

# South-South and Triangular Cooperation in the Mexican Higher Education System

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### Asia and the Pacific Basin

Mexico was a pioneer in the LAC in launching public research and training programmes devoted to Asia. With funding from UNESCO and the Mexican Government, in 1964, the **College of Mexico (COLMEX)** created the Center for Oriental Studies (the forerunner of the current Center for Asian and African Studies (CEAA)). The National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), the largest in the country, established a similar centre in 1966 (Toledo, 1997). During the 1990s and 2000s, both public and private universities inaugurated centres, departments or research and/or academic programmes focused on countries in Asia (Japan, Korea, China, India) or its sub-regions (Pacific Basin, Asia-Pacific). Thanks to this institutional scaffolding, Mexico is an attractive destination for scientists and professionals in research, diplomacy and business in the LAC.

The Universities of Colima, Baja California Sur, Guadalajara, Veracruz and Michoacán, and the Monterrey Institute of Technology and Higher Studies (ITESM) Guadalajara Campus are home to centres for studies for the forum, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and together make up the Mexican Consortium of APEC Studies Centers (CONMEX-CA), established in 2003 as the national **branch** of the international consortium (Falck, 2004, p. 2).

The research centres and the APEC centres bring together specialized academic staff that conducts studies from an historical, international relations or economics perspective. Academics at other institutions like the Metropolitan Autonomous University (UAM), and the College of Michoacán focus their research on countries throughout the region. The National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) recently hosted a seminar for centres, groups and individual specialists working on Asia to create a collective network. Mexico's rich capacity in terms of academic specialists and their participation/ leadership in international networks, has resulted in the country producing a significant portion of the books, articles, expert reports and journals in Spanish on historical, economic, social and current developments in Asia that are produced in LAC. It is one of the most active countries in the framework of regional SSC with Asia, alongside Brazil, Peru and, more recently, Colombia.

On the other hand, a  **cursory** examination of the projects and agreements in general reveals disparities in academic and scientific cooperation depending on the parties involved. Although China, Japan and, to a lesser extent, India have shown some interest – which is growing in accordance with these countries' increased foreign investment in Mexico, this is not the case for other countries (including Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, the Philippines, and Indonesia). To diversify and scale up university and scientific SSC and TC, it is essential to identify areas of common interest, institutional capacity and reciprocal interests of individuals for shared research. It is vital to evaluate the achievements of inter-institutional, bilateral and regional collaboration programmes as well as the diplomatic initiatives undertaken by countries such as Malaysia, Taiwan or Thailand to foster cooperation and the mobility of students and academics with Mexico.

In the case of Asia, the formal forerunners of SSC and TC date back to the 1960s, but have been invigorated over the past decade by the scientific diplomacy of Asian-Pacific governments and Chinese investment. While HEIs have mainly concluded agreements with national epicentres, the overall context is promising; national public policies and those of their partners and cooperation agencies are

generating stronger opportunities and more diversified and innovative approaches to regional cooperation.

Finally, it is worth noting that Mexican research on China and growing interest among students in learning about that country are linked to their assumed pragmatic value attributed to national policies on SSC and TC (Illán, 2011) and the historical economic nature of research on Asia in Mexico (Toledo, op cit). This explains the increasingly active role of private HEIs in this field. The ITESM, a private institution related to business groups, was the first Mexican educational establishment to open offices in Shanghai and Beijing. In 2011, the University of Veracruz opened a Center for Mexican Studies in Chongqing to promote language learning, international exchange and bilateral commercial flows (Bermúdez, 2011).

In 2012, the UNAM created the Center for Mexican Studies in China in collaboration with the Beijing University of Foreign Studies. In 2014, the Autonomous University of Nuevo Leon (UANL) opened a branch office in Shanghai. Moving in the opposite direction, in 2015, the University of Fudan in China announced the creation of a Research Center for Studies on China and Latin America at the ITESM.

## Africa

Few centres and networks in Mexico specialise in African Studies. The College of Mexico's CEAA has an African studies area and offers languages programmes; it is the most visible and institutionalised core for the production of knowledge on this continent and the training of specialists. The faculty comprises of nine researchers and language teachers with specialisations in the region. The Center for Economic Research and Teaching (CIDE in Spanish), in collaboration with the ITESM, Santa Fe Campus, the College of Mexico and the UNAM Faculty of Political and Social Sciences, organises an Arab week in Mexico. Researchers from a number of private and public Mexican HEIs (COLMEX, CIDE, University of the Americas at Puebla, Ibero-American University, University of Monterrey, Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (Flacso in Spanish), UNAM, and UAM) belong to an interdisciplinary network for research on Latin America and the Arab World (RIMAAL). The Latin American Council for the Social Sciences (CLACSO), a non-governmental academic association based in Argentina with regional scope, fosters South-South cooperation between its members and, within this framework, links its Mexican partners (69 in 2015) with 29 networks and research centres in Africa and seven in the Middle East through scholarship programmes, seminars and other academic activities. In 2008, it ran a bi-regional cooperation programme between Latin America and Africa and another for trilateral academic cooperation between Asia, Africa and Latin America (Buffa, 2008:348). In 2015, it announced the entry of two members (Lebanon and Palestine) and the possible incorporation of research centres in Morocco, Tunisia, Senegal, India, South Africa, China, Japan, the Philippines, Korea and Vietnam.

In 2017, the UNAM announced its interest in strengthening its research capacity on Africa. In January 2017, the AMEXCID launched a programme, "Exporting Mexican technical expertise to Africa". It focuses on food sustainability, health, agriculture, evaluation of policies for poverty alleviation, water technology and the environment in Kenya, South Africa, Palestine, Namibia, Egypt, Ghana, Iran, Malawi, and Ethiopia. Three research centres and universities (UNAM, University of Guadalajara, CYMMIT) and other governmental and non-governmental bodies have come on board (AMEXCID, 2017).

The institutional dispersion of the few academics specialising in Africa and the fact that they are based in centres covering a wide range of economic or international issues makes it difficult to identify them. A register of who is who, and who does what and where would make it possible to design and support bilateral or multilateral programmes for strategic SSC and TC cooperation between Mexico and Africa.

Given the current lack of information, it is also not possible to offer a systematic diagnosis of the situation and the barriers and opportunities.