

# Faculty Engagement in Internationalization: The Mexican Perspective

*By Wietse de Vries and José Francisco Romero*

As in many countries around the world, internationalization is an emerging theme in Mexican higher education policy discourse. In practice, this discussion has yet to result in substantial progress toward the internationalization of institutions, most of which have only recently begun—or have not yet started—the internationalization process. Regardless of how these efforts unfold going forward, however, there can be no doubt that faculty engagement will be crucial to their success.

## **Barriers to Faculty Engagement**

In Mexico there are a number of factors that inhibit the engagement of faculty in internationalization. First, a majority of current faculty were recruited in the 1970s and 80s, with only an undergraduate degree. Though many obtained graduate degrees in the following decades, most did so at local universities. Few Mexican faculty members have study abroad experience or international academic ties that might lead them to seek out research collaborations, teaching exchanges, or other international activities in their current positions.

Second, the administrative burden of establishing international programs and collaborations is substantial, particularly when faculty mobility is involved. Though faculty members themselves can contact colleagues abroad and begin the process, there are multiple layers of approval and formal procedures required before a program actually takes place. Forms must be filled out, credentials need to be checked and formally recognized, and offices and embassies must be visited—all of which consumes valuable time and energy that faculty members may feel they cannot spare.

Finally, as is the case in many areas of higher education, money is an important issue. What little support is available to faculty from their institutions or the government has generally been limited to a few specific international activities, such as sabbaticals and research, and a small number of participating faculty. Short-term and smaller-scale activities, such as teaching exchanges, that might be accessible to a greater number of faculty have received little consideration.

## **Several Promising Initiatives**

In recent years, a number of promising new programs and initiatives have emerged that may help mitigate these challenges and facilitate greater international involvement by Mexican faculty members. These include:

- Mexico's Secretary of Public Education (SEP) and the National Association of Universities (ANUIES) have started to offer grants for faculty to conduct research or teach at a foreign university for a short period of time—typically one semester. Such short-term programs facilitate an international experience for faculty who cannot spend more time away due to family and other commitments, and may open the door for longer-term academic relationships and collaborations.
- Most universities have established “international cooperation offices,” which assist faculty and students in exploring possibilities for working or studying abroad. An interesting variation on this is the creation of university offices abroad. For example, the Instituto Tecnológico de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey (a major private university) has created

liaison offices in some universities abroad (for example, at the University of British Columbia, Canada). These offices both assist faculty and students arriving from Mexico, and recruit local faculty and students for the home institution.

- Several (mostly private) Mexican universities have sought and attained accreditation by U.S. or international agencies, and have aligned their curricular contents and degree structures with those of the United States or the European Union. This has paved the way for joint degrees and other institutional partnerships that facilitate faculty exchanges, teaching collaborations, and the sharing of course materials.
- During the last decade, several Mexican universities have become part of international networks. Generally, these networks work by memoranda of understanding, with agreements on faculty and student exchange. However, a unique model that takes internationalization a step further is illustrated by the Universidad del Valle de México (UVM). The UVM network was acquired several years ago by Laureate International Universities, and has since expanded to become Mexico's largest private university. As a result of the acquisition, UVM became part of an international constellation that includes 60 universities in 28 countries, with a total of 600,000 students worldwide. While the corporate university model warrants careful consideration, it is clear that participation in an integrated and far-reaching international network facilitates faculty exchanges and other collaborative activities that enhance institutional internationalization.

In conclusion, internationalization is gaining ground in several Mexican universities. Its progress, however, is highly dependent on the participation of faculty: they are the ones who have direct contact with students and colleagues, and are knowledgeable about curricular contents, both within their university and abroad.

***Wietse de Vries** and **José Francisco** are researchers at the Vicerrectoría de Docencia, Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, Puebla, Mexico. Contact email: [wietsedevries@ultranet.com.mx](mailto:wietsedevries@ultranet.com.mx)*