

University of Baja California Graduate Program in Global Studies: A model for international cooperation.

Alfonso J Galindo, Patricia Moctezuma

Universidad Autónoma de Baja California

This paper focuses on the development of the graduate program in Global Studies at the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California (UABC) in Mexico, as a flexible, innovative higher education initiative. UABC was able to break the traditional boundaries existing between its own academic units to create an interdisciplinary curriculum, and look beyond national borders to develop World's first graduate program in Global Studies, with the cooperation of universities in four continents. The program benefits from UABC's location on the US-Mexico border: the most frequently crossed international border of the world and an ideal site for the study of global issues.

Background

Mexico operated as a closed protectionist economic system from the late 1940s to the early 1980s. During this period, production was mainly oriented towards a captive price-taking domestic market. Therefore, research and development (R&D) investment was limited to funds provided by the State, with little innovation financed through private sources. During the period of Mexican protectionism, there was no significant link between research and industry. The apparent goal of educational policy was to allow massive enrollment of students into the higher education system to ensure social permeability and foster equality. Enrollment in public universities was very inexpensive, and the opportunity to pursue a professional degree was open to the general population. With few exceptions, universities devoted their efforts to teach for the massive number of students that enrolled every year, with limited entry requirements. 'The 1970s continued the cycle of expansion. This decade was characterized by generalized growth of the educational system and an unprecedented expansion in the number of students, professors, support workers and facilities' (Rodríguez and Sosteric, 1999, p. 4).

'An institution of higher education was considered to be a *public university*, which was defined along the following basic rules and structures: student access was non competitive, fees were nominal, unconditional subsidies constituted the only source of income, the institution was autonomous in setting its own rules. Innovation in teaching was a secondary issue in a closed economy that was heavily influenced by the state.' (Kent, 1998, p. 3)

In the absence of adequate incentives, few Mexicans chose a career in academia. Indeed, many of those Mexicans who decided to become full time researchers and scientists opted to search for employment opportunities abroad.

The opening of Mexico's economy to the world, starting with the country's accession to GATT in 1986, posed an enormous challenge to its educational system. In 1994, the launching of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) '...explicitly pointed to the need to reform a higher education system which was considered extremely dysfunctional for the ongoing transformation of the productive system and the tertiarization of the economy characterized by the rapid development of a service sector' (Didou, 2003, p.2)

Under a new system of open exchange, it became necessary for universities to transform themselves from subsidized entities producing a mass of graduates with limited practical

training, to competitive organizations with the ability to educate professionals who could guide the country to a new era of global competition.

In general terms, Mexican higher education and research activities have undergone major reform in the past 15 years, aimed at linking university graduates and research facilities to the productive chain. However, after the years of closeness, there are many important challenges facing this process of structural reform. One of them has to do with the training and recruiting of faculty in Mexican public universities. Because resources available to these institutions are still scarce, they cannot compete with universities from other countries in the process of recruiting faculty.

There are many highly qualified professors in the system of public universities in Mexico, with distinguished credentials and important research accomplishments. However, high quality human capital is dispersed throughout the system, and resources are insufficient to staff complete schools and departments, that may compete in terms of equality with international institutions. Therefore, there is a window of opportunity to innovate in transnational and flexible educational arrangements.

Introduction

In December 2002, Dr. Alejandro Mungaray became President of Universidad Autónoma de Baja California (UABC). President Mungaray was elected for a four year term based on his distinguished record as Professor of Economics and high ranking official of the National Association of Universities of Mexico (ANUIES), in charge of developing and implementing higher education policies in the country. He is a member of the National System of Researchers (SNI) of Mexico, which was created in 1984 by the Mexican government to provide incentives for people devoted full time to academic activities¹.

President Mungaray presented his four year plan for UABC early in 2003. The plan established that '...to fulfill UABC's commitment to provide high quality education, it is necessary to enhance the learning process, by offering a diversity of programs based on dynamic, innovative, open and flexible academic arrangements' (UABC, 2003, p.11). One of the goals set in UABC's four year plan was to enhance the quality of its academic programs, so that they could be accredited as 'programs of excellence' by the National Council of Science and Technology of Mexico (CONACYT). In the last quarter of 2004, this goal was attained and UABC received an award from Mexican President Vicente Fox for being the university with the greatest number of accredited 'programs of excellence', rising from 14 at the beginning of his tenure to 23 in March 2004 and to 35 at the end of 2004².

It would be difficult to explain UABC's successful quest to become the best public university in Mexico without considering the elements of innovation, flexibility and openness introduced by President Mungaray in the process of developing academic curricula for graduate and undergraduate programs. This can be exemplified by studying the case of the Graduate Program in Global Studies presented in this paper.

The way things were in the Social Sciences at UABC until 2002

Upon his arrival at UABC, Dr. Mungaray faced several challenges with regards to the structure of the Social Sciences at UABC. First, the university was structured based on a model of independent schools per discipline, with each school dictating many of its internal policies with regards to teaching and researching. Secondly, the university operates through three separate urban campuses, one in each of the three most important cities in the State of Baja California, plus several suburban facilities in minor cities. Although each of these campuses specializes in different fields of knowledge, the division between schools did not allow for cooperation between the academic units of the system. Finally, with the exception of some schools, most of the academic units lacked the resources to establish a faculty cluster of full time, tenured Ph.D.s that would allow UABC to compete in the global arena. In fact, many of the schools did not have enough faculty members to build a full time graduate program³.

In the first year of his tenure, Dr. Mungaray supported groups of professors from different schools in their independent efforts to create quality graduate programs in several disciplines. However, it became evident that many of these initiatives were not heading to success, especially because the National Council of Science and Technology of Mexico (CONACYT) established a minimum of requirements for the accreditation of new graduate programs in the track to become 'programs of excellence'. When a program attains this status, the university may apply for federal funding, plus students can apply for scholarships to enroll in the program.

Although some schools were able to successfully create high quality graduate programs by themselves, a major problem that prevented the creation of more graduate programs was the fact that many of the independent schools could not put together clusters of faculty with enough credentials to attain CONACYT standards. Specifically, some schools did not have enough professors who had applied and had been accepted as members of the SNI, a condition established by CONACYT to allow new programs into the track to become 'programs of excellence'⁴.

The path to innovation

President Mungaray and his team decided to pursue an innovative path to solve the problem. They decided to study the configuration of graduate programs in other countries and observed that some institutions in North America allow people to take courses in more than one field of knowledge to grant interdisciplinary graduate degrees. The working team also concluded that the creation of programs based on interdisciplinary studies (IDS programs) would allow UABC to modify the traditional pattern of Mexican higher education based on excessive class (lecture) hours and limited time for students to study and perform research.

Based on these findings, the UABC team set out to develop an IDS graduate program in the Social Sciences, with the following characteristics:

- It would allow cooperation between independent schools of Social Sciences within the UABC system;
- It would permit the creation of strong faculty clusters with enough SNI professors to attain the requirements set by CONACYT;
- It would break the traditional boundaries that existed within the academic units of the university and allow cooperation between faculty with similar interests but different institutional affiliation;
- It would foster the professionalization of students at graduate level, allowing better incorporation of new human capital to the work force;
- It would break the boundaries of traditional disciplines and enter the innovative field of global studies;
- It would facilitate the process of internationalization of UABC higher education by appealing to international institutions who may be interested in joining the innovative programs through technical cooperation and exchange of graduate students; and
- It would capitalize on the geographical advantages of the Mexican State of Baja California, featuring an international border that separates a newly industrialized country from an hegemonic power, and has more transit than any other international border in the World.

The global studies graduate program at UABC

Master's program

The objective of the master's program is to develop qualified human capital to be incorporated into the work force in the short term

After studying several international examples of IDS education, the UABC team decided to adopt the following model, which allows students to specialize in three fields and graduate with a Master's degree in Global Studies, ready to participate in the work force.

Master of Arts in Global Development Studies			
Core Courses	Elective Field 1	Elective Field 2	Elective Field 3
Global Studies 1	Course 1	Course 1	Course 1
Global Studies 2	Course 2	Course 2	Course 2
Quantitative Methods	Course 3	Course 3	Course 3
Research Methodology	Paper	Paper	Paper

Figure 1 Structure of UABC Master's Degree in Global Studies

In this plan, a student entering with an undergraduate degree is required to:

1. Take four core courses with the purpose of introducing the general field of global studies and the tools required to perform research related to the subject.
2. Select three fields of concentration from the following disciplines:
 - Economics
 - Political Science
 - Public Policy
 - Geography
 - Social Studies
3. Relate the knowledge attained in each elective field to the general field of global studies by writing a paper.
4. Work with an advisor to enhance the three research papers and integrate them into one document, in partial fulfillment of the Master's degree requirements for graduation.

Some highlights of the program are:

- Faculty from different campuses, schools and fields of knowledge integrate into one cluster and interact to oversee the general progress of the students in the program, without incurring in high operational and administrative costs.
- Students design their own critical path to graduation based on course offerings on diverse topics within the elective fields of study, throughout a two year span.
- Students can approach a general topic of global importance from an interdisciplinary perspective.
- Students can make use and interact with more university resources from all campuses in the system.
- Students design research projects on a wide array of topics, with the committed participation of faculty,

Doctoral program

The goal of the doctoral program is to develop human resources to perform in depth research in the field of global studies.

To develop the doctoral program, UABC's team also considered several possibilities, ranging from a self standing Ph.D. with core courses based on a structured curriculum system to a

continuation of the work developed at the masters level through personalized tutoring and peer review. The planning committee opted for the second alternative.

The structure of the graduate program evolves from the Masters degree to the Ph.D. program as follows.

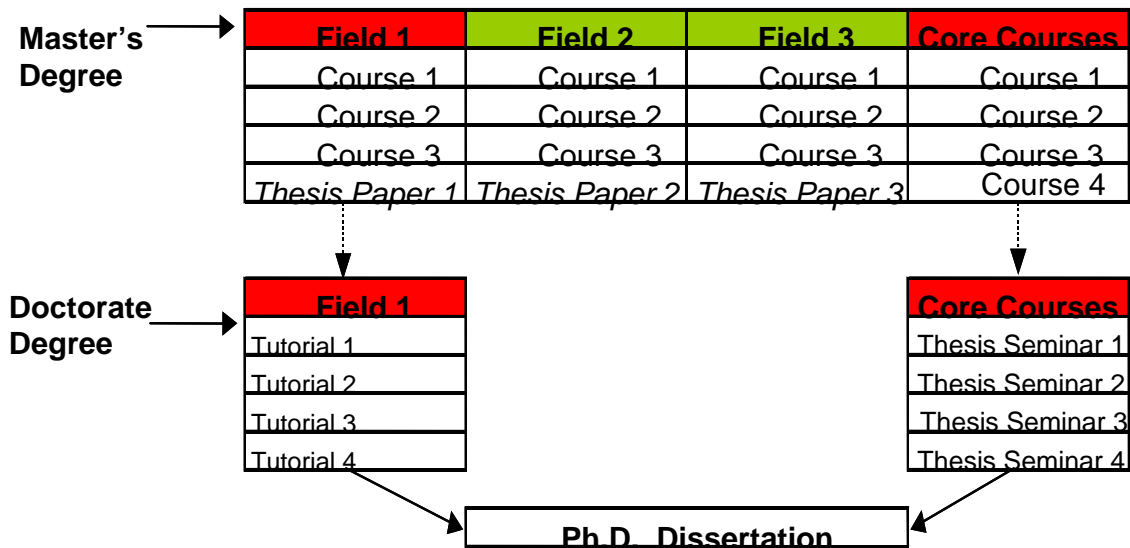


Figure 2 Structure of UABC's Ph.D. program in Global Studies

To pursue a Ph.D. degree, a student must:

- Satisfactorily complete all requirements for the Masters Degree in Global Studies;
- Choose one field of knowledge and a specific topic for in depth study and research at doctoral level;
- Select a faculty member who accepts to tutor the student and supervise his/her doctoral research until the successful completion of the program.
- Present a research plan and prospectus that may allow successful completion of the program requirements.
- Complete all program requirements, including full time participation in the program by meeting on a specific schedule with the chosen tutor, reviewing peer students work, and presenting thesis progress reports at regularly scheduled thesis seminar sessions.

Students are expected to finish all Ph.D. work and receive their degree two years after entering the doctoral program.

This program of study allows UABC isolated faculty members, facing the problem of scarce and disperse human resources at UABC, to transmit their knowledge to students on a one-on-one basis. The plan also supplies the university with a fresh class of students eager to pursue new ideas and ready to act as research assistants for senior faculty members.

Regional considerations

Mexico and the US have a common boundary that spans 3,141 kilometers, from the Pacific Coast to the Gulf of Mexico. It is the most frequently crossed international border in the world with over 200 million people crossing it legally every year (USDOT,2005). 'In addition to its vast flows of legal traffic, the U.S.–Mexico border is also perhaps the world's land border with the highest number of illegal crossings. Difference in living standards on the two sides of border is the primary driving force behind these migratory flows'. (Wikipedia, 2005).

The observed contrast between the United States and Mexico provide this border with excellent conditions for the study of global issues, as well as the implications that global development has in local populations. There is an enormous potential to develop research on topics ranging from exchange of capitals, goods and services to migration and environmental issues.

These characteristics attract an important number of scholars from Mexico and other countries to the border zone. The creation of UABC's Graduate Program on Global Studies provides a strong foundation to attract high quality students to the area. UABC's expectation is to further develop its program to become a strong component of a wider initiative, leading to the establishment of a research center specialized in the study of global development issues.

International cooperation through flexible and at-distance learning methods

In choosing a flexible curricular model for the graduate program in global studies, the UABC team kept in mind the need to enhance the international experience for graduate students in the field of global development. The structure of the program, which divides the curriculum into three different elective fields of knowledge, allows for a wide array of possibilities of exchange and cooperation with international universities specializing in different topics. It also permits UABC to work beyond its institutional borders by allowing distinguished students to be tutored not only by its own qualified faculty, but also by international experts in fields not fully developed within UABC.

UABC shared the idea and structure of the graduate program in global studies with officials from prestigious universities in four continents, all with established initiatives in issues of global development. The idea was well received and supported by the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), the *Université de Paris*, and the *Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales* (FLACSO). These institutions agreed to become institutional partners for the operation of the graduate program, allowing it to become the world's first interdisciplinary, international program in the field. Currently UABC is negotiating the terms of its partnership with recognized Australian universities.

The international component of the graduate program operates as follows: All students are expected to either enroll in courses at a foreign university or conduct research supervised by faculty affiliated with an international institution. Ideally, students are expected to spend the third semester of the masters program in residence at one of the partner institutions. However, not everyone has available resources to support their stay abroad, scholarships are subject to severe competition, and calendars vary at different universities. Therefore, the program allows for flexibility through alternative arrangements, some of which are:

1. International partner institutions accept to teach courses at UABC campuses combining traditional an at-distance methods. Typically, a professor from one of the partner institutions may visit UABC campus to open a course and present the course requirements to the students. Thereon, the professor follows up via distance learning technologies, aided by a local assistant. Depending on the geographical location of his/her home institution, it is desirable that the professor returns to teach at the classroom at least one or two more times during the period.
2. Students enroll in courses at international institutions and are physically present at the classroom for at least 30% of the lectures, either by commuting (UCLA case) or remaining in residence at the hosting institution for at least 4 weeks. Students and faculty establish the requirements for students to complete the rest of the course work by means of distant learning technologies.
3. International partner institutions allow UABC students to enroll in Summer or short courses that may allow them to complete curricular requirements in a shorter time.
4. A student presents the UABC graduate studies committee with a detailed plan to develop an independent studies project under a tutor based at one of the partner institutions.

With regards to doctoral work, all students are free to choose their tutors, either within the institutional boundaries of UABC or from partner institutions. The doctoral program curriculum, based on tutorial courses, allows individuals to pursue independent work under a wide array of mentors, as long as they receive authorization from both the tutor and the graduate studies committee.

Conclusion

The creation of UABC's Graduate Program in Global Studies is a good example of cooperation for the enhancement of international higher education opportunities, based on the use of flexible, open and at-distance educational methods. Through the use of these unconventional tools, UABC has been innovative in the global arena of education, and has been able to solve internal dilemmas that it faced in the process of enhancing opportunities for graduate education for the increasing demand of the US-Mexico border region. UABC's graduate program in global studies has raised the interest of several international institutions that wish to develop graduate programs following similar curricular arrangements.

Notes

- 1 For the description of SNI and its operation see www.conacyt.mx/sni/#que
- 2 See www.cronica.com.mx/nota.php?idc=163709
- 3 In Mexico it has been customary to allow part time professors, usually holding a professional degree, to teach at college level, but they are not allowed to teach at graduate level.
- 4 If a professor is already participating as member of a faculty cluster in a graduate program, he can teach in another graduate program, but cannot become a member of the main faculty cluster of such program.

Copyright © 2005 Galindo, A.J. & Moctezuma, P. The authors assign to ODLAA and educational non-profit institutions a nonexclusive license to use this document for personal use and in courses of instruction provided that the article is used in full and this copyright statement is reproduced. The authors also grant to ODLAA a nonexclusive license to publish this document in electronic or print form within ODLAA publications and/or the world wide web. Any other usage is prohibited without the express permission of the authors.

References

- Didou, S. (2003). The role of universities in the transformation of society: Political democratization, social change and educational reform in Mexico. Retrieved October 7, 2005 from <http://www.open.ac.uk/cheri/TRreports.htm>
- Kent, R. (1998). Institutional reform in Mexican higher education: Conflict and renewal in three public universities. Retrieved October 8, 2005 from <http://www.iadb.org/sds/doc/edu-102e.pdf>
- Plan de desarrollo institucional 2003-2006. Universidad Autónoma de Baja California (UABC 2003). Retrieved October 10, 2005, from <http://www.uabc.mx/planeacion/pdi/PDI.PDF>
- Rodríguez, R. & Sosteric, M. (1999). Higher education in transition: An agenda for discussion. *Electronic Journal of Sociology* (1999). Retrieved October 10, 2005, from <http://www.sociology.org/content/vol004.002/rodriguez.html>
- U.S. Department of Transportation based on data from U.S. Customs Service, Mission Support Services, Office of Field Operations, Operations Management Database. Retrieved Oct. 10, 2005 from http://www.bts.gov/programs/international/border_crossing_entry_data/us_mexico/pdf/entire.pdf
- Wikipedia. Retrieved Oct. 8, 2005 from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U.S.-Mexico_border