

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

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Abstract

Academic collaboration in Mexico mainly follows a traditional pattern of North-South cooperation (primarily with the United States as well as some central European Union countries). Higher Education Institutions have also developed South-South cooperation in Latin and Central America and some are now exploring new opportunities in Asia, essentially with China, Japan and Korea. While there are fewer alternative schemes for student mobility, scientific exchanges or joint degrees, innovative opportunities have emerged. It is important to consolidate such initiatives in light of the Trump administration's position on migration that could negatively impact the current Mexican internationalisation model for higher education and research.

Introduction

Throughout the twentieth century, Mexican universities were involved in academic exchange with foreign institutions. They recruited Mexican professors with qualifications from other countries and incorporated them into their cohort of foreign scientists in situations of forced or voluntary migration. In the 1970s, the National Council for Science and Technology (CONACYT in Spanish) launched a programme offering scholarships for study abroad with the aim of strengthening capacity in postgraduate education and research. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between Mexico, the United States (US) and Canada (Barrow, Didou and Mallea, 2003) and the country's admission to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 1994, entrenched outgoing student mobility as the central tenet of Mexico's higher education internationalisation policy. Over time, there has been a shift from internationalization with an outward focus to an *in situ*, more comprehensive programme.

Nonetheless, in geographical terms, internationalisation mainly follows the traditional pattern of North-South cooperation (principally with the US and some central European Union (EU) countries, including Spain, Germany and France). However, the Mexican government's desire for the country to become a leader in higher education in Latin America and among developing countries as well as the need to comply with the numerous international and multilateral agreements it has signed creates openings for South-South cooperation (SSC) and triangular cooperation (TC). In the university context, SSC programmes have enabled capacity development and knowledge circulation via networks and exchange of both academics and students. On bi- and multilateral as well as sub- and interregional scales, their achievements have depended on the geostrategic context and historical factors, the organisation of disciplinary areas, the identification of scientific topics of mutual interest, the availability of financial resources and the reputation of the academics involved.

This article identifies the organisations (governmental and non-governmental), Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and networks at home and abroad that have promoted SSC in general and in the specific context of higher education and science. Our hypothesis is that, where favourable conditions existed at the global and national level, HEIs built networks and international knowledge chains in unconventional geographical spaces, based on shared disciplinary interests (for instance, agriculture or health sciences). Within this framework, some countries served as poles of attraction. The article notes the importance of not only the commitments assumed by the partners to such agreements, but

also the existence of core groups of academics that are able, due to their antecedents and their connections, to foster SSC and TC. In a context where the authorities and major players demonstrate a low level of commitment to these types of academic cooperation, individuals and small scientific teams play a major role in ensuring the success of such initiatives. Mexican Institutional Cores and Networks in Latin America, Asia and Africa Given that SSC promotes horizontality and self-management of projects at different levels, it is important to identify the Mexican HEIs and networks that have cooperation projects with countries in Latin America, Asia, and Africa as a result of their disciplinary specialisation.

The focus here is on institutional cores that launch cooperation initiatives. They bring together specialists from regional blocs to foster agreements, foreign academics' visits to Mexico and from Mexico abroad, student exchange, events and publications. The level and continuity of the network activities and the institutional capacity achieved differ according to regional context.

Latin America

The main zones in which Mexico participates in SSC and TC programmes are LAC and, particularly, Central America (Figuerola Fisher, 2016). Mexican HEIs offer a temporary home to numerous academics and researchers from the Southern Cone, Central America, Cuba and Haiti. Their shared historical-cultural matrix and Mexico's active promotion of regional integration have resulted in a decades-long flow of ideas and people across the region. The pool of expertise on the region is considerable and educational opportunities are numerous. CONACYT noted that 22 masters and 24 doctoral courses in various branches of Latin American Studies were offered at public and private universities and research centres in 2015. Moreover, 14 HEIs were home to one or more centres conducting research in fields of special interest to the region. In addition to the Platform for Academic and Student Mobility of Pacific Alliance, the AMEXCID offers postgraduate scholarships in the sciences and engineering from the Organisation of American States (OAS) (with a quota of 17 percent for Central Americans), a programme specifically for Haiti, and another for Mesoamerica, which support the exchange of knowledge and experience in some sectors (among them Education). This programme fits with the Mexican orientation towards Central America to foster development capacity and address joint problems such as illegal migration or local/transnational mafias (for instance, "maras").

Within this framework of potential opportunities, there are asymmetries in the flows of outgoing and incoming scholars. Furthermore, despite its complex system of quality assurance, Mexico fails to attract foreign students from LAC countries such as Brazil and Ecuador that have ambitious scholarship programmes for postgraduate students and academics but are more interested in sending them to the United States, Portugal, Spain and France. Experiences of successful collaboration have essentially promoted short-term internationalisation, based on temporary mobility at undergraduate level.