

# MIGRANTS FACE BARRIERS TO EDUCATION RECOGNITION IN MEXICO

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## SUMMARY

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The higher education system in Mexico is complex and heterogeneous, comprising subsystems with distinct operational and regulatory infrastructures. In the last decade, there have been relevant reforms to the recognition of studies to establish a framework that is more accessible and reduces the documentation burden to facilitate international educational mobility in a system that is comprised of institutions with various levels of autonomy. Nevertheless, higher education institutions (HEI) continue to require legalized or apostilled documents in their admission process, resulting in the exclusion of migrants who lack these requirements. Additionally, the inaction by the HEI to eliminate the revalidation procedure and align other admission requirements to the flexibility standard established by education policy perpetuates entry barriers.

Mexico's higher education system faces structural challenges in regulating admission processes and adhering to the principles of expediency, impartiality, flexibility, and affordability stipulated in the General Law of Education (GLE). To address these issues, it is recommended that the Ministry of Public Education (SEP - *Secretaría de Educación Pública*) strengthen its role as the governing body of the education sector and enhance coordination within the higher education system. HEI should adapt their admission processes and support applicants with international mobility backgrounds, mainly focusing on socially disadvantaged and vulnerable groups due to their migrant experiences.



## CONTEXT: MIGRATION AND EDUCATIONAL INCLUSION

Research on the right to education for migrants in Mexico has documented the challenges faced by various migrant populations, from accessing the Mexican education system to transitioning between educational levels. Multiple studies have emphasized that the entry requirements and excessive documentation demands imposed by education authorities disadvantage individuals who have pursued or completed their studies abroad.

In the last decade, qualitative studies and policy reports have concluded that access to education is blocked by bureaucratic structures of the Mexican education system for various profiles of migrants at all levels. This is the case for U.S. born children in Mexico whose parents have been deported or have returned, as well as migrant children who face difficulties enrolling in basic education. Returning Dreamers and international migrants experience a heavy burden of documentation requirements to obtain official recognition of their studies abroad at the secondary and higher education levels, a recognition which would have facilitated the continuity of their studies or their entry into the labor market. For these population groups, finishing studies outside the country is the most common factor complicating educational mobility in Mexico.

Educational inclusion encompasses access and the capacity for institutions to offer services adapted to linguistic and cultural needs, among others. Access to education is the first critical step towards inclusion. Despite the changes in education policy over the last decade aimed at eliminating obstacles to accessing the Mexican education system, there is a gap between policy and practice within school campuses. This gap is due to documentation requirements such as a birth certificate and/or the national ID number, Clave Única de Registro de Población (CURP), necessary for school enrollment and obtaining a certificate to continue their studies. Consequently, it is crucial to examine the institutional bureaucracies and the extent to which these perpetuate the exclusion of migrants. The analysis and evaluation of the procedures and the pathways to educational integration, which become increasingly complex for migrants when they seek recognition of their studies in secondary education and/or attempt to enroll in higher education institutions, are scarce. The Ministry of Public Education (SEP - *Secretaría de Educación Pública*) has not conducted reports nor compiled data to show the impact or the efficiency of the revalidation process in the educational inclusion of applicants with studies undertaken or concluded abroad.<sup>1</sup>

In this text, I show how the obstacles migrants face accessing the higher education system are related to the revalidation requirement of foreign studies. Although this procedure has

The text is based on the author's independent research on access to education (Landa, 2016), dialogues facilitated by the author in advocacy processes with SEP from 2015 to 2017 grounded on her personal experience of return, and accompaniment to cases of migrants in their revalidation procedures with educational authorities since 2013. The analysis is also informed by field observation carried out in various research projects and by technical advice on migrant integration in Mexico from 2017 to 2022.

been made flexible, in many cases, revalidation becomes an unnecessary step that complicates educational mobility among socially disadvantaged groups, as one can observe in the various profiles of migrants. Additionally, education authorities face structural challenges in regulating the higher education system to ensure HEI admission processes are guided by the principles of the educational normative framework. Consequently, HEI do not see themselves as actors obligated to implement these principles.

## STRUCTURE OF THE MEXICAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

The Mexican higher education system is complex and heterogeneous, comprising 13 subsystems integrated by educational institutions with various levels of autonomy. Public institutions, including federal and state universities, integrate most subsystems. Although these HEI depend on public financing, they have autonomy in decision-making. SEP has direct control of seven subsystems that are comprised of institutions that act as decentralized governmental organisms. The federal government establishes a governance framework for these institutions, giving them the authority to decide over some operational aspects, including academic offerings and study plans. The public research center sub-system consists of 37 centers from which the National Council of Humanities, Sciences, and Technologies (Conahcyt - *Consejo Nacional de Humanidades, Ciencias y Tecnologías*) operates 28, and the rest are managed by the National Polytechnic Institute (IPN - *Instituto Politécnico Nacional*), the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM - *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*), and some by state institutions. The remaining two subsystems are private and completely independent in their management.

Three-fourths of HEI are private, and they enroll one-third of the students; in other words, it constitutes the largest subsystem, followed by state public and federal public universities with 25 and 13% enrollment rates, respectively. The HEI' academic offerings range from the higher technical level and associate professional to a doctorate. Some subsystems offer programs that start at the bachelor's degree level, while others, like the technological universities, do not offer a doctorate. Public research centers, on the other hand, specialize in postgraduate degrees.

The federal and state public universities have complete autonomy guaranteed by the Political Constitution of the United States of Mexico (article 3, section 7). Its central governance is established at the corresponding level: laws emitted by the federal legislative power in the case of public federal universities and by the state congress in the case of public state universities. The government does not directly intervene with autonomous universities but deploys mechanisms to propel institutional policy coherence aligned with national development priorities. For the other subsystems, the level of autonomy and the areas where it is implemented vary depending on their regulatory and operating frameworks. Although this autonomy gives them freedom in various places, including establishing admission processes for applicants, HEI must operate within the established educational normative framework because they are part of the Mexican education system.

## CHANGES DERIVED FROM THE GLE REFORMS AND AGREEMENT 286

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Education authorities at the federal and state levels have concurrent responsibilities in Mexico's governance, coordination, and regulation of higher education. SEP develops and operates national policies and plans in collaboration with other federal government institutions and employs multilevel coordination (federal and state) in higher education planning. State education authorities coordinate and implement policies at this level. SEP also has the competency to emit professional credentials for regulated and non-regulated careers and the accreditation of programs within the higher education system.

Among the legal instruments that regulate diverse aspects of the higher education system, some previously mentioned, are the [General Law of Education](#) (last modified on June 7, 2024) and [Agreement 286](#) (last modified on April 18, 2017) relative to the revalidation and the recognition of studies and non-formal and informal learning. In the current structure, the GLE and Agreement 286 have introduced more flexible parameters that indicate progress in education mobility. The reforms to education policy in [2015](#) and [2017](#), which introduced more flexible requirements to initiate the revalidation procedure, aimed to [address the education access problems faced by the returned Dreamer population](#). These reforms also had implications for everyone in the country who had completed studies abroad. The modifications to Agreement 286 included specific aspects of the higher education systems (see Table 1):

- Eliminating requirements that disproportionately burden the applicant with proof of authenticity of school records and identity documentation (such as an apostille, official translation, and original copies).
- Eliminating the revalidation procedure as a requirement to facilitate entry, mobility, and graduation of individuals with foreign studies for academic purposes.
- Eliminating the requirement to revalidate all previous levels of education completed abroad.
- Resolution of the lack of equivalency, meaning the percentage of similarity between foreign and national programs, from being an obstacle in obtaining a partial or total revalidation. The level of comparability is eliminated for non-regulated professions and reduces the percentage required for regulated careers.

**Table 1.** Requirements to initiate the revalidation procedure for studies and entry into the higher education system

Requirements	Revalidation of higher education studies based on Agreement 286 (2015)	Effects of the requirements on migrants	Modifications to Agreement 286 (2017) for the revalidation of higher education studies	Documentation requested for entry into the Mexican higher education system
<b>1.</b> <b>Identity Document</b>	A birth certificate or equivalent document is required, with apostille or legalization if issued abroad.	Impossibility of returning to the place where the identity document was issued to obtain the apostille. Obstacles in the procedure to accredit Mexican nationality of binational applicants in Mexico.	Elimination of apostille or legalization.	Apostille or legalization of identity documents is included as an entry requirement in HEI.
	If it is in a language other than Spanish, it is required to obtain an official translation.	Difficulty in locating an official translator and the translation costs.	An unofficial translation of identity documents issued abroad is accepted.	
			Lacking an identity document shall not impede the initiative of the revalidation procedure.	A valid official identification and the CURP are required to access and move within the educational system at all levels.
<b>2.</b> <b>Immigration Documentation that proves legal status in the country (for foreign nationals)</b>	Required.	This excludes migrants who have not regularized their immigration status in the country and binational individuals who have not been accredited as having Mexican nationality.	Elimination of the requirement to prove legal status for foreign nationals.	HEI require regularization of legal status.
<b>3.</b> <b>Academic Background</b>	Certificate or title that verifies the conclusion of the level immediately preceding the studies to be revalidated.	People with experience of deportation or forced displacement generally do not arrive in the country with original school records, and obtaining them is impossible due to their migration background.	The presentation of this requirement is optional, and the lack of this documentation does not impede initiating the revalidation procedure.	HEI have not implemented similar mechanisms to the revalidation procedure to verify educational levels concluded abroad without presenting original copies of school records.
<b>4.</b> <b>Title, diploma, or official academic degree</b>	School records that are subject to the procedure.	Similar obstacles to obtaining an academic background for profiles of people with experiences of deportation or forced displacement.	Upon presentation, the apostille or legalization is removed.  Verification may be carried out through electronic means	The apostille or legalization of school records is included as an entry requirement at HEI.

Requirements	Revalidation of higher education studies based on Agreement 286 (2015)	Effects of the requirements on migrants	Modifications to Agreement 286 (2017) for the revalidation of higher education studies	Documentation requested for entry into the Mexican higher education system
	If it is in a language other than Spanish, it is required to obtain an official translation.	Difficulty in locating an official translator and the translation costs.	Elimination of apostille or legalization.	HEI require the translation of school records without specifying acceptance of unofficial translations.  Associated costs in cases where the applicant requires assistance with the translation or the HEI requests an official translation.
<b>5.</b> Certificate of courses with grades and credits	School records with details of the courses taken, periods, and grades, with an apostille or legalization if issued abroad.	Impossibility of returning to the place where the school document was issued to obtain the apostille or legalization.	Elimination of apostille or legalization.	The apostille or legalization of school records is an entry requirement in HEI.
	Official translation required.	Difficulty in locating an official translator and the translation costs.	An unofficial translation of identity documents issued abroad is accepted.	HEI require translation of school records without specifying acceptance of unofficial translations.  Associated costs in cases where the applicant requires assistance with the translation or the HEI requests an official translation.
<b>6.</b> Study plan and program	Description of the thematic content of each course taken to determine the equivalence percentage with a related program.	The required level of comparability (75%) results in the lack of partial or total recognition of the completed studies. The applicant is required to repeat subjects or degrees of study completed abroad.	Elimination of the similarity level for total revalidation in non-regulated careers.  The comparability level is reduced to 40% to revalidate regulated careers.	HEI request revalidation to recognize courses and degrees completed abroad. Although the procedure is more flexible, it remains mandatory for educational inclusion in the various higher education sub-systems.

Source: Own elaboration.

Educational inclusion can be complicated when HEI require the revalidation procedure in the admission process, generating confusion among applicants seeking to identify the adequate route to recognize their studies. This is due to the diverse options available, with particularities that vary depending on the location of the applicant and the institution in charge of the procedure. Since the 2017 education policy reforms, the revalidation procedure is not solely the responsibility of education authorities. A new role has been introduced: delegated and authorized HEI, which now have the authority to revalidate partial studies (Guideline 14, Agreement 286). These changes introduce an alternative path in the official recognition of partial studies, aiming to prevent the applicant from being redirected to federal or state authorities for revalidation, allowing them to manage it directly with the HEI. This authority extends the obligation to the HEI to simplify the procedure and act according to the reforms' principles: expediency, impartiality, flexibility, and affordability (GLE, arts. 61 and 63). To date, SEP does not report delegated HEI, and among the authorized HEI, [34 private institutions have received this designation](#).

The revalidation to enroll in an HEI, processed by the General Directorate of Accreditation, Incorporation, and Validation ([DGAIR - Dirección General de Acreditación, Incorporación y Revalidación](#)) or the local education authority, is the most complicated and to some extent redundant. Suppose the HEI does not have the authority to revalidate or the institutional capacity to evaluate internally the academic background. In that case, the applicant is directed to the pertinent educational authority to initiate the revalidation procedure. In this process, the evaluation conducted by the education authority to emit a certificate of revalidation is based on the academic program of the HEI within its territory or for DGAIR at the national level. Preference is given to the HEI where the applicant wishes to enroll. The education authority does not conduct the academic evaluation directly but requests the HEI for the technical assessment of the comparability of the study plan. This creates an unnecessary process that could have been avoided if the HEI had supported the applicant. Especially in partial studies, the academic background review could be conducted without needing a revalidation process. Some HEI that do not have the authority to conduct revalidations have established academic committees to perform the technical evaluation in these cases. When the applicant needs a certificate of comparable foreign studies in Mexico for other purposes, the revalidation conducted by the education authority provides recognition with official validity at the national level.

The pathway to the recognition of studies without revalidation better facilitates access to the academic offerings of the HEI that do not require revalidation of the immediately preceding level of education as an entry requirement. Before the most recent changes to Agreement 286, the revalidation procedure and the practice of HEI requiring it in their admission processes were creating complications for the educational inclusion of migrants. On the other hand, some HEI allowed applicants to begin their admission process without the revalidation procedure. Due to their autonomy, they had the operational authority to establish flexible criteria. Nonetheless, this practice has not been generally adopted within the higher education system, even after the education policy reforms. This is especially the case of public universities, which require revalidation and perpetuate a high documentation

burden in their admissions processes. Consequently, the documentation obstacles persist despite education authorities streamlining the revalidation requirements since HEI continue to require school records and identity documentation without adopting the flexibility mechanisms adopted by SEP.<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 1.** Pathways of Foreign Studies Recognition

	<b>Recognition without revalidation</b>	<b>Recognition with partial revalidation</b>	<b>Recognition with total revalidation</b>	
<b>Education Level</b>	High school, truncated or completed undergraduate or graduate studies for academic purposes.	Truncated undergraduate or graduate studies.  Completed undergraduate or postgraduate studies when it does not receive full revalidation.	High school, undergraduate, or graduate studies.	Completed undergraduate or graduate studies that require professional credentials.
<b>Objective of the recognition of foreign studies</b>	<b>Continuation of studies</b>  Admission to HEI without the revalidation requirement in the admission process.	<b>Continuation of studies</b>  Admission to HEI requires revalidation to obtain credit for some courses taken abroad.	<b>Continuation of studies</b>  Admission to HEI that requests revalidation of the previous level of education completed.	<b>Continuation of studies</b>  Admission to HEI requires a professional credential from the previous level of education completed.
	<b>Professional practice</b>  Acceptance of education level or title without revalidation for teaching purposes.	<b>Professional practice</b>  Partial revalidation based on the academic offering available within its territorial jurisdiction.	<b>Professional practice</b>  Total revalidation based on the academic offering available within its territorial jurisdiction.	<b>Professional practice</b>  Career in which a professional license is required to practice (may include unregulated careers).
<b>Actors involved</b>	The involvement of education authorities or HEI with the authority to revalidate is not required.	Partial revalidation can be managed by DGAIR, the local education authority, or the HEI, which has the authority to revalidate with the involvement of the HEI of admission (if different).	DGAIR or local education authority are the only institutions authorized to issue total revalidation certificates with official validity.	The authorities responsible for the revalidation process are DGAIR or the local education authority. The professions division of SEP or state education authority carries out professional license procedures.



Results				
	HEI conduct an academic evaluation of the previous education level completed, facilitating the applicant's entry.	Completing the non-revalidated and/or remaining courses is required to obtain the degree or educational level to be completed.	Favorable resolution of revalidation of degrees issued by internationally recognized HEI and non-regulated careers.  If total revalidation is not obtained (only partial), the applicant may request an evaluation to accredit sufficient knowledge to obtain total revalidation.	Total revalidation is required to request a professional license. In the case of regulated careers, a 40% compatibility level applies.

Source: Own elaboration based on information from Agreement 286 y [Revalidation Information Sheet Application DGAIR](#), and [General Directorate of Professions \(Dirección General de Profesiones\)](#).

The general pathways identified based on a review of the reforms to Agreement 286 (2017) demonstrate that, while the routes to recognizing foreign studies have integrated a level of flexibility that allows for more accessibility to the procedure, they do not guarantee the recognition of studies for migrants in diverse circumstances. This occurs when official recognition is required for the continuity of studies, given that the role of the HEI is fundamental to implementing the principles reflected in education policy. It applies not only to the revalidation requirement but also to the documentation required for the admission process. The existence of diverse routes of revalidation and the lack of a regulatory framework that prioritizes the recognition of foreign studies without revalidation within the higher education system hinder the adoption of the education policy principles. The increased bureaucracy created for the revalidation procedure contradicts the progress in guaranteeing the right to education at the normative level, especially for migrants in Mexico.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The structure and coordination of the higher education system in Mexico are directed to educational institutions with varied administrative structures and procedural infrastructure. The various legislative instruments related to higher education lack clarity and specific guidelines. In a national system comprised of 13 subsystems, its regulation is complex and challenging. Compared to other higher education systems in the region, Mexico is falling behind in coordinating public policy that effectively promotes the internationalization, academic mobility, and educational inclusion of migrants. As a result, HEI have not demonstrated a willingness to establish specialized units to support migrant populations or to attract international students.<sup>3</sup>

Education authorities have not been able to respond to the emerging needs arising from the increasing and diverse migration phenomenon in Mexico, both as a country of return and as a destination. Seven years after the modifications to education policy related to the recognition of foreign studies, mechanisms in the higher education system have not been created to guarantee proper implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. On the other hand, the lack of adjustments in admission processes by HEI to align with the flexibility standards established by education policy will continue to uphold an exclusionary bureaucracy in higher education. Efforts for the educational integration of migrants should not rely solely on the goodwill of HEI. Instead, there should be an obligation and commitment to advancing toward an inclusive education system founded on the cornerstones of the GLE and Agreement 286.

Based on the challenges identified, I propose the following recommendations.

### **1. Strengthen SEP's capacity to effectively carry out its various functions in order to streamline the procedure for recognizing foreign studies**

- a. Foster the adaptation of the principles of expediency, impartiality, flexibility, and affordability stipulated in the General Education Law within the higher education system. This includes guaranteeing that the revalidation procedure is not required for the educational inclusion of people with foreign studies.
- b. Develop specific indicators that measure the access and education mobility of return and international migrants to evaluate the impact of policies and programs implemented.
- c. Develop complementary tools to facilitate the procedures for recognizing partial studies and comparing academic programs offered by HEI that are not part of the list of internationally recognized programs.

### **2. Implement initiatives within the various higher education subsystems to align with the principles established by GLE and Agreement 286.**

- a. Adjust admission processes to be more flexible and less dependent on the revalidation of foreign education, opting to embrace the principles of flexibility demonstrated in education policy.
- b. Adopt better practices to benefit marginalized groups that engage in international mobility and possess the academic profile that HEI seek. This will help remove structural barriers and allow their entry into the Mexican higher education system.
- c. Create a specialized service to support academic committees and student services for applicants who belong to socially disadvantaged groups, including the population in international mobility.
- d. Integrate the theme of international educational mobility in the respective higher education subsystems, aiming to promote mechanisms and coordinated actions with education authorities to guarantee access to higher education for migrants.

## MORE INFORMATION

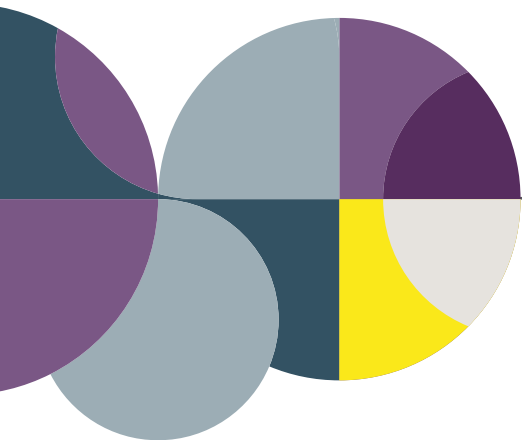
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## NOTES

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- 1 Information obtained through a transparency data request.
- 2 Ángel Lara's chapter, “Las universidades públicas estatales mexicanas ante el retorno”, in *Los dreamers ante un escenario de cambio legislativo: inserción social y económica en México* (Cruz Piñero *et al.*, 2020) systematizes the requirements of 34 public universities located in the various states. Of these, only twenty provided information on their institutional websites about the admission requirements for foreigners and individuals with studies completed abroad. Of these twenty, all required at least one of the documents that were eliminated in the last modification to Agreement 286 (see Table 1).
- 3 In 2021, in Mexico there were a total of 32 800 international students in tertiary education, according to data available from the [Migration Data Portal](#) (“international students” indicator). This data, in addition to figures on the migrant population within the educational system, are not available in [the statistics published by SEP](#).



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Nancy Landa has more than ten years of experience managing programs, projects, and initiatives focused on migration and forced displacement with civil society organizations, research centers, and international agencies. She obtained her master's degree in Global Migration from University College London (UCL) in the United Kingdom. Landa has managed qualitative research projects on public policies and protection needs for migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees. Her areas of specialization include (re-)integration policies, return migration, irregular migration, and the right to education and identity.

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**NOTAS  
SOBRE  
+ MIGRACIÓN Y  
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