

Re-rigging a flagship: The Mexican Government's CONACYT scholarship programs and the contested worth of international mobility in higher education.

Kieve Stone Saling

KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm, Sweden

Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

Limited theoretical approaches have been employed to understand scholarship programs for international student mobility. Amongst scholarship programs offered by the governments of rapidly developing countries, human capital theory is frequently utilized as a principal rationale. Subsequently, programs are often studied in an “evaluative mode”, using the same theoretical point of departure. Such analysis provides a stark, unsophisticated and binary understanding of “brain drain” and leaves aside more complex questions related to international mobility and “brain circulation”. This paper uses the case of Mexico’s CONACYT and the orders of worth approach within economics and sociology of conventions (EC/SC) to analyse annual reports, white papers and interviews with sponsored students, illuminating valuation processes and attempts at coordination and examining the tensions and contestations between actors involved in such programs. Such tensions have recently erupted in Mexico making the case of CONACYT especially noteworthy. The findings provide insights into these recent developments.

Full paper

Introduction

The Mexican government’s scholarships supporting degree studies abroad were awarded through its National Council for Science and Technology (CONACYT). These represented Mexico’s flagship programs sponsoring international student mobility (ISM). The primary rationale undergirding these programs was human capital theory (HCT) (Lopez-Murillo, 2020). Notwithstanding their long history and growth in recent decades, contestation intensified amongst the actors involved. Sponsored students’ return-rates was a main area of contestation. Despite actions taken to address coordination problems, a break occurred with the current government. CONACYT was sharply criticized, senior staff unceremoniously dismissed, and core programs paused. CONACYT was subsequently restructured to include the humanities within its core remit (and is now called CONAHCYT); its international scholarship awards were almost completely eliminated. Funds and programming were redirected towards domestic degree scholarships. The contestation around CONACYT, its apparent inability to justify the value of specific programs under criticism and finally, a reorientation of programs away from ISM provides a case rich for analysis. The chosen theoretical approach within the economics and sociology of conventions (EC/SC) allows for a complex understanding of this case and challenges that similar programs in other countries

may face amidst changing geopolitical landscapes and shifting conventions around work, often oversimplified within a “war for talent” discourse.

Literature review summary

Studies of CONACYT fall within a growing sub-field of HE research focused on scholarships for ISM (Engberg et al., 2014; Åkerlund, 2015; Perna et al., 2015; Pietsch, 2016; Campbell, 2017; Dassin et al., 2018; Campbell & Neff, 2020; Scott-Smith & Tournès, 2021; Ye, 2021). A recent doctoral dissertation and subsequent article (Lopez-Murillo, 2020, 2023) analyses CONACYT-sponsored doctoral alumni using the capabilities approach while other studies critically analyse inequalities in CONACYT’s awards processes (Andere, 2004; Arceo Gómez et al., 2019). CONACYT’s programs are reviewed in commissioned studies and derivative articles (Salazar et al., 2000; Luchilo, 2008, 2009; OECD, 2008). A parallel body of research on highly skilled migration and diaspora policies is valuable to understanding the Mexican case – a nation where a significant percentage of highly educated citizens reside abroad (Meyer, 2001; Aupetit, 2004, 2006; Tigau, 2011; Tigau et al., 2017; Gómez-Flores et al., 2022; Gérard & Lebeau, 2023).

Theory and method

This study utilizes a theoretical framework based in the pragmatist institutionalism of EC/SC (Diaz-Bone, 2018) and specifically the orders of worth (OW) approach (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006).

The study leverages empirics including CONACYT annual reports, white papers, presidential speeches, news reports, and interviews with ten CONACYT-sponsored alumni who studied master’s programs in Sweden in the prior decade. This empirical material is analysed using an OW approach, illuminating valuation processes utilized by varied actors involved in sponsored ISM and revealing key contestations and justifications.

Findings

CONACYT has represented the value of sponsored alumni and their studies primarily through HCT-framed “Market” justifications. In analysing CONACYT’s representations, “Civic” and “Industrial” justifications also being employed.

Sponsored alumni describe the value of their studies in manifold ways. However, they prominently rely on justifications associated with Project/Network valuation processes (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2018), not through HCT. Non-return is a common theme. They refer to individual self-making projects and the value of international networks above market (salary-level) or civic (giving back) valuations. Industrial (knowledge transfer) justifications are largely depreciated.

Discussion and conclusion

CONACYT has relied on HCT to provide justification for how its programs contribute to the common good. Given recent developments, this justification has proven ineffectual. It is also strongly at odds with student’s own representations. While capabilities approach-based studies have provided new ways of understanding benefits to students involved in ISM, they also fail to conceptualise around non-return. Researchers working on large scale skilled migration research have detailed how a highly-skilled diaspora works within the discourse of “brain circulation” and have theorized around understandings of

the value of ISM via actor-network theory . Such actor-networks prove difficult to evaluate although they harmonize with the findings of the current study, expressly around the coordination of modern forms of work. Despite CONACYT's interest in diaspora research (and apparent recent interest in actor-network evaluation), alternative understandings have been eclipsed by dominant neoliberal framings that privilege HCT and "war for talent" discourses – where non-return represents a binary loss for the home country. A lack of quantifiable market-based "proof" of alumni's contributions provided powerful critics with clear avenues to question the programs' effectiveness in reference to the common good, contributing to their dissolution.

References

- Åkerlund, A. (2015). For Goodwill, Aid and Economic Growth: The Funding of Academic Exchange Through the Swedish Institute, 1945–2010. *Nordic Journal of Educational History*, 2(1), 119–140. <https://doi.org/10.36368/njedh.v2i1.47>
- Andere, E. (2004). The International Higher Education Market: Mexico's Case. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 8(1), 56–85. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315303257116>
- Arceo Gómez, E., Campos Vázquez, R., Medina Cortina, E., & Badillo Salas, R. (2019). Desigualdades en el sistema De becas para posgrado En el extranjero en México. *Revista Mexicana de Investigación Educativa*, 24(80).
- Aupetit, S. D. (2004). ¿FUGA DE CEREBROS O DIÁSPORAS? INMIGRACIÓN Y EMIGRACIÓN DE PERSONAL ALTAMENTE CALIFICADO EN MÉXICO. *Revista de la Educación Superior*, XXXIII(132).
- Aupetit, S. D. (2006). The brain drain in Mexico—A subject for research...or agenda? *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 4(1), 103–120. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767720600555160>
- Boltanski, L., & Chiapello, E. (2018). *The new spirit of capitalism* (G. Elliott, Trans.; New updated edition). Verso.
- Boltanski, L., & Thévenot, L. (2006). *On justification: Economies of worth*. Princeton University Press.
- Campbell, A. C. (2017). How international scholarship recipients perceive their contributions to the development of their home countries: Findings from a comparative study of Georgia and Moldova. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 55, 56–62. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2017.05.004>
- Campbell, A. C., & Neff, E. (2020). A Systematic Review of International Higher Education Scholarships for Students From the Global South. *Review of Educational Research*, 90(6), 824–861. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654320947783>
- Dassin, J. R., Marsh, R. R., & Mawer, M. (Eds.). (2018). *International Scholarships in Higher Education*. Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-62734-2>

Diaz-Bone, R. (2018). Economics of Convention and its Perspective on Knowledge and Institutions. In J. Glückler, R. Suddaby, & R. Lenz (Eds.), *Knowledge and Institutions* (Vol. 13, pp. 69–88). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-75328-7_4

Engberg, D., Glover, G., Rumbley, L. E., & Altbach, P. G. (2014). *The rationale for sponsoring students to undertake international study: An assessment of national student mobility scholarship programmes*. British Council & DAAD. <https://www.britishcouncil.org/education/he-science/knowledge-centre/student-mobility/rationale-sponsoring-international-study>

Gérard, E., & Lebeau, Y. (2023). Trajectories within international academic mobility: A renewed perspective on the dynamics and hierarchies of the global higher education field. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 100, 102780. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2023.102780>

Gómez-Flores, P., Morales-Salgado, V., Maza, A., Villarreal, A., Lara-Jacobo, L. R., Jiménez-Córdova, M. I., Jiménez-Alvarez, D., & Hernández-Mondragón, A. C. (2022). Mexican Scientist Diaspora in North America: A Perspective on Collaborations With México. *Frontiers in Research Metrics and Analytics*, 7, 898896. <https://doi.org/10.3389/frma.2022.898896>

Guggenheim, M., & Potthast, J. (2012). Symmetrical twins: On the relationship between Actor-Network theory and the sociology of critical capacities. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 15(2), 157–178. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431011423601>

Lopez-Murillo, K. (2020). *Experiences of Mexican doctoral students supported by the CONACYT international mobility scholarship programme* [Doctoral Thesis - Monograph]. University College London.

Lopez-Murillo, K. (2023). Diverse socio-economic backgrounds and international pathways: European mobility opportunities through a scholarship programme for Mexican doctoral students. *Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-023-01005-z>

Luchilo, L. (2008). Evaluación de impacto del programa de formación de científicos y tecnólogos 1997-2006. *México, Conacyt, Centro Redes*.

Luchilo, L. (2009). Los impactos del programa de becas del CONACYT mexicano: Un análisis sobre la trayectoria ocupacional de los ex becarios (1997-2006). *Revista Iberoamericana de Ciencia Tecnología y Sociedad*, 5(13), 175–205.

Meyer, J. (2001). Network Approach versus Brain Drain: Lessons from the Diaspora. *International Migration*, 39(5), 91–110. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2435.00173>

OECD. (2008). *OECD Reviews of Tertiary Education: Mexico 2008*. OECD. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264039247-en>

Perna, L. W., Orosz, K., Jumakulov, Z., Kishkentayeva, M., & Ashirbekov, A. (2015). Understanding the programmatic and contextual forces that influence participation in a government-sponsored international student-mobility program. *Higher Education*, 69(2), 173–188. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-014-9767-4>

Pietsch, T. (2016). *Empire of scholars: Universities, networks and the British academic world, 1850-1939*. Manchester University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7228/manchester/9780719085024.001.0001>

Salazar, S. O., Blum, E., & Nigrini, G. V. (2000). *Investing in knowledge: CONACYT's scholarship program*. Plaza y Valdés, S.A. de C.V. <https://books.google.se/books?id=3quIzwEACAAJ>

Scott-Smith, G., & Tournès, L. (2021). 150 Years of Scholarship Programs. In *Global Exchanges: Scholarships and Transnational Circulations in the Modern World* (p. 8).

Tigau, C. (2011). The Mexican Brain Drain Today. *UNAM Voices of Mexico*. <http://www.revistascisan.unam.mx/Voices/>

Tigau, C., Pande, A., & Yuan, Y. (2017). Diaspora policies and co-development: A Comparison between India, China and Mexico. *Migration Letters*, 14(2), 189–203.

Ye, R. (2021). Schooling for government: Institutionalised sponsored mobility and trajectories of public service scholarship recipients in Singapore (1979–2018). *Journal of Education and Work*, 34(4), 518–532. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2021.1943335>