



Educational cooperation and exchanges: An emerging issue

By Duncan Wood

Key Recommendations:

- The formation of a high-level bilateral working group on educational exchange with government, private sector, and academic representation.
- The creation of public-private partnerships to fund student exchanges and joint research programs.
- The creation of binational undergraduate and graduate joint-degree programs.
- To prepare Mexican students for study in the U.S., intensive language training will be needed.

Introduction

At a time when the Mexican and United States governments are looking for an opportunity to diversify the bilateral agenda and strengthen the economic relationship, there is an urgent need to focus on the long term challenges of competitiveness and human capital in the region. Questions of infrastructure, standards, border procedures and energy are all crucial to this equation, but an emerging issue that has been little discussed in the public sphere is that of educational cooperation. Several experts and government officials have long recognized this as a potential growth area in the bilateral relationship, but there are now greater opportunities than ever to further develop educational collaboration.

Mexico urgently needs to build its human capital to move from a middle income to high income country. Indeed, the Peña Nieto government's first major legislative effort has been a constitutional reform of the K-12 system to improve the quality of education. However, a second area that requires major attention is undergraduate and graduate education, especially in STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) and innovation. At the same time, the United States needs to develop the cultural and linguistic capacities that would allow Americans in professions ranging from nursing to teaching to business to better communicate with the growing Spanish-language population in the United States and to take advantage of commercial and investment opportunities in the Western Hemisphere. There exists, therefore, a powerful logic for the two governments to work together to seek mutually beneficial solutions to their educational needs. One excellent way of doing so would be to encourage higher levels of university-level exchanges between them.

The Educational Context in the Two Countries

International rankings of university quality in terms of research and teaching capacity have repeatedly placed U.S. universities firmly at the top. In the 2012 Times Higher Education World Universities survey, 30 of the top 50, and most remarkably 20 of top 25, universities in the world were located in the United

States. This preeminence of U.S. based institutions is nothing new, and the concentration of educational quality in the United States has long been recognized as an important facet of its success. The investment on the part of the U.S. government and private and public universities in education has meant that the United States has been the global leader in research and development since the end of the Second World War, and this has been credited with maintaining high levels of innovation and productivity. It has also meant that millions of foreign students have flocked there to study, with many of them building relationships with U.S. companies and citizens, and often choosing to develop a professional career in the U.S.

However, while U.S. universities have kept their positions at the top of the global rankings, it is notable that universities in emerging market countries, especially Asian institutions, have been rising in importance. Although the top ranked U.S. universities have retained their lead, second-tier institutions in the U.S. have begun to slip down the global rankings, together with their Canadian and British counterparts.

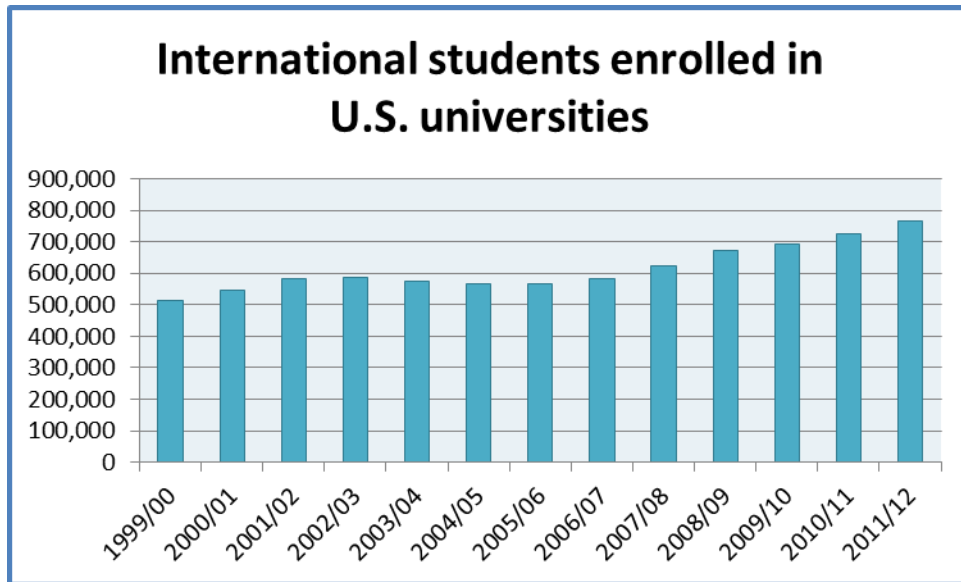
As for Mexican universities, there has been little change in their status in these rankings. Although the national university, the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), frequently features in the top 200 worldwide, there are few other higher educational institutions in the country that can compete internationally. There are a small number of institutions that offer an excellent undergraduate education (such as the Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económica (CIDE), the Colegio de México, the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM), and the Instituto Tecnológico de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey (ITESM)), but they suffer from both a limited offering of degrees and a weaker reputation at the level of graduate studies. This is both a reflection of poor funding for higher educational programming and a reflection of the fact that more students leave Mexico to pursue graduate studies than enter as international students. The most successful Mexican researchers are often drawn to foreign universities by the lack of support for research in Mexico. Faculty salaries in public universities tend to be very low by international standards, and the support given to researchers by the Sistema Nacional de Investigadores (SNI) is increasingly difficult to obtain.

In the medium term, Mexico's higher education system faces a significant challenge, with public and private university enrollment rising as Mexico's middle class grows. The National Association of Universities and Institutions of Higher Education (ANUIES) has estimated that it will be necessary to increase the capacity of universities to enroll students by 48% between 2010 and 2020. This means there will be a total student population in higher education of 4.7 million in 2020, 1.7 million more than were registered in 2010. Although the demand for private education is certainly growing in Mexico, the vast majority of students will find their way into the public university system, posing challenges in terms of funding and the availability of high quality undergraduate and graduate programs. At the same time as the total number of students in public sector higher education is growing, the amount that the federal government spends in subsidizing each student's education has also increased, rising from just over 39,000 pesos in 2006 to around 48,000 pesos in 2010. While this investment in education is needed, providing students with a quality higher education will prove a major challenge for the Mexican government. Looking to collaborative international programs and exchange opportunities is one way in which that challenge can be met.

The challenge facing Mexico-U.S. educational exchanges

Around the world university education is becoming more international in nature. In the West, universities have come to see foreign students as an important source of income, essentially subsidizing national students in their studies. The United States has followed this trend, with international students rising in number from 547,867 in 2000-01 to 764,495 in 2011-2012. These international students contributed \$22.7 billion to the U.S. economy in 2012.

Compared to other countries, however, it is clear that the United States could do much more. In the United Kingdom, for example, according to the Higher Education Statistics Agency, there were 420,000 international students studying in 2012. Since 2008, international student enrollment has increased at an annual rate of 8% in the UK, compared with only 4% annual growth in the United States. To have less than twice the number of foreign students in a country of 5 times the population and a higher rate of young people going on to post-secondary education highlights the room for growth that still remains in the U.S. international student market.

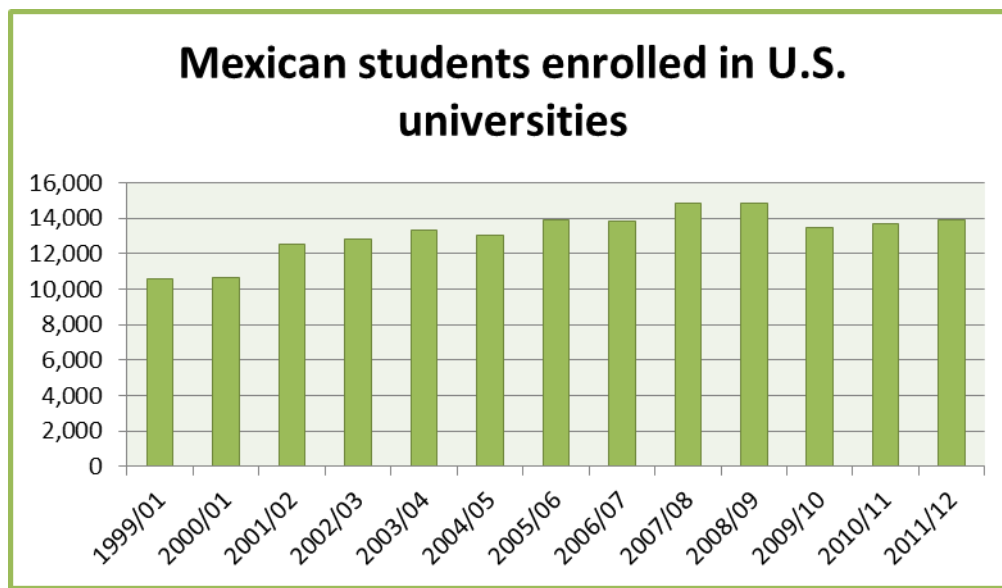


*An international student is defined as anyone studying at an institution of higher education in the U.S. on a temporary visa that allows for academic coursework. These include primary holders of F (student) visas and J (exchange visitor) visas.

Source: Institute of International Education. (2012). "International Student Enrollment Trends, 1949/50-2011/12." Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange. Retrieved from <http://www.iie.org/Research-and-Publications/Open-Doors/Data/International-Students/Enrollment-Trends/1948-2012>

The strengthening of student visa requirements after 9/11 was a key factor holding back growth in the number of all foreign students studying in the United States. Part of the issue derived from the United States actually denying visas or denying entry to some students, but at a more general level the U.S. began to be perceived as a slightly less welcoming place for international students.

When examining the international student numbers for the United States in greater detail, one observes that the figures for Mexican students are even more disappointing, showing only marginal growth over the past decade and actually falling since 2007/08. The low number of less than 14,000 Mexican students enrolled in U.S. universities and colleges in 2012 is all the more stunning when considering the fact that the two countries share a border, their economies are ever more integrated, there is a huge population of Mexican origin in the U.S. and that Spanish has become the country's unofficial second language.



Source: Open Doors: Report on International Educational Exchange, published annually by IIE with support from the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. <http://www.iie.org/Research-and-Publications/Open-Doors/Data/Fact-Sheets-by-Country/2012>

Mexico ranks ninth (9th) among countries that send students to the United States for undergraduate education and tenth (10th) for graduate education, far below Turkey, Iran, and other smaller and more distant countries. The number of Mexicans studying in the United States today is surpassed by students from China, India, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, Canada, Taiwan, Japan and Vietnam. The number of Chinese

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students going to the United States rose by 23.1% between 2010 and 2011; the number of Saudi students by more than 50%; but the number of Mexicans by only 1.3% in the same period. More Mexican students go to Spain to study than go to the United States, but what is more surprising is the fact that almost as many Mexican students go to France to study as to the United States.

Explaining this disappointing performance over the long term is not easy. The number of Mexicans studying in the United States was probably somewhat affected by post-9/11 factors, although not to the same extent as students from other parts of the world. If we compare the two charts above, we can see that, whereas the total number of foreigners studying in the U.S. stagnated immediately after 2001, the number of Mexicans continued to grow, even if only slightly. The major factor, it seems, was the U.S. and global financial crisis, and in particular the effects of Mexico's recession must be taken into consideration. The more than 6% decline in Mexico's GDP in 2008-09 essentially halted the resurgence in Mexican student flows to the U.S. that began in 2006/07.

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But we can also point to longer term trends. Even before the impact of the post-9/11 student visa requirements and the economic downturn, Mexican students were under-represented in the U.S., at around 2% of the total foreign student population; today at less than 14,000, they represent only 1.8%. It is likely that a number of factors play a role. First, language. The lack of English language skills on the part of many Mexican students is a restraining factor that prevents them from participating in exchange programs in the United States. Second, it is clear that the historical cultural ties between Mexico and Spain and Mexico and France have played a key role in determining the direction of Mexican student exchanges. Across the higher education system in Mexico but particularly in public universities, there has been a bias against U.S. universities and in favor of their counterparts in Europe, a bias reinforced by the perception that Mexican migrants often face discrimination in the United States. Third, the high cost of university education in the United States, and a lack of funding opportunities have meant that exchange programs with U.S. universities are often few and far between.

The combination of cultural, linguistic and financial challenges suggests that a concerted effort is needed to encourage a major increase of Mexicans studying abroad in the United States. Fortunately, just as migration begets migration as family members follow their relatives to a new destination, a targeted program could utilize those same factors to create momentum for educational exchange that would likely outlast and magnify the scale and scope of the bilateral initiative. What's more, the cultural exchange fomented through these programs would go a long way in improving the image of each country in the other.

The figures for U.S. students studying in Mexico are even more worrying. Over the past decade, the number of American students studying abroad has grown steadily, rising from 154,168 in the academic year 2000-01 to 273,996 in 2010-11. But in recent years, largely in response to the rising levels of violence and the corresponding toll on the country's international image, American students have largely abandoned Mexico as a destination for educational exchange. As several U.S. universities have withdrawn their insurance coverage for students traveling to Mexico and in many cases cancelled official exchanges, often in response to travel advisories from the United States government, the number of students studying in Mexico has plummeted. From over 7,000 in 2009/10, the number dropped by almost 42% the following year to just over 4,000. Mexico is thirteenth (13th) on the list of countries where U.S. students go for short-term exchanges (usually one to two semesters), well below other Latin American countries like Costa Rica and Argentina, and behind distant locales such as South Africa, despite the opportunities afforded by the educational system next door. Despite its distance, France sends more exchange students to Mexico than does the United States.

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As public security improves in many parts of Mexico, a concentrated effort will be needed to recover these losses and to increase the attractiveness of Mexico as a destination for U.S. students studying abroad.

Improving the system of Mexico-U.S. student exchanges

The stagnation of the system of exchanges between the U.S. and Mexico is lamentable when we consider the multiple benefits that would accrue to both countries by expanding the extent and scope of undergraduate and graduate exchange programs. Students in both countries are clearly missing out on a linguistic, cultural and educational experience that would not only edify and improve them on an

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individual basis, but would contribute to national economic development and help build ties of friendship and trust in the long term.

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Opportunities that would include leading government officials; university presidents from the two countries; business leaders from the two countries closely identified with higher education; and key educational organizations. COMEXUS (Fulbright-García Robles Commission), the only truly binational education organization, could serve as a secretariat.

An ambitious agenda for educational exchange would include a series of public/private partnerships to strengthen student exchange, create joint degree programs and fund strategic partnerships between universities on both sides of the border to develop common research and training programs. This is the kind of exercise that would both interest and benefit the private sector, leading educational institutions, and multiple levels of government.

The goal would be to encourage additional public and private funding for four sets of targeted educational exchange opportunities: Increased funding for scholarships to study abroad in the other country via Comexus and other scholarship-offering programs. This may need to privilege semester and year-abroad study rather than full two or five-year graduate programs in the other country, but the specific goals of the programs must be designed in consultation with universities, philanthropic organizations and the private sector. The goal would be to first and foremost give students in the two countries a strategic exposure to the educational resources in the other country, with only a secondary focus on funding full degree programs abroad. This would allow for vastly increasing the numbers of students involved.

In addition to these steps towards boosting exchanges, it will be important to develop mechanisms to encourage universities to start their own scholarship programs for semesters/years abroad in the other country, building on existing efforts. Identifying leading institutions in both countries, universities that are already heavily committed to international exchange and have a track record of success in this field, will be of considerable help.

Furthermore, the Task Force should work towards helping universities in creating binational joint Master's degree programs, involving a semester in the other country. Ideally this would include the development of networks of graduate study programs to maximize choice for students. In order to identify which programs would likely grow quickly, it is worth examining what the preferences of exchange students are today. Mexican students travelling to the U.S. tend to focus their studies in two main areas: business and engineering, with 22% and 17% of the total respectively. For US students opting to study in Mexico, there is a bias towards the social sciences that highlights their curiosity for Latin American studies, history and culture.

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In order to foster stronger ties not only between students but also between university researchers, it is imperative that seed funding is created to encourage university to university partnerships on research. USAID's TIES program pioneered this, but it was unilateral and then disappeared. A truly binational approach, with competitive seed funding to encourage research partnerships, would be particularly exciting.

The implementation of these proposals would be facilitated by the existence of common standards between the two countries for higher education. A number of Mexican university programs are already accredited in U.S. systems (such as the Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP)). However, another alternative would be to develop joint accreditation systems for university degrees, working with existing accreditation organizations, governments and universities.

In order to facilitate the flow of Mexican students to the U.S., two preliminary programs should be encouraged. The first, crucially, involves English language training. One of the major impediments to Mexicans studying abroad remains their weak foreign language skills and English is no exception. The two governments should work together to encourage more Mexican high school students to spend a short period of time in the United States, learning English and becoming accustomed to the cultural differences between the two countries.

The second preliminary step is to strengthen data gathering about international students in both countries and about the international activities of national students. The Institute for International Education (IIE) in the United States produces an annual report titled Open Doors which provides data on international student activity in the U.S., and the foreign educational activities of U.S. students. In 2012 Mexico followed suit, with the publication of the Patlani report on student mobility. It remains to be seen if this first edition of the report will be followed by further research, but the data contained within the 2012 report is of great value in identifying the preferences of Mexican students.

Conclusions

The potential for expanding student exchange and international mobility programs between the United States and Mexico is considerable. By encouraging more students to spend time in the higher educational institutions of the other country, and by developing the funding programs needed to finance such an

effort, governments, educational authorities and businesses will be contributing to the creation of a new generation of bilingual, bicultural young professionals who will be prepared to work in either economy. Particularly in the area of the sciences and engineering, Mexican students will benefit from high quality programs and relatively abundant resources. This coincides with a period in which more Hispanic students in the United States are choosing to study these degrees. For U.S. students, the benefits of both stronger Spanish language skills on the one hand, and a greater sensitivity to and understanding of Mexican professional culture on the other, would be considerable, both in the domestic and international spheres.

The creation of a high level, binational commission to fully develop these ideas, and to seek ways of organizing and funding greater participation and higher quality student mobility programs between the two countries, is a priority that both governments should embrace at this time. It is an initiative that offers considerable tangible benefits to both economies and societies, and will greatly increase mutual understanding.