

## MEXICO

# Universities open their arms to returning 'Dreamers'

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Mexican politicians and universities are preparing the way for many young Mexicans to return from the United States in the wake of President Donald Trump's threat to deport millions of illegal immigrants. Critics claim the easing of restrictions in university applications undermines quality controls, but one outcome could be greater student mobility in Mexico's higher education system.

President Donald Trump's threat to deport millions of illegal immigrants – half of them Mexicans – has triggered an unprecedented campaign by the Mexican government and universities. A raft of measures announced in recent weeks seek to reincorporate returning migrants into the country's education system and labour force while defending those who wish to remain in the United States.

Trump has vowed to deport as many as three million illegal immigrants, with those with criminal records at the front of the queue.

However, there is growing fear among the hundreds of thousands of university students and workers who are beneficiaries of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals or DACA programme – which grants temporary legal status to certain immigrants who arrived as minors – following the detention of several DACA holders in recent weeks.

A recent series of menacing tweets by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement, suggesting that even DACA holders could be subject to deportation, has sparked further alarm.

Mexicans represent roughly 5.8 million of the estimated 11 million illegal immigrants in the United States. They include an estimated 400,000 Mexicans known as Dreamers, for the proposed federal Dream Act that sought to provide legal status for young immigrants. Many have little or no support system in Mexico and some don't even speak Spanish.

In response, the Mexican government is seeking to ease the repatriation process for hundreds of thousands of migrants, particularly students.

### New legislation

On 17 March, the Mexican Congress approved new legislation that streamlines the application process to schools and universities for returning migrants. The changes to the federal Education Law empower private colleges to revalidate transcripts from other Mexican or foreign institutions.

Even more significant, students who studied abroad no longer need to present an apostille – a diplomatic notarised seal – along with their transcripts, a process that can take weeks and cost hundreds of dollars.

The federal Secretariat of Public Education previously announced that elementary and middle school students can enrol without a birth certificate or transcript since many migrants lack the most basic documents.

Finally, the law creates a national qualification system to unify educational requirements among institutions, based on international standards. Currently, the onerous revalidation process deters many students from studying abroad or at other Mexican institutions.

The Mexican government has also opened free legal clinics at its 50 consulates in the United States. The offices, which began operating on 4 March, will aid migrants facing deportation or seeking legal residence status.

## **A political diversion**

These measures represent a major shift in the Mexican government's historic treatment of its citizens abroad. For much of the past century, migrants were seen as traitors to their homeland or simply ignored.

The Mexican government withheld 10% of the salaries for Bracero guest workers – a programme that sent as many as 300,000 Mexican farm labourers to the United States during World War II – and only agreed to pay back a share of it in 2008. Similarly, Mexicans living abroad only earned the right to vote in 2005 and bureaucratic hurdles still make the process difficult for most.

However, President Enrique Peña Nieto has made the plight of Mexican immigrants in the United States a major diplomatic issue in his dealings with Washington – although not necessarily for the right reasons. Peña has seized on widespread fears in Mexico over the 'Trump effect' to divert attention from the corruption scandals plaguing his government. In the process, he has painted the migrants as returning heroes to be greeted with open arms.

## **University action**

Many universities are also taking action on behalf of the migrants, both at home and in the United States.

On 14 March, the National Autonomous University of Mexico or UNAM, the National Human Rights Commission and the Carlos Slim Foundation announced a joint programme to provide legal assistance to Mexicans who qualify for citizenship in the United States. The programme will operate in conjunction with the UNAM's five offices in the United States.

Some 130 US universities have also pledged to offer legal services for the programme, according to a press release from the foundation run by Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim.

Mexican universities are also working to expand opportunities for returning Dreamers. The Ibero-American University in Mexico City – one of the country's most prestigious and expensive private institutions – announced in February that it would offer scholarships to 1,500 returning migrants. The university also pledged more spots on its lower-level university courses, which are similar to community college programmes, as a pathway to a full university degree.

The UNAM and other public universities have pledged to make room for returning university students and others are offering free Spanish-language programmes for incoming Dreamers.

However, critics question the viability and ethics of reserving spots for migrants in the already overcrowded public university system. Currently, less than a third of the 10 million Mexicans between the ages of 18 and 24 attend university, according to government figures. And the country's largest institution of higher education – the UNAM – turns away nine out of 10 applicants.

Critics have also taken aim at the new changes to the education law, which they claim are politically motivated and undermine hard-fought quality controls in the system.

That might be true. But streamlining the application process will benefit student mobility in Mexico as a whole, which is virtually nil. More importantly, any steps that will ease the repatriation of migrants – particularly those for whom Mexico is practically a foreign country – should be welcomed. Their path is already hard enough.

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