

## One Podcast to Start Your Day: Mexico

Alex Usher:

Hello everyone, and welcome to another edition of one podcast To Start Your Day With me today is Alma Maldonado-Maldonado, a researcher in the Department of Educational Research at CINEVSTAV, a major public research center based in Mexico City. And she is with me to talk about the rapidly changing and somewhat volatile situation in Mexican higher education. Alma, welcome.

Alma Maldonado-Maldonado:

Hi, Alex. Thank you very much for the invitation.

Alex Usher:

My pleasure. Why don't I start because I think Mexico may be a bit of a, a mystery to many of our listeners, at least in terms of they, you know, they may go for a vacation, but they don't necessarily know the higher education system very well. What's, you know, from, if you, if you were trying to explain the Mexican higher education system to North American, to an American or a Canadian, what would you tell them?

Alma Maldonado-Maldonado:

I would say we belong to the Latin American tradition. That means we have a national university that's very important. That's a central part of our system. But we also have a very centralized higher education system where the government still has a lot of power and control over it. We mostly are a public system in the sense of the amount of people who are enrolled in higher education. So we have, obviously, a private subsystem of higher education, but the number of students is less in comparison to the public one. So it's a very subsidized system and institutions. We have a diversity, you know an interesting diversity of institutions, different types, technological polytechnical, multicultural, state universities, pedagogical teaching schools, et cetera. So it's diverse. Most of our programs are four years, you know, and this, in order to compare with the discussion that we are having in Europe and in other parts of the world where they have three year programs. We, most of our programs are four years. And I, I would say, and, and then we, we have, you know, a very different system in terms of quality. We have very prestigious private institutions, and we have other type of "Garage" universities, which has been a big issue in the country. So I would say those are some of the main characteristics that I could mention right now about the Mexican higher education system.

Alex Usher:

So let me take, let me get you to elaborate on a couple of those different types of institutions. Let's start with the government institutions. And as you said, there is a national institution, which is very, very important. UNAM — Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, this is a mega university. I think it's, it is the largest university in North America. It's bigger than University of Toronto. It's bigger than Ohio State. It's a hundred over a hundred thousand students. But it's also a very politicized institution, right? I mean, I see things on the evening news about people electing their rector, which is strange to most of us in Canada. And of course there have been very important political events: the strike that lasted almost a year, I think, over tuition fees, which I believe you had some role in. This is now 20 years ago now. Tell us about the public sector and, and how politicized it is. How, how does that make it different from other North American institutions?

Alma Maldonado-Maldonado:

Yes, I think that, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, which is UNAM, it's a central part of our system in the sense of it's an intellectual, political center because one of the differences between Latin-American and North America is that our universities represent these intellectual places because we didn't have other spaces. So universities had to cover that as well, that part. So, also this national universities in Latin America are the main center for training the elites, or used to be, now it's changing, but used to train the political, economical and cultural elites in the country. So that's why they are very important and they are very politicized as you mentioned. The political activities are, in my opinion, very different from the, the ones happening in the US and in Canada, because they are involved in the political life of the country, the cities. A lot of things are happening obviously, our institutions and our democracies are not very strong. So there are always issues, always problems, and, in so many ways the universities are these mirrors, right? Where, where all these problems are reflected. And as we know by the studies on student activism, students have the, the space, the time, normally they belong to the middle classes, so they, they can participate in politics in different ways and citizens or other sectors. So, I think that is part of the reflection. Also, UNAM receives most of the, not most, but receives a very important part of the public financing so they can perform activities that other institutions cannot. For instance, the dissemination of culture, which is a third, third function or mission that Latin American universities carry on. And that's also very important and interesting in comparison to what happens in the north.

Alex Usher:

Okay, interesting. And on the private university side, I mean, you mentioned I mentioned you know Tecnológico de Monterrey, you mentioned garage universities. That's a, that's a wide variety of private institutions in there. I mean, what's the, what's the direction that, that those institutions are taking? Are they a significant competitor to top, I mean, are there top students who go to those institutions? Is it like the United States where the private sector, the, the private university sector has some elite institutions that can compete with the, the UNAMs? Tell us about that.

Alma Maldonado-Maldonado:

Yeah. The, the private sector is large and diverse, right? So one of the things that people should know about the Mexican system is that we are one of the countries with the largest number of universities in the world. We have more than 5,000, which is crazy. If you think about, you know the number of students we have, we are reaching about five, 4.5 million students. So the, the number of students is not that large and not that impressive. But we have a lot of institutions. So most of these institutions are private. So we have all kinds of private institutions. We have a very small sector of leaders and private institutions who do research and who they have a very, you know high quality. But then we have another number of these institutions that basically receive tuition. Then we have these small universities that normally they only report like 40 students, 30 students, who knows, right? And they disappear one year, you know, to the, to the next one. And it's, it's really in that sense, a very chaotic, I would say, sector. And the, the most important thing that people who study higher education in Mexico worry about is that some of these institutions charge important, you know, to reach some money for poor, poorer, for the poorer sectors, right? Who believe their kids are getting some training or, or some education. And at the end, this education is not relevant and won't mean anything to the, you know, labor sector. So I think it's part of the issues that we are dealing with.

Alex Usher:

Well, so let's talk about one of Fox's successors, and that's your current president Andrés Manuel López Obrador. And he has been president now for four years. And when he came to office, he talked about making higher education universally accessible for people who finished secondary school. And I've seen an article, which I believe you wrote, which suggested that meant adding about a, a 1.4 million people over the, for, you know, from 2018 to, to 2024. How's that going?

Alma Maldonado-Maldonado:

Yeah, let, let me say that a lot of things are happening these days in Mexican higher education. So it's a great moment to talk about, you know, where we are and what, what is happening. First of all, when López Obrador arrive in or started his presidency, one of the main issues he proposed was the free higher education, which is something unique if you think about where the discussion worldwide is going, right? So first of all, it's free education, and secondly is mandatory higher education, which means mandatory for the state, not for in, for the individuals, right? So if I want to continue my higher education, the state must provide me and, and the space to continue my education. So that's, those are the two main points that he added into the constitution. This, this became law, right? So this happened on this day, December 12th and 2019, so some couple of years ago. So since then there have been different situations, proposals, policies that have taken place in Mexico. One of the things is that he also has criticized a lot the enter examinations in higher education. He has been very critical, and he keeps discussing that Mexico, you know, should have free entrance and free with no cost. But now where we are is in a major contradiction. On one side, we have free higher education. On the other side, the finance, the public financing of higher education has collapsed. So institutions are not able to really respond to that new change in the constitution by offering free higher education because we have less and less money giving to the state universities, which actually are the most important subsystem of public higher education. So this is one of the things we are dealing with and institutions, you know, cannot accept more students because they don't have enough money. So this is one of the main tensions we are dealing with.

Alex Usher:

But yeah, so let, so let me just let me I'll follow up on this. So this is not only do you have existing universities losing funding, having to deal with greater demand but the president has set up a large number of new universities which I believe are called the Benito Juárez universities.

Alma Maldonado-Maldonado:

Yes. That's, that's the other, the other part of the story, right? So we have this, this during his campaign, he proposed this idea of creating a hundred universities. Something Alex, that also is interesting probably for the, for the audience here, because I, I cannot find any other president proposing such a, such a thing in a short period of time. So the whole plan has to do with creating these universities to be open in, in communities where they don't have higher education institutions and where there were restrictions for, for the population to, to access to this level. Now, the problem is that they are not actually universities. First problem, right? The, the money provided for this for this project was not enough. Obviously. If you don't have money for the other universities, you don't have money for this project.

Alex Usher:

Right? And, and most of the ones that I've seen are actually sort of single, you know, it's, it's Benito Juárez University of Nursing. And so it'll be one field of study, not a, not as you say, as a full university.

Alma Maldonado-Maldonado:

Yeah. It's more like programs, right? Yeah. Extension programs. That is something we also have criticized. Why not, why not opening a major extension program, you know with the universities that already existed. But no, the whole idea is let's create these new universities, which are not universities, which sometimes they only have, let's say two professors, three professors, four students in some cases because the information is not really public. And this has been another problem, transparency with this project mm-hmm. <Affirmative>. But the information we have, we can see that there are some of these programs with one professor or even two, right? And we, we don't have enough data about how many students have enrolled, what are the programs, you know, the particular programs, the, the, the syllabus, anything. We, we basically are very blind on this, on this topic and on this project. And it's unfortunately because the whole idea is good, the idea is to provide higher education to the sectors that traditionally have been excluded. So I, I think most people agree that this is important. The problem is how you are, you know, following and elaborating the project and, and, and the money that you are providing to it.

Alex Usher:

Right. And it's not just, my understanding is that the, the conflict that López Obrador has with the higher education community, it's not just with the universities, but it's also with the scientists. There's been conflict with the, the National Scientific Agency as well. Could you tell us what that's about?

Alma Maldonado-Maldonado:

Yeah, I, I think one, one of the things I would like to remark here is that we are dealing with this government, with this regime and, and the main difference between him and other presidents is not that the other presidents were better, but the, the difference with this president is that he has been very critical openly, you know mm-hmm. <Affirmative> emphasizing openly academics, scientists, for him it's a luxury. We are talking about, you know, these privileges the academics have had historically. And, you know, his criticisms has to do with that. We don't care about the social problems, the political problems, nothing, we are apart from reality of the country. And, and that really translates into all these policies where, you know, he, he considers we are spending money in all these privileges like traveling to conferences or to, you know, do science basically. That's the main characteristics and the main difference between him and the other presidents. The other presidents also didn't give money, also didn't care about, you know, science and higher education, but at least they didn't attack directly.

Alex Usher:

So you make López Obrador sound very right wing populist in the sense that he dislikes academics, but left wing populist in the sense that he loves students.

Alma Maldonado-Maldonado:

Yeah. in some ways that, that is happening because his main policy is to give money directly to people, right?

Alex Usher:

Not institutions?

Alma Maldonado-Maldonado:

Yeah. Not institutions, not state programs, nothing like that. So it's let's give money to single mothers directly before they used to have, you know, an structure institutions to help these mothers, you know, to provide care or some other issue. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. So now is let's give the money directly in, in the past they used to help building infrastructure at schools. Now let's just give the money directly to the parents. They, they will know what to do. So it's, it's kind of the same in, in, in this case is like, let's provide scholarships to students who are enrolled in national graduate programs, but let's forget the other side, right? The other side is just luxuries, corruption is, is a bad idea. And, you know, there is a political reason to do that. Obviously, <laugh>, if you give, give the money directly to people, then you get more votes and, and people who like you, and he's very popular. That's, that's part of the reason eh, why it's difficult, you know, to, to establish the point, to, to, to make a criticism to some of these policies who in reality, they are not going to solve inequity in Mexico, which should be the main purpose because he says he cares for the poor, the poorest people in the country. But at the end, these policies are just affecting because see, the paradox here is that what he's doing with this Benito Juárez universities is creating another, another group of institutions like the, this private that I am talking to you are, are doing, right. This is not good education. This is nothing is going to be useful to get a job. This is not relevant education. And that's, that's really complicated, I guess.

Alex Usher:

Alma, thanks so much for talking to us today. I really appreciate your time.

Alma Maldonado-Maldonado:

Thank you, Alex.

Alex Usher:

I've been talking to Alma Maldonado-Maldonado researcher at the Department of Education Research at CINEVSTAV in Mexico City. Have a great day, everyone.