

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Changing patterns of international mobility in the making of an academic community: A case study of Mexico

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**Research Domain:** International Perspectives and context (IPC)

**Abstract:**

Using the case of the academic profession in Mexico, this paper addresses the role of international study trajectories in structuring national academic communities. The paper draws on the statistical analysis of a dataset of over 20000 demographic, academic and mobility profiles of research active academic extracted from Mexico's National System of Researchers (*Sistema Nacional de Investigadores, SNI*), from which data related to higher education qualifications obtained abroad were extracted and reported to current positions in the SNI system.

Trajectories in international mobility by qualification, discipline, and country(ies) of destination are reported to periods of mobility and generations of researchers in order to answer the following question: How do international mobility patterns towards academic qualification reflect and shape 1) the evolution of the academic profession and national higher education system in Mexico and 2) its changing relations with key historical hubs of the international higher education market.

**Paper:**

This paper discusses the international study trajectories of academics and their role in shaping national academic communities. Using the case of the academic profession in Mexico, we concentrate on trajectories in the process of acquiring higher education qualifications. A focus on situated trajectories as structuring element in the shaping of academic careers is adopted. The paper draws on the statistical analysis of a dataset of over 20000 demographic, academic and mobility profiles extracted from Mexico's National System of Researchers (*Sistema Nacional de Investigadores, SNI*).

*Trajectories* in international mobility by qualification, discipline, and country(ies) of destination are reported to periods of mobility and generations of researchers in order to answer the following question: How do international mobility patterns towards academic qualification reflect and shape 1) the evolution of the academic profession and national higher education system (expansion, diversification, stratification, recognition) and 2) its changing relations with key historical hubs of the international higher education market.

### *Renewing perspectives on mobility*

For nearly four decades the literature on the international outlook of the academic profession and national research communities of developing countries has been dominated by paradigms of academic imperialism, dependence and centre periphery, and by push-pull and brain drain literatures (Meyer 2001; Solimano 2008; Gerard and Cornu 2013). Within those approaches, South North mobility was treated both as consequence and aggravating effect of the unequal relationships between rich and poorer nations, as a manifestation of academic imperialism (Altbach 1977, Alatas 2015) and as expression of the destabilisation of the developmental state (TFHE 2000; Lebeau and Sall 2011; Lebeau 2019). New approaches emerged from the late 1990s under the paradigm internationalisation, emphasizing the benefits of international mobility for both sending and host countries and a strong correlation between international study mobility and the development of the knowledge economy (Altbach and Teichler 2001). Yet as the number of students in international mobility defined a new “global market”, more fine-tuned analysis soon revealed contrasting and unequal experiences of studying abroad (Rizva and Teichler 2007; Shields; 2013; Bilecen and Van Mol 2017) while others highlighted new global geographies of knowledge production (Jons 2015). This paper seeks to contribute to this renewed perspective by emphasising trajectories within the mobility process as constitutive of academic identities.

### *Focus, sample and method*

In this paper we concentrate on the international study mobility of a particular group of individuals: the research active population of Mexican academics entered in the national system of researchers (SNI). Introduced in 1984 in an attempt to better incentivise research careers in Mexico, SNI rests on a principle of differentiated retribution according to productivity. The system is made of an entering stage and three subsequent highly selective levels (Didou and Gerard 2010). Enrolment in SNI is voluntary although the prestige attached to the status makes it difficult to maintain a research active career without being part of it. Today, about 40% of academics in the country are members, mostly concentrated at the lower levels (“Candidate” and “Level I”). We were granted access to the fully anonymised SNI database as part of the CONACYT funded ROMAC project (Grediaga and Gérard 2019) and the datasets drawn upon in the paper include all research active academics enrolled in 2013 (about 20,000).

SNI offers a unique opportunity of access to a large volume of comparable information on individuals, including information on all steps of their academic and professional trajectories (place, year and types of all degrees and qualifications obtained, of various research positions occupied etc).

For this paper, we focus on the international dimension of SNI member's higher education qualifications. Data is analysed with reference to the following three structuring dimensions of their international experience: the period (4 generations identified), the subject area, the country(ies) involved, the number of qualifications and overall length of trajectories . Using a simple typology, we are then able relate the changing nature of trajectories over time to the changing demographic profile of Mexican academics, the status of disciplines and knowledge areas in Mexican research, the evolution of the international market of academic qualifications, and the Mexican policy of internationalization .

### *Summary of key findings*

- Nearly 40% of all SNI graded Mexican researchers studied abroad for their doctorate.
- The dominant pattern is of just one country visited (for one or more degrees acquired), and where a change of country occurred, it happened in most cases between the Masters and PhD degree
- Study abroad trajectories tend to be more linear (no breaks between degrees) and less cumulative (fewer degrees acquired in fewer countries).
- There is a high level of specialisation among countries of destination at all levels of study.

### *Interpretation*

Analysing trajectories within international study mobility sheds light on their capacity to generate and consolidate a scientific capital transferable into academic career progression. They also offer a unique window on the **variable attraction and retention capacity of leading destination countries**, and therefore their strategic role in the formation of the Mexican scientific elite.

Our findings reveal that the **HE trajectories of future Mexican academics have primarily changed in terms of their temporality**. A young generation of academics less mobile as students and having completed their studies over a shorter and uninterrupted period can broadly be opposed to an older generation with longer, cumulative, more interdisciplinary and more multinational study trajectory. As a consequence, countries previously important as springboards (those where people acquire a degree but do not complete their cycle of study) in trajectories tend to either disappear as destinations or re-emerge as final destination (with a greater capacity to influence future international networks of academics) in a reflexion of the changing geographies of Mexico's scientific dependencies. Study abroad trajectories offer new perspectives on the complex realities of academic mobility while also informing on the international factors at play in the academic field of a rapidly changing higher education system.

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