

The experience of the internationalisation process at the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla: the North American Region.

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Abstract

During the last five years, the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla has experienced a process of growth in its academic exchange and mobility programs, favouring its integration to the scientific community at world level. An improvement in the teaching-learning process has been achieved, and the access to knowledge and multicultural understanding has been enhanced.

In the area of internationalisation, the Minerva Plan of Institutional Development 2006-2009 observes that program contents must promote human sustainable development. This approach integrates environmental, geographic, economic, social, cultural, and political participation concerns. This plan looks for the transfer of technology and the mobility of knowledge, making the university present in new regions and countries.

BUAP is a university which perceives its internationalisation with a strong social compromise. The institutional concept of internationalisation has been applied by the International Office of BUAP under four guiding principles which have helped to increased number of student mobility. In 2001, BUAP only had one international student and by 2006, it was expanded to 140. Our students abroad were only 15 by 2001; and by 2005 BUAP already has 112.

1. Puebla and BUAP in context

1.1. Geographic position

Puebla is situated 120 Km. from Mexico city, the city constitutes one of the most important academic, industrial, commercial, and financial spots in the country due to the fact that is the strict way to go to the north and to the south of the Mexican Republic. Puebla has 1,482,532 inhabitants.

1.2 The Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla

1.2.1 History

The College of the Holy Spirit, nowadays Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, was founded by the Spaniard Catholic order of the Jesuits in 1578. As a Catholic- Jesuit college, during the 16th and 17th Centuries, BUAP had in its classrooms notable liberals. In 1767 the Jesuits were expelled from the country and the Spanish King, Carlos III, took the university and named it as the Royal Carolino College, becoming the university as a strong influence in liberal thought in the XVIII Century. From 1820 and 1821, the Jesuits were allowed to come back to Mexico and they took over the University again, being known as the Royal College of the Holy Spirit. This instability continued until the end of 1821, the year of the Mexican Independency, when the First Mexican Empire authorized the installation of the Imperial College (1821-1825).

Since 1825 and until 1937, BUAP was known as the 'College of the State' or 'National College'. During this phase, BUAP received the most important thinkers in the country. After the Mexican Revolution in 1917, the University was closed and it was reopened in 1937, when it formally became the University of Puebla. Finally, in 1987 the Parliament of the State gave to the university the honorary title of 'Benemérita'. Since 1956, BUAP is a self-governing educative institution; the university regulates itself with internal laws and rules, even though it is financed with public resources.

1.2.2 Academic relevance of BUAP

After a decade of efforts to fortify its institutional development, its academic programs and its excellence in teaching, in 2006 BUAP was awarded by the National Association of Universities and Institutes of Higher Education (ANUIES) with the SEP-ANUIES price (SEP 2005: 1-3).

BUAP is the academic point of reference in the south-central region of the country. The university receives more than 10,000 students from the neighboring provinces, having more than 30,000 students registered in its undergraduate and postgraduate programs.

1.2.3 The Minerva Plan of Institutional Development

The Minerva Plan of Institutional development was made to successfully respond to the challenges of the global community, the Mexican reality and the regional demands. These responses are thought considering that BUAP is a public educative institution and it has a key role in improving the quality of life of the population. With the Minerva Plan of Institutional Development, BUAP has centered its attention to the students, promoting efficiency, quality and pertinence of research, study programs, complementary projects and administrative services. BUAP aims and vision are extremely engaged with the development of the community (Agüera 2005).

1.3 Aims of BUAP

BUAP is an autonomous and public institution in Mexico. The institution dedicates its work to the study production, and transmission of human sustainable development, with the main objective to solve the national and regional problems. BUAP is continuously promoting its capacity to produce knowledge with quality. The education given to students is aimed to give them the opportunity to solve problems with rationality, impartiality, social consciousness, justice, equity, tolerance and awareness. BUAP is committed to reaffirm and recreate the Mexican culture and to build a productive, innovative, fair and secure society.

2. The process of internationalization

2.1. The Internationalization concept

Internationalization of the institution is the process that allows undergraduate and postgraduate students, faculty and staff, to get involved in the world dynamics. The process will be facilitated through the strengthening of the capacities, goals, assumptions and knowledge of the actors involved, leading them to successfully respond to the challenges of globalization. Students, faculty and staff, may think globally thanks to their academic background; act creatively applying their acquired techniques and knowledge, and innovate responsibly in relation with the needs of their community.

This process is favored by the institutional endeavor of increasing the quality of study programs, research and conferences, including an international content in compromise with the national needs.

BUAP is basically implementing four axes to internationalize itself:

- a. Enhancement of student and faculty mobility and exchange,
- b. The re-engineering of the international office functions and work,
- c. The creation of complementary programs towards a multicultural education,
- d. The strengthening of its infrastructure and study programs favouring the off-campus learning.

2.2. International Relations and Academic Exchange Office

The International Relations and Academic Exchange Office – further as International Office-, was originally thought to facilitate academic exchange and mobility. Since the beginning of 2006, the International Office is moving towards the next level of internationalization. Renewing its structure, making the application process of students going abroad transparent, taking advantage of agreements with foreign universities, engineering an scheme of international student recruitment, and promoting the multicultural content of study programs, the International Office is in the process of expanding the opportunities of study at BUAP, and to offer to local students, faculty and staff, the opportunity to successfully respond to the challenges of today's world dynamics.

2.3. Enhancement of student and faculty mobility, exchange, and recruitment

During the 90's and the beginning of 2000, BUAP International Office focused its internationalization efforts to student mobility, conceived as the first phase of a broader process of internationalization. Nowadays, BUAP has 274 (see table 3) agreements with foreign universities, and although recently the strongest flow of students has been with Spanish universities, BUAP is interested in diversifying the efficiency of its programs. As seen in table 1 and graphic. 1, from 2001 until 2006, the policy of

student mobility has shown a considerable success. In table No. 2, is described the preference to study programs.

Table 1. Student Mobility

Period	BUAP Students overseas	International Students at BUAP	T o t a l
2001-2002	15	1	16
2002-2003	18	11	29
2003-2004	30	27	57
2004-2005	76	92	168
2005-2006	120	166	286
2006-2007	145	174	319
T O T A L	404	471	875

Source: DRIIA

Table 2. Preference of International Students to BUAP Colleges, August 2005- August 2006

College	Total of Students
Administration	33
Philosophy and Literature	26
Law and Social Sciences	25
University Hospital	9
Engineering	8
Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities	7
Architecture	6
Modern Languages	5
Economics	3
Psychology	3
Media	2
Physics and Mathematics	2
Sports	3
Agro -hydraulics Engineering	2
Estomatología	2
Medicine	2
IT	1
Arts	1
Others	26
Total	166

Table No. 3

Agreements per Country	
Argentina	16
Bolivia	7
Brazil	3
Canada	14
Chile	7
Colombia	5
Costa Rica	5
Cuba	31
Ecuador	1
El Salvador	2
France	40
Germany	7
Guatemala	2
Haiti	1
Honduras	1
Hungary	1
Israel	1
Italy	7
Jamaica	1
Japan	1
Nicaragua	3
Norway	2
Panama	2
Peru	3
Poland	1
Portugal	3
Puerto Rico	1
Russia	9
South Africa	1
Spain	50
Switzerland	1
The Netherlands	1
Ukrania	1
United Kingdom	11
United States of America	27
Uruguay	1
Venezuela	4
Total	274

2.4. The re-engineering of the international office functions and work

The success of the student exchange and mobility programs, both national and international, led the International Office and BUAP itself, to conceive internationalization as a wider process, as it has been described above. This expanded concept of internationalization has been designed during the last year, with the collaboration of staff and faculty, following the guiding principles of the Minerva Plan of Institutional Development.

Although Mobility Programs have been the main focus of the internationalization of BUAP, the new policy is aimed to expand the internationalization process to a wider number of local students, and also to make the university more attractive to foreign students. One disadvantage of focusing merely on mobility programs is the relatively low impact that the international experience give to the whole student community. If it is considered the population of BUAP is around 30,000 students, 145 students abroad and 174 international students at BUAP, is not enough to fulfill the needs of an university of the size of BUAP. This represents an extremely low percentage.

2.4.1. Mobility, Exchange, and study abroad Programs

BUAP is currently running 14 long term programs. Now we have achieved the signature of 274 agreements with 205 universities in 37 countries, it is the goal of the office to make them work efficiently. Customized short and medium term programs will complement the International Office's existing projects.

Among the programs within the North American Region, the International Office coordinates the Anuies-Crepuq Exchange Program that comprises several Canadian Universities of the Quebec region. This program is one of the oldest one and has become very popular among BUAP students. Each year around 15 students travel to Canada and we receive an equivalent number of Canadian students. This trend has been a constant in the last three years.

The Program for North American Mobility in Higher Education sponsored by the US, Canadian and the Mexican governments proved to be a successful program and, although the official period of funding ended last year, the program continues to exist and we hope will continue for many years. Besides the Trilateral Consortium we participated in a Bilateral Partnership with UT, Austin. This program was evaluated by Community Sync. This company conducted an independent evaluation of the Bilateral Civil Society Educational Partnership program founded by USAID. We are very pleased with the results. Steven Smith, from UT, Austin concluded that "We should all congratulate ourselves on all of the hard work that went into making this grant a success".

Although we have been members of Conahec for many years, we joined the student exchange program recently. One student from BUAP has participated in the program and we hope to receive applications from Canadian and US students in the near future. Although it may be too early to make an evaluation of this program, we believe that the number of students that will participate in the program will increase considerably in the coming years.

As you all know there are many other programs and opportunities for students within the North American region and it is our aim to become more involved in them.

Traditionally, one of the problems that the International Office has found when recruiting students for the exchange programs, is that the students language skills need to be enhanced. There are many students with the right profile; however, when it comes to the language skills, not all of them have the required level of English, in terms of TOEFL scores.

Even though all students that are admitted to BUAP have to take four courses of English as part of their B.A. Program, this is certainly not enough. As part of the institutional efforts to promote internationalization, our Language School is working very hard to support students to continue courses

at more advanced levels and has specific courses that prepare the students prior to the sitting of the TOEFL examination. This has proved to work fine and students have, to date, a better command of English than in the past.

A difficulty that our students have faced is the visa process when applying to American Universities. As we all know, this process is very lengthy and bureaucratic. As a result the deadlines are every day moved to earlier dates, and sometimes these overlap with the TOEFL results dates. In many cases, students submit their applications on time, but the TOEFL examination score is not submitted at the same time. We have become flexible, and tend to accept their documents giving them a reasonable deadline to submit the TOEFL score.

2.4.2. Adjustment to the world educational needs

International education at BUAP is oriented within the framework of Human Sustainable Development. Taking this concept into account, BUAP is willing to address environmental, demographic, economic, social and cultural concerns (BUAP 2005: 6-8). BUAP is aimed to collaborate with external institutions in order to unify the gap between the generation of knowledge and its application within the community (UNESCO 2005: 1-3).

2.5. The creation of complementary programs towards a multicultural education

The process of internationalization of BUAP is being complemented by customized projects that unify the academic work and with extra curricular activities. These projects serve as a bridge between the population and the scientific and academic population.

2.5.1. International Volunteers at BUAP

In order to follow the Rector's policy of internationalization and supporting the Millennium Development Goals, BUAP is internationalizing its Social Service Program.

International Volunteers at BUAP (IVP) is a project who offers the opportunity of volunteering to international and exchange students in disadvantaged communities, governmental agencies, university departments, and Non-Governmental Organizations in the State of Puebla. It seeks to establish a pattern of transference of technology, knowledge and experiences among BUAP, students from partner foreign Universities, and the community.

IVP has long term, short term and summer programs, to be started in autumn 2007- summer 2008. They give a new understanding of development: 'development in partnership', where two cultures can learn from each other, achieving a reciprocal assistance, transferring of technology and knowledge, and the understanding of culture, customs and motivation of the actors involved (Garcia-Fabela 2006:4-12) .

2.5.2. Founding

One of the main obstacles for the internationalization of the university is its financial sufficiency. As a public institution, BUAP owes its budget to public resources. In this point, the International Office is aimed to be self- sufficient, offering customized projects, expanded academic programs, and short term working experiences.

Conclusion

In previous years, internationalization was seen at BUAP merely as the mobility of students and faculty. During the last year, internationalization began to be seen as a wider process that includes not only students going abroad or international students going to BUAP, but also as an inclusive activity within the university. The new conceptualization of internationalization was established as a result of two main factors:

- a. **The implementation of the Minerva Plan of Institutional Development**, a project aimed to give the responses to the current global challenges through the reformulation of the aims and vision of the university, a reengineering of the study programs, and to promote efficiency and justice within the academic framework.
- b. **The success of mobility programs ran by the International Office**. With the enhancement of academic agreements, student mobility and faculty exchange, the International Office is committed to offer a wider panorama of the internationalization experience through the reformulation of its internal organization and work, the implementation of customized projects aimed to encourage a multicultural education, and to begin the design of off-campus programs.

The main motivation which makes BUAP turning its attention to the internationalization process is to offer better educative options to local and foreign students. The education given at BUAP is primarily, centered in the students. Though, research projects, program modifications, and any other project is thought in the pertinent formation of its students.

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