Bureaucracy and Internationalization in Higher Education in Mexico: Fatal impacts

Sylvie Didou Aupetit[*]

Abstract. This paper analyses to what extent mechanisms of quality control and results-based financing hinder innovative programmes. Focusing on one precise example, the paper will demonstrate how bureaucratic schemes that prioritise the production of evidence of compliance force higher education institution (HEIs) to adapt their internationalization programmes to government policy requirements as a matter of routine, and to pay less attention to meaningful activities such as knowledge production and the development of networks. Because of the conditions of its implementation, internationalization has become merely instrumental and limited in scope, which weakens its sustainability. The question of how to internationalize such that programmes of mobility, exchange, joint research, networks, and collaborative degrees incentivize projects of institutional development, innovation, and social responsibility, has become a secondary concern.

Keywords: governance, internationalisation, higher education institutions, Mexico

A highly bureaucratized model of governance

Recently, experts have illustrated that governance schemes for higher education in Mexico are worn out. Their erosion is due to the exhaustion of policies unmodified for the last three decades, changes in the country's contextual, political, and social situation, transformations brought about by globalization (Brunner & Ganga, 2016; Acosta et al., 2016), and by national higher education reforms. In an increasingly diversified higher education system (Table 1), experts highlight increasing inefficiency of administration schemes. Those schemes are hyper-bureaucratized and over-regulated (for the sake of transparency and the fight against corruption), and justified by the belief that complying with indicators is producing positive effects overall. They have warned that, instead of continuing to propitiate the rationalization of behaviours and organization of procedures, as expected

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in the nineties (Kent & De Vries, 1994), what they produce is simulations[1].   In particular, experts have criticized accountability models and practices which have not adapted to the circumstances of political transition, in a context of democratic federalism.   They have called for the installation of contra-hegemonic models contrasting with governance mechanisms labelled as neoliberal.

Administrative practices are appropriate to their institutional context when they sustain self-regulation of university communities and drive the dynamics of innovation.   In Mexico, by contrast, they tend towards a "normalization" of behaviours and performances, in accordance with "internationally standardized" criteria for the measurement of quality.   However, they are not a fair way to promote the institutional core and missions of specific HEIs, particularly considering institutional diversification carried out by the government and local actors in the past thirty years (Table 1), and internal dynamics of teaching and research inside the universities.

Table 1. Public higher education institutions, by category, in Mexico, 2018

Category	Number
Federal Public Universities	9
Technological Institutes	267
Intercultural universities	13
Public State Universities	34
Public State Universities with support for capacity development	23
Technological Universities	114
Polytechnic Universities	62
Pedagogical Universities	76
Open and Distance National University	1
Public Research Centers	6
Public Teachers Training Schools	261
Others	53
Out of category	33
Total	**952**

Source: https://www.ses.sep.gob.mx/instituciones.html

Another illustration of this phenomenon is the duration of training periods at the postgraduate level.   The National Council for Science and Technology (CONACYT) requires that master's degree

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[1] "Current evaluation has come to confuse the indicator with work that "counts", but does not value, recognize or provide feedback, (work that) much rather segments and labels individual performances, disassociating them from the objectives of institutional development. This condition in turn leads to the programmes prizing certain activities over others－for example, research over teaching, the dissemination of culture and connecting with society－without analyzing the contributions or their quality within the framework of fields of knowledge or institutional concerns, the type of results, disciplinary traditions or the stage in their trajectory of the subjects being evaluated" (Buendia et al., 2017, p. 2-3).

students graduate in two and a half years and doctoral students in fifty-four months. This recommendation has produced various distortions with respect to the quality of graduate theses, the transmission of disciplinary knowledge, and acquisition of basic academic skills of candidates, and acts in contradiction with expert international literature on the matter. In fact, even in higher education systems listed as the top in the world by international rankings, the "desirable" duration is usually exceeded. For example, in 2015, the average time to graduation ranges from 6 to 12 years in the USA for doctorate holders (National Science Foundation, 2016: scheme F7). During the period 2006-2016, main factors defining those differences are disciplinary field of studies, doctoral institution type, ethnicity or race and highest parental educational attainment (National Science Foundation, 2018:4-6).

In Mexico, norms regarding teaching and research profession and student training, imposed by the governmental bodies and national agencies financing science and higher education, have encouraged the subjection of academics to *sui generis* regulations and administrative procedures and restrained academic autonomy. Having been designed according to a logic of political control and, mainly, oriented towards a reorganization of the power relationships between academic and administrative groups, the rules of the game have become progressively more divorced from the needs and working conditions of the actual players. The rules have not encouraged a model of monitoring from a distance, as was foreseen in the nineties when the Evaluator State was emerging. Rather, they have produced a growing disassociation between students, researchers, teachers, and bureaucracy, founded on protection of their own interests, not on the defence of common goals. In consequence, the idea of a university "community" no longer has any meaning as, in practice, universities house progressively antagonistic groups. On becoming more entrenched, these maladjustments have generated feelings that oscillate between revolt and cynicism (Olaskoaga-Larrauri et al., 2015, p.113). These feelings are particularly deep among the academic sector who have seen their status downgraded, contrary to the empowerment of the bureaucratic sector. Many recent academic essays have demonstrated the inadequacy of administrative schemes, contradictions with a national context of political transition to "democratic federalization" (Rodríguez Gómez, 2014, p. 10), or suggest elaborate contra-hegemonic reforms to neoliberal governance mechanisms (Alcántara, 2016).

To argue the urgency of revising this model of governance that has brought about such decline in academia, by re-coupling it organically with the core functions of an HEI (transmitting, producing and disseminating knowledge), this paper will analyse internationalization programmes in higher education. Built on the current idea of the university, internationalization programs cross fundamental organizational spheres of the establishments (missions and objectives/ curricular design/academic profession/conditions for the production and dissemination of knowledge/scientific networks). However, as they are still in a process of institutionalization, their implementation reveals the difficulties HEIs are experiencing in moving from an action pattern that reacts to external

opportunities, mainly those provided by the government, to a strategic and endogenous perspective suited to with institutional/local context.

Twenty-five years later: a process of internationalization still evolving

In Mexico, the internationalization of universities is linked with their progressive development and growth. However, this only became apparent in policy in 1974, when CONACYT launched its flagship programme featuring postgraduate scholarships both within the country and abroad. At the beginning of the nineties, when universities found themselves compelled to internationalize on the eve of the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the education authorities reinforced what they already knew: promote long-stay outward-going student mobility and the signing of agreements with overseas institutions, mainly located in the South border of United States. They also progressively backed the organization of student and academic short stays and exchanges, incoming and outgoing, the building of scientific networks, and internationalization of the curriculum. The National Association of Universities and Higher Education Institutions (ANUIES) recommended its associates move from a mode of internationalization orientated towards the outside world, to one of internationalization at home. CONACYT, the Ministry of Public Education (SEP) and the Mexican Agency of International Cooperation for Development (AMEXCID) operated programmes of student or academic return mobility, sabbaticals, and postgraduate scholarships for foreign students and scientists. They supported thematic networks with national or international components and International Chairs to attract back to the country doctoral graduate Mexicans living abroad and delivered invitations for temporary stays to foreign colleagues. The National Researchers System (SNI) and CONACYT's National Register of Quality Postgraduate Courses (PNPC) included internationalization indicators in their evaluation criteria regarding the quality of individual trajectories and of the postgraduate programmes (Didou, 2017a). The Support Program for the Development of Higher Education (PADES) financed a sub-programme that contributed to internationalizing HEIs. Meanwhile, the National Program for Teachers Training and Improvement (PRODEP) supported professors and academic bodies who had the desired profile to participate in international networks or events abroad.

In response to this framework conceived by the government, HEIs have diversified their international activities. They have linked them to evaluation and accreditation strategies, improvement of students training models and the recruiting of international researchers, in other words, graduates outside the country (Didou, 2017b). However, this group became progressively less important as a feature of the overall faculty, as the national supply of postgraduates progressed and the proportion of CONACYT's international scholarships diminished. In January 2017, international academics made up only 25.6% of SNI members, with degrees obtained mainly in the USA, Spain, France, Germany and Great Britain.

The weight of this "federal centralization"[2], symptomatic of the model of governance for higher education used in Mexico, generated an excessive institutional dependence on government resources. It limited the autonomy of HEIs and academics to design internationalization projects in their own image.   This is worrying because the country is suffering an economic crisis that, recently, has led the government to reduce resources assigned to internationalization and to impose progressively more restrictive supervision requirements over expenditure.   This situation will inevitably produce tensions, most of all if government policy continues to value (or even over-value) "internationalization" as an indicator of quality.   It will only serve to aggravate already evident disfunctions, such as:

- The internal contradictions in a public policy agenda becoming progressively more atomized in programmes of limited scope and based on mutually incompatible criteria.
- The diversification of resources destined to strengthen research functions, into maintaining a growing bureaucracy dedicated to the administration of micro programmes.
- The progressive exhaustion of researchers and teaching staff.   They are currently subject to the scaled results of multiple evaluation processes, to short terms calendars, with fiscal years lasting 4 to 6 months only, to contradictory schemes of accountability, and to audits that incentivize the "production of evidence" instead of an academic discussion on scientific relevance and social pertinence.

This model of finance and administration is in itself inconsistent: it channels resources to significant activities designed to strengthen internationalization but then imposes modalities of operation that are discordant with these goals.   Internationalization activities require continuity, timeline flexibility, and the possibility of adjusting objectives according to whether or not activities are attaining their goals.   They should not be focused essentially on the production of "proof" to corroborate compliance with indicators.   In effect, the "results" evaluation mechanism itself is limiting the scope of efforts made, and results obtained, in a prescriptive context with negative impacts in personal autonomy, individual freedom, and institutional financial resources.

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[2] "The influence and weight of a federal power that frequently controls, invades and determines the duties of public institutions, not only because the greater part of the budget is provided by the federation but also because through more subtle mechanisms it intervenes or guides pre-determined institutional policies and has a qualified "opinion" in the appointment of the vice chancellors. This involvement undermines the relative autonomy within the institution and leaves out or minimizes the participation of local or provincial state powers. In Mexico the development of higher education in the current century cannot be understood without reference to the role played by the federal government, which in recent years has been much more active" (López, 2001, p. 4).

Administration of internationalization: from a bureaucratic hydra to a Kafkaesque machinery

Public HEIs promote the creation or relocation of specialized internationalization offices. As well as being a functional change in organizational flow-charts, it also translated into the updating or promulgation of new norms regarding academic and student mobility, the recognition of credits acquired abroad within the framework, interinstitutional agreements, the selection of visiting researchers and their working conditions, academic exchanges, and collaborative degrees and agreements. Almost all autonomous public universities, research centres, and federal institutions opened or restructured the offices that dealt with international affairs in the first decade after the year 2000[3]. As primary duties, they were assigned the internal diffusion of calls for application for the award of scholarships, research grants and public competitions, attention to academic exchanges, student mobility above all else, and support for internationalization *at home* programs. Thus, their profiles, tasks, personnel, responsibilities, and hierarchies are very different.

Symbolically, these offices corroborate the commitment of HEIs in favour of internationalization, according to government recommendations and those of the sectorial associations and international organizations, by demonstrating their capacity to re-direct their internal organization schemes according to external priorities, driven by national political context. Pragmatically, they allow the concentration of activities in one single department and the production of information required by the finance programmes for their evaluation. Consequently, international affairs offices carry out the accounting of whatever it is possible to count, according to a dominant model of university administration, based on "countable factual demands" (Bel, 2014, p. 49). By contrast, however, neither their own denomination, nor their own position, are even minimally standardized.

These disparities, the product of the history and autonomy of the respective HEIs, also express a lack of definition in their responsibilities and institutional prevalence. In consequence, the international affairs offices have highly variable hierarchies, staff, and installations. They are under the direct authority of the Vice Chancellor's Office or that of the Secretary General, or they may be located at a third or fourth level of decision-making structures, under coordination of Departments or Directorates. However, despite the heterogeneity of their profiles and responsibilities, they have generally grown in relevance during the last decade. They have managed to link their interactions with other administrative bodies also uncharged with procedures, oriented mainly to students and academics. In a situation where bureaucracy is becoming progressively more complicated and time-consuming for many actors, they have established their role as centres providing specialized services essentially to three recipients:

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[3] As an exception, the National Autonomous University of Mexico created its own internationalization office in 1955. Its last reform was in 2009.

- the authorities, through the administration of agreements and the organization of formal official visits;
- the academics, through support for the resolution of technical problems (hotel reservations, assistance in the organization of events, obtaining visas);
- the students, through advice and information about scholarships.

Even though almost all these offices take on technical duties and supervise student mobility and/or agreements, some (but not a lot) also play a political consulting role and are advised by internationalization councils or experts, who confer legitimacy on them. Whilst some design strategic programmes, publish the CV of their directors, and publish statistical data about the activities of the university's vice chancellor online or in print, others are opaque with regards the professional background of their staff and the results of their offices.   Functionally, the offices are centralized and located on the main campus, or they have nodes according to disciplinary areas, mainly when the HEIs are geographically decentralized.   They aim, thus, to circumscribe well-known inappropriate effects, such as greater student and academic participation in mobility by the main campus and the concentration of international activities by researchers.   In a few cases (which constitute best practice), these offices have begun to link up, even though in a preliminary manner, the three internationalization processes (the official type, the scientific type, and that related to student mobility), that co-exist at the HEIs.

The above has not been sufficient, however, for the internationalization processes to assist the cognitive, productive, and social goals of HEIs.   This administrative restructuring has contributed to the optimization of some operational procedures but has not been enough to enable the strategic programming of internationalization activities, or a self-evaluation for these activities according to institutional development plans and social or productive needs of their local surroundings.

Institutional appropriation of internationalization processes: aspiration more than reality

To date, internationalization offices have gained visibility, but don´t necessarily encourage processes of institutional appropriation of internationalization.   In general, diagnoses about the state of internationalization at Mexican HEIs identify few original experiences in this regard (Didou, 2016; Malo, 2014).   Some genuine efforts have been made to design collaborative degrees, to attract post-doctoral foreigners, to insert internationalization practices into schemes of social responsibility or productive innovation, or to enter into co-operations with emerging counterparts, mainly in Asia (Ramirez Bonilla, 2017).   These are limited, however, to a handful of establishments which, on consolidating their international co-operation, demonstrate a proactive character in their efforts.

In effect, HEIs have, for the most part, failed to benefit from their internationalization programmes, priorities, and administrative procedures, from any comprehensive perspective[4]. This situation stems internally from difficulties in building consensus and finding support for internationalization, due to a climate of conflict between interest groups and ruptures in the chains of command or between the hierarchy and the operators, within institutions. Even when the authorities assert that internationalization is crucial for the future, HEIs lack procedures for training and performance evaluation that would mobilize the administration, at median and lower levels, to comply adequately with the obligations that derive either from their own responsibilities or from hierarchical orders. As a result, these sectors experience difficulties in resolving unforeseen situations or new ones arising out of the internationalization programmes themselves, such as taking a decision *just in time*, in relation with imperative deadlines, support for the compilation of files required to submit requests for finance from foreign sponsors, and proper handling of external resources, etc.

These multiple *de facto* bureaucratic hurdles demotivate academic players from committing themselves in favour of internationalization. Therefore, the number of teaching staff and even researchers who report results in both the bi- and multilateral spheres is low. It appears difficult for them to articulate their research proposals based on the resolution of specific problems with a multilateral academic scope or to incorporate local dynamics of networking or "innovation" in international scientific teams. Among the dissuasive factors explaining this situation, we should mention, at an institutional scale, the volatility of criteria in budgetary allocations, the inadequacy of operating rules for the modes of functioning in disciplinary areas, the delay in channelling resources to scientific needs, and the lack of preparation among the administrators themselves, especially in the finance area.

The difficulties of operating internationalization projects create tensions within HEIs, because of the incompatibility of objectives and of representations between the academic players in charge of conceiving the projects and bureaucratic officers responsible for the management and auditing of resources. Internationalization is not only an object of dispute between various academic collectives that confirm, or not, its benefits. It also stokes discord and conflicts between researchers and administrative personnel, which in the end contributes to dividing institutions, both intra- and inter-sectorial.

Submerged in a bureaucratic logic of governance, universities in Mexico have failed to put forward inclusive internationalization processes. They have not been able

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[4] "Comprehensive internationalization is a commitment, confirmed through action, to infuse international and comparative perspectives throughout the teaching, research, and service missions of higher education. It shapes institutional ethos and values and touches the entire higher education enterprise. It is essential that it be embraced by institutional leadership, governance, faculty, students, and all academic service and support units. It is an institutional imperative, not just a desirable possibility.
Comprehensive internationalization not only impacts all of campus life but the institution's external frames of reference, partnerships, and relations. The global reconfiguration of economies, systems of trade, research, and communication, and the impact of global forces on local life, dramatically expand the need for comprehensive internationalization and the motivations and purposes driving it." (Hudzik, 2011, p.6)

"to implement solutions that would respond to the growing and plural demands for access to, and participation in, the distribution of resources, at the same time as facing compliance with economic growth targets and the satisfaction of commitments to efficacy and transparency in public administration.   Much of the contemporary debate about conditions of governability revolve around this dilemma, which is expressed, among other aspects, in a continuous debate about democratic practices" (Rodríguez Gómez, op. cit., p. 10).

Under the pretext of transparency defined in terms of measures and fiscal corroboration of resource use, the establishments are progressively less responsive to the expectations and situation of the actors: their difficulties to provide adequate solutions to the academic needs derive from the over-regulated mechanism of accountability, which is increasingly unsuitable for the logics and uncertainties of intellectual work.

In sum, even if the training of personnel at the internationalization offices and the redefinition of their roles are points on the agenda, they are not the only ones to require urgent attention.   As long as there are no well-trained human resources in administrative roles to support internationalization as an axis of innovation, it will be difficult for collectives of academics and students to appropriate it, making it more likely they will opt to return to familiar paths.   Any action likely to cause additional tensions, with negative impacts in institutional governance models, will continue to be postponed *sine die*, which amounts for the majority of what is indispensable for consolidating emerging processes. Experience will not be processed into learning, nor will the lessons of errors committed be learned from.   Few aspirations come to fruition without being pursued with adequate fervour.

One concrete example is that of travel expenses for academics.   In some institutions, the total sum provided to host a foreign academic is lower than the cost of an average class hotel and in many parts of the country does not stretch to covering the cost of meals and transport.   Travel expenses for trips abroad are similar for all countries, therefore oscillating between excessive and insufficient.   In both scenarios, academics have to justify their expenses through tedious invoicing procedures.   Even though the authorities repeatedly claim they prize any administrative simplification, and despite complaints from academics, the authorities still refuse to implement a fixed-rate *per diem* that does not need to be justified with receipts, such as is utilized by countries that were, supposedly, the source of inspiration for the governance model applied to higher education in Mexico.

Because of this accumulation of bureaucratic, contradictory, and increasingly irrational demands, the "grey area" of the market is growing.   This is not only so in relation to tutorials, but also to accountability and quality assurance rules, to presentation of work portfolios, to language teaching and to international mobility, mainly for professional practices.   Countless numbers of both national and international consulting firms provide services to accompany students, academics, and stakeholders in

their evaluation and audits, from the moment in which they prepare their projects until they submit their technical and financial reports.

In the face of intricate procedures to guarantee a good and transparent use of resources, a growing part of the resources for science are being diverted to pay for intermediaries who smooth the way for the intervention of the auditors, a new "*deus ex machina*" of the research field. The costs of hiring these intermediaries inevitably reduces the amount of resources destined to knowledge production and teaching activities, even though they may be included under this rubric. It is no accident then, if manifestations of critics and mobilizations from academics and students increase, and if the next decade promises to be a minefield of conflict.

Exit from the "age of suspicion"?

Analysing how internationalization has, in reality, been channelled to externally-determined activities, and how the warped inconsistencies between discourses and the implemented administrative mechanisms of the daily dealings of HEIs shows that their administrative schemes are, today just as yesterday, unequal to the task of correcting abuses in behaviours. The schemes are also lacking in justification, in intellectual terms. They manifest the empowerment of bureaucratic nuclei, barely receptive to any need that does not match the exact wording of a specific regulation, the observance of which the bureaucrats are responsible for supervising. They reveal a growing helplessness among academics, whose autonomy is hemmed in by bureaucratic requirements regarding capabilities for defining objectives, lines of work, indicators of success and timetables, inconsistent with the very nature of scientific work based on "essay and error".

The norms that regulate both the conditions and evaluation of academic work in Mexico are without a doubt imposed from outside the educational arena, according to a system of resource distribution in which the SEP has a voice, but the Treasury (Hacienda) decides what to do and controls how it should be performed. The CONACYT 2018 regulation of a support programme for networks prohibits a member from making more than one trip abroad per year. "Why?" was a question to which academics did not receive any satisfactory response, in light of compliance with both general educational objectives (generation of knowledge) or specific objectives (constitution of specialized networks). In the absence of any penalty for undesirable behaviours, (the concentration of resources of some networks in the hands of only a few members, for instance), the regulation has resulted in the imposition of criteria for funding distribution that are counterproductive to all.

The possibility of reducing the undesirable consequences of this governance model and correcting their negative effects obliges one to ask oneself: "What works, and what doesn't, in internationalization?" To envisage a way out of this context where the players are tired of wasting their valuable energy on unproductive confrontations, some initial steps could be:

- Organizing academic collectives to resolve main dysfunctions and conflicts;

- Identifying and solving incongruences in regulations;

- Returning decision-making, including financial, to the hands of SEP and CONACYT;

- Restoring academics to their rightful place as the central players, together with students, in academic and scientific life.

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