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Comparative Study Makes the Case for Mexico's Public Universities



Marion Lloyd for The Chronicle

At the National Autonomous University of Mexico (above), creators of a database that compares Mexican institutions say that international rankings fail to weigh the contributions university researchers make toward national development.

By Marion Lloyd

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Mexico City _ It can be lonely at the top, especially when it comes to global university rankings. So in 2008, researchers at the National Autonomous University of Mexico—the sole Mexican university to break into the top 200 in international rankings—decided to see how their institution stacks up against its rivals in Mexico.

The result was the Comparative Study of Mexican Universities, the second version of which was published today. The interactive database compares the country's 43 public universities and the top 15 private institutions with each other in areas such as patent production, scholarly articles published in peer-reviewed journals, and the number of full-time professors with Ph.D.'s. With statistics compiled from 2,400 different academic and government institutions from throughout the country and the world, it represents the most comprehensive database of its kind in Mexico.

The site is not, however, intended to serve as a national university ranking system. (Several Mexican newspapers offer university rankings already, although many universities have declined to participate on grounds that the survey methods are highly subjective.)

Instead, the creators of the database at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, which is known by its Spanish acronym UNAM, insist that their goal is to provide an antidote to the rankings model, which they view as arbitrary and skewed in favor of a sole model: that of the elite American research institution.

"The rankings are nothing more than Harvard-ometers, how much you look like Harvard," says Imanol Ordorika Sacristán, director general of institutional evaluation at UNAM and co-director of the database project.

He said he hoped the database would provide a useful source of information for scholars and university administrators, both in Mexico and abroad.

"We tried to do what the rankings don't," says Mr. Ordorika, who holds a Ph.D. in education policy from Stanford University. "We tried to create a comparative tool that allows us to know the state of the universities, not the position of the institutions."

Overcoming Biases in Rankings

He and other academics argue that global rankings are biased in favor of English-speaking countries and, particularly, institutions in the United States, Britain, and Australia. (Together, institutions from those three countries account for more than half of the top 200 universities listed in the most recent *Times Higher Education* rankings.) They note that the main instrument used for counting scholarly articles, the Thomson Reuters Web of Knowledge, mostly surveys English-language journals.

Mr. Ordorika also argues that the rankings fail to take into account the broader role of public universities in Latin America in guiding social policy, promoting democracy, and combating poverty in the region.

"Our universities fulfill a huge range of activities that the others aren't fulfilling, or aren't required to fulfill," he says. "These functions aren't measured or even identified by the majority of the rankings."

The National Autonomous University of Mexico—which, with 140,000 undergraduate and graduate students, is one of Latin America's largest institutions of higher education—still manages to rank among the top 200 universities in the listings produced by *Times Higher Education* and Shanghai Jiao Tong University. But, says Mr. Ordorika, "the rankings are incapable of capturing what UNAM really is."

In addition to having produced three Nobel Prize winners over the years and having 2,500 articles published in international peer-reviewed journals in 2009 alone, the university also hosts one of Mexico's top orchestras, and operates the nation's largest library and its main astronomical observatory. In addition, the university has graduated hundreds of thousands of professionals, including most of the country's presidents, since its establishment in 1910. "The state-level

universities do the same thing at the state level," he said, "but none of that figures in the rankings."

The decision to create a comparative database was motivated by more than national or regional pride. The authors are also seeking to improve the image of Mexico's public universities, which are facing fierce competition from their private rivals.

Under the pro-business National Action Party, which has governed Mexico since 2000, the government has been increasingly channeling research and development funds to private institutions, breaking with a long tradition in Mexico in which only public universities received government support.

Public vs. Private

By far, the biggest of the private recipients is the private Monterrey Institute of Technology and Higher Education, which has about 77,000 students on 33 campuses nationwide. Conservative members of Congress and opinion makers increasingly hold up Monterrey Tec as a model of productivity in arguing for more government support for the university's technology innovation programs.

Mr. Ordorika insists that such arguments are wrong-headed. He notes that Monterrey Tec ranks sixth nationwide in the number of patents awarded since 1991. It has produced three, compared with UNAM's 121. In addition, he notes, public institutions in Mexico account for 95 percent of articles published in international peer-review journals.

Monterrey Tec officials, meanwhile, say the database does not reflect their institution's recent efforts to expand research and development. Over the past decade, the institution's research budget has quintupled, to \$45-million, says Francisco Cantú, dean of research and graduate studies at Monterrey Tec. There are plans to double that investment within five years.

The university has also greatly increased its patent-production efforts, with 170 applications now pending in Mexico and Europe, he says. "The UNAM has taken decades to get where it is, whereas the Tec has shot up in the last 10 years."

Mr. Cantú insists that Monterrey Tec is not out to compete against UNAM, much less against the public universities in general.

"It's unfair to make this distinction between public and private," he says. "The Asian tigers don't make this distinction, nor does the United States. If we want to compete as a country on an international level, we have to push for more research and it shouldn't matter who does it."

Mr. Ordorika is not convinced.

"In the ongoing debate in this country between public and private higher education, they're trying to convince us that Monterrey Tec is the most marvelous," he says. "But now we have the facts to make our case. The future of higher education in this country lies with the public universities."

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