



¿Calidad o cobertura de la educación superior en México?

Quality or coverage of higher education in Mexico?

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: mexican higher education is currently grappling with the challenges of globalization. This has sparked a debate between the renewed nationalist approach to public policy on higher education and the proposals put forward by the neoliberal model. The previous government (2018-2024) was determined to expand the coverage of higher education without increasing its funding, which meant a decline in the quality of education.

Methodology: in order to explore this scenario in greater depth, the case of the Autonomous University of Sinaloa was analyzed through a mixed documentary study with a reflective approach.

Results and discussion: in addition to addressing the state of the university ecosystem, the current government, given its nationalist vocation, seems to be advocating a model that rejects the opportunities that contact with other peoples can generate. This contradiction emerges from the rejection of the idea that higher education can be made an interchangeable commodity on a global scale that multiplies the job opportunities and income of university graduates.

Conclusions: it is concluded that the quality of higher education must meet the expectations of students eager to go out and conquer other spaces with new ideas. Reconciling the internal with the external is the key to solving the problems of the most vulnerable groups in society.

Keywords: accreditation, assessment, culture, educational quality, Higher Education.

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RESUMEN

Introducción: la educación superior mexicana se encuentra sumida en el proceso de responder a los desafíos de la globalización. Esto ha supuesto un debate entre el renovado enfoque nacionalista de las políticas públicas para la educación superior y los planteamientos que propone para la misma el modelo neoliberal. El anterior gobierno (2018-2024) se empeñó en ampliar la cobertura de la educación superior sin incrementar su financiamiento, lo cual significó un retroceso en la calidad de la oferta educativa.

Metodología: con el propósito de profundizar en este escenario, se analizó el caso de la Universidad Autónoma de Sinaloa mediante un estudio documental mixto con enfoque reflexivo.

Resultados y discusión: además de afrontar el estado del ecosistema universitario, el gobierno actual, dada su vocación nacionalista, parece reivindicar un modelo que renuncia a las oportunidades que puede generar el contacto con otros pueblos. Esta contradicción emerge del rechazo a la idea de que se pueda hacer de la educación superior un bien intercambiable a escala global que multiplique las posibilidades laborales y los ingresos de quienes egresan de las universidades.

Conclusiones: se concluye que la calidad de educación superior debe responder a las expectativas de alumnos deseosos de salir a conquistar otros espacios con nuevas ideas. Conciliar lo interno con lo externo constituye la clave para resolver los problemas de los grupos más vulnerables de la sociedad.

Palabras clave: acreditación, calidad de la educación, cultura, educación superior, evaluación.

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INTRODUCTION

This article aims to analyze the concept of quality in Mexican higher education under globalization pressures, taking as its empirical focus the formation of human capital in public institutions, with an emphasis on the paradigmatic case of the Autonomous University of Sinaloa (UAS). In this regard, the institution's Vision 2025 Educational Model embodies



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the search for institutional responses to simultaneous national and transnational demands, where quality is defined as the emerging property of the systemic articulation between educational components and their teleological adaptation to democratizing educational ends (Universidad Autónoma de Sinaloa, 2021).

Such a conception requires the integration of a cosmopolitan perspective in curriculum design as an indispensable condition for societal relevance, recognizing that contemporary challenges transcend the local to become global problems requiring multi-actor solutions. In this context, university excellence is measured by the institutional capacity to generate innovative solutions in complex environments, which redefines the social contract of higher education from its transformative rather than adaptive function.

The expansion of the purposes of higher education in Mexico has not been a manageable undertaking, as it meant abandoning extreme nationalism so that a cosmopolitan view of higher education could be successfully presented. In recent years, the paradox between the national and the global has reappeared, with the former tending to gain ground, as is the case in Mexico, according to the authors' research and teaching experience.

During the administration of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, a nationalist vocation emerged to the detriment of anything coming from abroad. According to the analysis, the previous direction represents a limitation for those who aspire to obtain a professional degree and, with it, a job, since the training of professionals, in the context of globalization, must respond to the demands of both the domestic and foreign markets. This premise is based on the need to ensure that university graduates have a better chance of applying what they have learned in the classroom and achieving a better standard of living.

METHODOLOGY

The epistemological basis of the research is rooted primarily in critical theory, as the aim was to recover the essence of the discourses and perceptions of subjects in the process of development/liberation. The methodology used was mixed and documentary, to integrate the foundations and procedures of qualitative and quantitative approaches (Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza, 2020). In terms of design, the study was configured based on a strategy in which the qualitative route predominated, while the quantitative route was embedded, being fundamental in understanding numerical data and strengthening the assessments made.

To this end, a literature review of official and institutional documents, scientific articles, and books was first conducted by the authors. Among these, an analysis of the 2019-2024 National Development Plan was conducted to observe the federal government's proposal on higher education and its discourse on its implementation (Diario Oficial de la Federación, 2019). Similarly, authors carried out a statistical monitoring of enrollment funding at the Autonomous University of Sinaloa (UAS) as a case study.

In a second stage, the perspectives of individuals identified as key informants were recorded through press statements, institutional platforms, and social media. In order to achieve a better understanding of the subject, a triangulation program was implemented that moved from the data to the authors' self-referential assessments, concluding the analysis with a comparison of sources from the specialized literature, both those included in the first phase and new sources.

Finally, it is important to note that the entire study was based on a clear ethical imperative: to make the subjects of interest more aware of the realities and more critical of their possibilities and alternatives based on scientific knowledge. In this way, ethical principles were observed, such as the protection of the identity of sources; deontology as a cross-cutting principle in data collection and processing; the commitment of researchers to objectivity without renouncing the voices and perspectives of actors; and the researchers' axiological awareness.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Coverage or quality in higher education?

In Mexico, according to Acosta Silva (2020), university agendas were focused on public policies for quality assessment and the conditioning of funding for compliance. In this regard, the resources injected generated a differential and highly competitive landscape, where mechanisms were implemented that resulted in a dynamic of restrictions and incentives for the initiation of processes of internationalization, accreditation, and accountability, among others.

This incentive policy gave universities greater dynamism and led them inexorably to improve their academic and

administrative processes. As a result, these transformations were reflected in significant changes in infrastructure and in the projection of a different image from the one they had before the processes. From a perspective focused on accreditation and academic mobility, it can be seen that several Mexican institutions managed to project themselves globally, where both students and professors were able to successfully exchange experiences, take courses, and conduct research in other countries.

On the other hand, according to data from the National Survey on Labor Market Insertion of Upper Secondary Education Graduates (ENILEMS), of 2,9 million upper secondary education graduates, 603 000 interrupted their academic career, while only 1 million moved on to higher education (INEGI, 2019). These data reveal a systemic fracture in educational continuity that contradicts the apparent boom in quality and scope.

In this regard, Aviña Huerta and Centeno Miranda (2021) identify economic precariousness as the primary cause, followed by academic backwardness and disconnection from educational projects, creating a scenario of structural educational exclusion. The higher education policy of the government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador was aimed precisely at reintegrating these interrupted youth segments, articulating an institutional response to the economic barriers that hinder the right to university education.

De La Cruz Flores's (2022) diagnosis shows that educational policies attempt to compensate the vulnerable population. However, this was not enough, and the author recommends that processes promote the right to remain in and successfully complete studies. This objective is fundamental so that, regardless of their origin, graduation allows for social mobility, as well as the social and productive incorporation of students.

In Mexico, during the six years analyzed (2018-2024), the expansion of higher education was notable. However, the scarcity of resources also grew significantly, which had an impact due to its insufficiency in quality indicators. From the perspective of the authors of this article, coverage and quality are elements that must be addressed simultaneously when designing a university model that transforms the living conditions of vulnerable groups.

However, despite the real possibilities of achieving this unity, Acosta Silva (2020) argues that the diagnosis of the underlying university model for the 2018-2024 six-year period allows higher education institutions to be conceptualized as mechanisms that reproduce social stratification. This quality is marked by access that remains restricted to socioeconomic elites, while structural asymmetries are perpetuated through higher education. This criticism identifies economic precariousness as a fundamental barrier that excludes the popular sectors, thus providing a basis for redefining the right to higher education as enforceable, free, and universal.

In line with this paradigm, the 2019-2024 National Development Plan articulates two strategic programs. The first of these was *Jóvenes Escribiendo el Futuro* (Youth Writing the Future), which took the form of affirmative action scholarships for students in priority public institutions (intercultural, rural teacher training colleges). The second was called *Universities for the Welfare of Benito Juárez García*, a federal network of campuses in marginalized areas aimed at guaranteeing comprehensive professional training through exclusive dedication and radical free access. The interweaving of both proposals shaped a model of educational democratization based on principles of redistributive justice and territorial decentralization of opportunities (Diario Oficial de la Federación, 2019).

The objective of the *Beca Jóvenes Escribiendo el Futuro* (Youth Writing the Future Scholarship), according to the official information on its website, was to enable young people who meet the requirements to remain in and complete their studies at a public higher education institution (IPES) through the assistance offered (Becas Benito Juárez [BBJ], 2024). About the status of IPES with full coverage, this is defined as an institution that does not require its students to meet specific requirements (age, socioeconomic status), so that all of them are admitted (BBJ, 2024).

Unfortunately, these cases serve as examples to understand the limitations of generalizing policies. In IPES with full coverage, students are granted a uniform scholarship without considering their socioeconomic status. This insufficient prior research and inadequate adaptation of conditions is questionable because, although it is carried out in highly marginalized regions, not all young people suffer from extreme poverty. As a result, this process leads to a waste of resources that could have been invested in those students who, in the absence of a personalized or individual assessment, were left without state support.

According to the National Development Plan (2019-2024), the Benito Juárez García Universities for Well-being were established primarily in areas with high population density, no university education, and high rates of social backwardness, violence, and marginalization (Diario Oficial de la Federación, 2019). This design was based on

offering 32 000 places for students with scholarships of 2400 pesos per month. The university campuses were mainly concentrated in Oaxaca, Mexico City, Veracruz, Chiapas, and Guanajuato (Diario Oficial de la Federación, 2019, section II, program 9).

After evaluating testimonies, data, and experiences, it is reasonable to conclude that offering coverage does not automatically mean that young people will escape poverty, as this aspiration requires quality education. Higher education, as conceived, can only aspire to the survival of those who are the target of this social policy. This model of university, whose organization or line of authority descends directly from the federal government, aims to displace the educational offerings of autonomous universities, which are considered an obstacle to the idea of a single mindset that the previous government tried to promote.

On the other hand, the Benito Juárez García Universities for Well-being, despite their strategic importance for educational inclusion, faced structural contradictions at the end of the six-year term, manifested in arbitrary dismissals of teachers whose appeals for direct protection remain pending before the Collegiate Circuit Courts. As documented by Tourliere (2024), the Coordinating Body (OCUBBJ), which reports to the SEP and is headed by Raquel Sosa Elizaga, denied the existence of an employment relationship by categorizing teachers as “beneficiaries of a social program,” which nullified their fundamental rights and benefits through a precarious legal framework.

This operational contradiction is based on a financing model in which 98,8% of the 1,489 billion pesos spent in 2023 were labeled as “subsidies” (Tourliere, 2024). This mechanism institutionalized contractual deregulation by using public resources to remunerate teaching services without recognizing employer-employee relationships, thus undermining the principles of labor justice that should underpin any democratizing educational project.

It is difficult to imagine that, under this conceptualization of the worker, one can aspire to quality education when workers are exploited under the guise of volunteers. The above scenario confirms the idea that what really matters under this model is coverage, not quality, because the latter cannot be achieved with teachers who do not enjoy rights and social benefits. As evidence, they are even referred to in political and academic discourse as participating volunteers, limiting their participation to that of beneficiaries of social programs.

The Mexican government’s education policy (2018-2024) contradicts the guidelines, orientations, and recommendations of the World Bank (WB), the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), as these organizations consider it important that higher education be an exchangeable good in the globalization process. This premise indicates that individuals who pursue a professional career must be able to find employment in a deterritorialized labor market, due to the trade agreements that Mexico has signed, especially with the United States of America, its leading trading partner in the world.

Returning to a point already addressed, this issue is facilitated by mobility programs. However, international student mobility is less than 1%, while in Latin America it reaches 1,5% and in Europe it is 10% (Herrera, 2023). Nowadays, workers do not necessarily have to migrate to join a foreign company, since when there is a skilled workforce, this acts as a factor that attracts foreign investment.

According to Pedroza Flores and Reyes Fabela (2022), within a framework of academic and commercial exchange, these organizations demand cross-border higher education that allows for the mobility of people, as well as the improvement of curricula and projects (research, innovation, and services). In this way, this model accelerates competitiveness in the import and export of higher education, an exchangeable good that has changed the landscape of the internationalization of education with the existence of franchises, foreign campuses, liaison offices, and virtual campuses.

On the other hand, Fuentes Hernández (2021) states that Mexico is one of the countries with the lowest investment in higher education according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). This poor investment, coupled with the extinction of 109 trusts related to scientific and technological research and the lack of regulatory parameters for programs with extraordinary funds, meant giving up a quality university education policy aimed at alleviating the country’s economic backwardness, especially in the case of the most vulnerable groups. The lack of funding is reflected in the decline in the quality of education and, bluntly, reinforces the idea that without quality, there can be no progress.

To sum up this issue, it is clear that the politicization of education in Mexico is a means by which those in power have sought to obtain or perpetuate their positions without any real intention of transforming people’s lives in any meaningful way. Thus, it is possible to assert that national education policy does not promote greater social mobility. This goal requires a willingness to sacrifice or postpone other issues on the national agenda that, for reasons rooted

in the electoral process, seem difficult to achieve, as their consequences appear to have been inherited by the current government (2024-2030).

The financing of public universities at the Autonomous University of Sinaloa

The Autonomous University of Sinaloa (UAS) is a national benchmark in state public education due to its comprehensive coverage, as it accepts 100% of all applications for admission. This institution operates under the legal status of a decentralized public body, as it was created by state legislative decree. As such, the institution exercises full autonomy in its internal governance. This power entails substantive responsibilities for institutional self-management, by the Mexican constitutional framework, making it a paradigmatic model of educational decentralization with territorial roots (Poblano-Chávez, 2022).

Despite operating under chronic budget constraints, the UAS achieved a historic milestone in 2021 by becoming the first state public university to implement universal coverage, simultaneously serving more than 140 000 students at the upper secondary and higher education levels (Puntualizando, 2024). Even though the UAS was the first public university in Mexico to comply with the federal government's call to provide universal coverage to all those who aspire to study a degree within it, public funding remains insufficient to support the activities of students and teachers and thus enable the university to continue to grow in quality. If in the past, the adaptation of universities to national policies meant being able to access the necessary resources to meet quality indicators. Today it can be said that in Mexico, universities are obliged to offer quality programs to their students, but with fewer resources.

Table 1 shows that during the period 2019-2023, federal and state government funding per student rose from 47 884,12 pesos per student to 58 621,02 pesos per student. In the context of the high competition generated by the globalization process, this figure is worrying, especially since it concerns the training of resources on which the future of a nation depends. Likewise, it appears that the budgetary contribution is predominantly federal. However, the state government is the one that shows the most significant resistance to guaranteeing sufficient resources, not only to guarantee quality professional education, but also, on occasion, to guarantee the payment of benefits and salaries to workers.

Table 1.

Evolution of annual funding per student at the Autonomous University of Sinaloa (UAS)

Year	Enrollment (upper secondary and higher)	Annual evolution of funding per student	Percentage increase compared to the previous year	Federal contribution	State contribution
2019	142 863	\$47 884,12		68.05%	31.95%
2020	144 168	\$50 359,13	5.16%	68.05%	31.95%
2021	144 957	\$51 389,00	2.04%	68.34%	31.66%
2022	125 533	\$62 374,07	21.37%	67.79%	32.21%
2023	140 291	\$58 621,02	-6.98%	67.94%	32.06%

Source: prepared internally using data collected from the Transparency and Accountability platform of the Ministry of Public Education [SEP] and the Undersecretary of Higher Education of the federal government (Subsecretaría de Educación Pública, 2024)

In 2022, once the lockdown phase caused by the COVID-19 pandemic had ended, a considerable number of students decided not to return to face-to-face classes, with enrollment falling from 144 957 students in 2021 to 125 533 students in 2022. In other words, 19 424 fewer students returned than in the previous year, so the amount per student increased from 51 389 in 2021 to 62 374,07 pesos per student in 2022. However, in 2023, as enrollment recovered, rising from 125 533 students to 140 291 students, a difference of more than 14 758 students, funding decreased to 58 621,02 pesos per student.

In this context, universities faced a permanent shortage of resources. This factor often tends to paralyze quality indicators, infrastructure (laboratories, computer centers, internet access), and national and international mobility of students and professors. Amid this complex scenario, the federal government's response to the demand for a larger budget for the university was to dismiss the incumbent rector from his position. This act was sanctioned by order of a control judge, based on the alleged irregular use of resources provided by both the federal and state governments (Sainz, 2023).

Universities in Mexico, and particularly the Autonomous University of Sinaloa, have responded to their struggle for greater resources to guarantee the quality of their educational programs with political persecution and the criminalization of legitimate movements. In addition, the withholding of resources used to cover the salaries and benefits of academics and administrators has been used, and this continues to be a reality that hurts the economy of university workers.

The statement by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador regarding the confrontation between factions is an acknowledgment that the confrontation between universities in Mexico over the issue of public funding is highly politicized, as was the case in the past with other governments. Education, as the main conduit for political ideas, continues to be perceived by governments in Mexico and political parties as a tool that can allow them to perpetuate themselves in power, regardless of which party is in power. Therefore, authors can deduce that for the López Obrador government, achieving quality was not important, but instead gaining ideological and political control over education. As a result, the amount of funding these institutions received depended on this, which helps to understand the attacks directed at the institution by the state government.

According to the Institutional Development Plan with a Vision for the Future 2025, the internationalization demanded by the globalized field of knowledge implies meeting standards and competitiveness, which requires the flow of teachers, students, and renewed international cooperation (Universidad Autónoma de Sinaloa, 2021). Consequently, the core of the institutional challenge lies in the deliberate reorientation of its academic policies and programs toward this global perspective. For the authors of this article, this must be achieved through institutional reengineering that positions the university as a dynamic hub capable of attracting, generating, and concentrating international academic capital, thus becoming a leading agent in global scientific production circuits.

This university model being tested by the UAS dates back to the second half of the 21st century, during the rectorship of Héctor Melesio Cuén Ojeda, when quality accreditation processes by external bodies and academic peers were introduced to internationalize the university (Cuén Ojeda, 2006). This encounter between the government and the universities had a positive impact on the UAS's quality indicators, despite the insufficient economic resources that constantly threatened the institution's functionality.

On September 28, 2023, Rector Dr. Jesús Madueña Molina, continuing with this educational model, informed the University Council, the highest authority of the university, that the UAS ranked third among public universities in Mexico in the World University Ranking, which is the largest measurement tool in the academic sector worldwide (Universidad Autónoma de Sinaloa, 2023, para. 1). This means that the university not only meets quality standards but also provides full coverage, despite not having the necessary funding.

From observing this university model, we can affirm that the quality of higher education is currently considered based on internal and external factors, as the problems faced by communities are no longer local but have become a global issue. This model is the vision that the UAS has been developing for two decades, and in order to continue on this path, it requires increased funding. Therefore, despite the shortcomings experienced by the UAS, it continues to make an enormous effort to maintain and even improve its quality indicators. In this regard, a significant effort is being made to manage resources to meet all demands, as a result of a federal education policy that gives priority to new universities over established ones.

Based on the above research, we can affirm that federal education policy conditions funding on the achievement of quality standards by IPES, which must improve its programs and processes. Additionally, this policy implements its programs with a discourse of attention to vulnerability without diagnostic criteria that prevent people without need from obtaining support, leaving those who genuinely require economic support without it. The philosophy embodied in the National Development Plan is reflected in programs that widen the inequality between IPES and, at the same time, establish an imbalance between the funding they receive and the quality requirements. This reality is especially marked in the case of the UAS, an institution that complies with universal coverage and quality standards (Diario Oficial de la Federación, 2019).

Welfare universities that provide educational services with teachers who have no labor rights, are in legal conflict, and are considered beneficiaries of the social program cannot demonstrate quality, but rather an attempt to displace the educational offerings of universities, especially autonomous ones. Furthermore, this contradiction forces autonomous universities to face the dilemma of maintaining their indicators by quality requirements or the state's demand for full coverage of educational enrollment.

The confrontation in Mexico between the federal government and the universities is unlikely to be resolved in the short term (the next six years), as the Mexican state is unlikely to increase the budget for universities

significantly. An aggravating factor is that this impossibility extends to scenarios where universities decide to sacrifice the autonomy that has cost university students so much effort. The case of the Autonomous University of Sinaloa, where political persecution is a constant threat from the local government, but guided by the federal government, demonstrates the gaps created by the attempt to align the political thinking of the government and the universities.

CONCLUSIONS

Universities in Mexico, and particularly in the case analyzed, the Autonomous University of Sinaloa, are subject to state power through financial strangulation and political persecution. The violation of university autonomy through the university reform that the federal government is implementing through state legislatures is intended to take political control of universities.

The deterioration of the quality of educational programs will become apparent if the problem of inadequate funding is not reversed. The analysis showed that it will not be possible to continue with the process of internationalization of the university and its educational programs, because this requires sufficient funds to operate these programs, such as student and faculty mobility. The inflow and success of investments will depend on investors' perception of Mexican professionals in all fields of knowledge. Therefore, it is necessary to improve the relationship between the government and universities in the country, where the search for a new concept of nation that transcends borders and recognizes the need to share the global space to find solutions to problems that are no longer local is present.

Since 2005, the Autonomous University of Sinaloa has charted a course of openness with other universities around the world, which has earned it recognition for its quality from other countries. This international reach is precisely one of the main attractions for students who wish to enroll at this university, as they see it as an opportunity to share spaces and ideas with students from other parts of the world.

University autonomy will undoubtedly remain in place, as it has been a historic achievement that has allowed freedom of thought and has been a key element in building a more just and democratic society. The critical and independent thinking that the university has developed since the second half of this millennium has been fundamental in projecting it to international levels. The lack of a cosmopolitan outlook on the part of the current government could limit the actions of university students in the national environment, causing employment opportunities to become more limited in increasingly competitive markets.

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AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION

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