded directive—made this unnecessary. I may not have been surprised, but I was curious. These were ‘Aussie’ students, by which I mean students typically accustomed to politically uneventful lives, with hardly a ripple of concern across their young years that ‘politics’ might not only impinge on their studies, but least of all, threaten their lives. Yet by November, these students had personally experienced the dangers and fears of a full-blown social and political outburst in their own streets and universities. Their studies had been suspended; their campuses had been closed. In more personal terms, their access to basic essentials had been heavily restricted and local classmates and friends had been injured or detained. They could hear shots fired and explosions set off near their places of residence. Yet they still remained steadfast on their decision to stay. Why so?

Those who chose to stay seemed of one mind that their adopted city/community needed their support. ‘I have close ties with local families and friends here and they need me my support,’ was a common refrain. Bonds of friendship and, more generally, humanitarian instincts towards their fellow Chileans summarised their initial choice to remain. As time went by, other factors came into play. In their early months, connections within the ICS group had been strengthened through shared classes and assignments; visits to each others’ cities, and group plans for semester-break travel in the region. Such bonds proved providential as issues of insecurity and scarcity of food and other essentials pressed on them individually and collectively. Each ICS site became its own family unit. At another level, intellectual curiosities had been sparked and many began to question how, what had seemed to be a solid stable society, could suddenly plunge into such widespread social and political turmoil and violence. With the unexpected time-to-spare, some began to research Chilean contemporary society and history; some held Zoom interviews with Chilean university colleagues and teachers posing questions that probably seemed quite ingenuous to those accustomed to political insecurity and violence throughout their entire lives. In effect, they were intuitively designing and conducting their own ‘independent, engaged and ethical research in and about’ their own ICS country, utilising now familiar research and analytical tools they had employed for their major research projects months before. Some journalism students posted short pieces in social media and news media outlets in Australia; others released videos seeking to document images and impressions of what they were witnessing. Improvisation was vital as so many of their previous life and study structures collapsed, and they found themselves in what, five years hence, is deemed by Chilean and other historians of the period as the country’s most politically tumultuous period since the violent coup of 11 September 1973 that overthrew the democratically elected Socialist President Salvador Allende and installed a 17-year period of State Terrorism.

But, as it dawns on me increasingly since then, it was improvisation based on, among other things, years of prior learning and training to be ‘adaptable, flexible and resourceful practitioners’ in their chosen fields, to ‘possess critical problem-solving and research-led analytical skills in international and intercultural change,’ to confidently engage ‘successfully with cultures overseas,’ and perhaps most importantly of all, ‘as informed and engaged international citizens ... demonstrate cosmopolitan openness, with an awareness of, and commitment to, ethical practices’ that these students displayed in full measure in those last months of their ICS year in Chile 2019.

Despite the constant anxiety and concern for their welfare at the time, my enduring memories and reflections of that extraordinary ICS Chile 2019 cohort cling stubbornly to what, under such exceptional pressure, that group of students demonstrated and achieved. They may have been utterly unschooled and unprepared for the social and political crises awaiting them, nine months into their ICS. But some of those Graduate Attributes that as ICS Co-ordinators we so assiduously attempt to develop in them clearly served them well at the most intellectually, emotionally, and physically demanding time of their student lives.