



**Autonomy and its
significance for higher
education institutions**

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Key words

Autonomy, institutions of higher education, knowledge society, academic freedom, globalization..

Abstract

The construction of knowledge and the training of professionals have claimed, over history, academic freedom for teachers and liberty to create, as well as autonomy to achieve optimal working conditions in the education and innovation processes. This claim has faced, in several circumstances, the private interests, with multiple links, of the actors of higher education institutions (HEIs), which are often detrimental to the objectives of the very institution. As the university is also considered a source of power and conflict, both the government and the various interest groups try to impose their share of control. In this context, university autonomy is the best legal way to channel internal and external interests, enable flexible organizational forms according to each HEI and to the needs of the diverse and changing environment that require innovative and effective solutions.

La autonomía y su significado para las instituciones de educación superior

Palabras clave

Autonomía, instituciones de educación superior, sociedad del conocimiento, libertad académica, globalización.

Resumen

La construcción del conocimiento y la formación de profesionales han reclamado, a lo largo de la historia, libertad académica para los docentes, así como autonomía para crear y alcanzar condiciones de trabajo óptimas en los procesos educativos y de innovación. Este reclamo se ha enfrentado, en reiteradas circunstancias, a los intereses particulares, con múltiples vínculos, de los actores de las instituciones de educación superior (IES), que muchas veces resultan en detrimento de los objetivos de la propia institución. Como la universidad también es considerada fuente de poder y de conflicto, tanto el gobierno como los diversos grupos de interés tratan de imponer su cuota de control. En ese contexto, la autonomía universitaria es la mejor forma jurídica para encauzar los intereses internos y externos, posibilitar formas de organización flexibles acordes a cada IES y a las necesidades del entorno diverso y cambiante que requieren soluciones innovadoras y eficaces.

L'autonomie et sa signification pour les institutions d'éducation supérieure

Mots-clefs

Autonomie, institutions d'éducation supérieure, société de la connaissance, liberté académique, globalisation.

Résumé

La construction de la connaissance et la formation de professionnels ils ont réclamé le long de l'histoire, une liberté académique pour les enseignants, ainsi qu'une autonomie pour créer et atteindre des conditions parfaites de travail dans les processus éducatifs et d'une innovation. Cette réclame s'est affrontée, dans des circonstances réitérées aux intérêts particuliers avec des liens multiples des acteurs des institutions d'éducation supérieure, qui résultent souvent au détriment des objectifs de la propre institution. Comme l'université est aussi considérée fontaine de pouvoir et de conflit, le gouvernement et les divers groupes d'intérêt essaient d'imposer sa quotité de contrôle. Dans ce contexte, l'autonomie universitaire est la meilleure forme juridique pour diriger les intérêts internes et externes, pour faciliter des formes flexibles d'organisation du même avis avec chaque IES et les nécessités de l'environnement divers et changeant qui requièrent des solutions innovatrices et efficaces.

Introduction

From the 90's, universities around the world, strongly driven by economic and technological globalization, took on the task of reflecting on their situation, challenges and prospects. The Bologna Declaration, signed in 1999 by 29 European countries, emerged as a partnership to build a common European higher education space to improve the quality of their universities and achieve convergence in the training of professionals, as well as scientific and technological development.

Similarly, international agencies like the World Bank (WB), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco), the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (Cepal), and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), have played a leading role in analyzing the status quo of higher education and have suggested some recommendations regarding that matter to the governments and their HEIs which have had a significant impact on the various regions of the world (Rodríguez and Alcántara, 2003).

Of the bulky amount of reports emanating from these international organizations, there are prominent items of coincident diagnosis such as:

1. Poor quality of higher education as a result of its exponential growth and the severe financial constraints for its support.
2. Inefficient use of government subsidies.
3. Problems of inequity since higher education needs more subsidies than the basic one, and those who reach that level are not the ones with a lower income (Kent, 1995).

The concept of higher education as a public good and its importance as a means of creating value for the economies made it stronger in international government agendas. Currently more than 143 million people worldwide are taking higher education courses (Unesco, 2006). Although enrollment differences across regions are very pronounced, there is a general increasing tendency. While in North America and Western Europe, gross enrollment rate is above 70% on average in central and Eastern Europe is 54% in Latin America and the Caribbean, East Asia and the Pacific 28% in Asia central 25%, in Arabian states 21%, Western and Southern Asia 11%, and in sub-Saharan Africa only 5% (Unesco, 2006).

In Mexico, as elsewhere, the conditions, challenges and perspectives were analyzed, and the processes of reflection were encouraged in both public and private HEIs. From there, a set of changes began to be activated, especially those referring to the strategic planning processes and, therefore, for reforming the educational models (Anuies, 1998).

Reports from international agencies such as the one presented by the National Association of Universities and Institutions of Higher Education (Anuies), reiterated the importance of autonomy as a strengthener element of the HEIs. Unesco (1998, p. 24), concluded: *Academic freedom in higher education and its wide autonomy are essentials for the institutions to perform their mission*, for its part the Anuies (1998, p. 148), in its guiding principles states: *The nature of the HEIs makes it necessary, for their*

proper functioning, that the organization of activities, and overall decision making, are made through established and internally operated mechanisms, mainly by their academic staff and without interference from outside interests.

The aforementioned reports reiterate that the quality and good performance of the HEIs, in addition to being associated with factors of the educational type —training of teachers, relevance of curricula, adequate infrastructure, research development, mentoring systems, among others— and with adequate and efficiently channeled budgets, should also be related to open organizational forms, more horizontal among their members, of collegiality in decision-making, prone to constant evaluation and to the full exercise of autonomy.

In 2008, more than 2 million 750 thousand people completed the high school level in Mexico, this is 29% compared to the total population between 20 and 24 years of age (Inegi, 2005). The budget allocated to this level exceeded 100 billion pesos —116 000 376 million pesos in 2010, by agreement of the Chamber of Deputies— which is why the analysis of public policies towards this sector of government activity is essential.

In 2008, in Mexico, there were 872 HEIs, which coordinated 796 thousand schools where university courses were offered at the graduate and undergraduate level. Of these, 407 were state teacher training colleges and six federal teacher training colleges, 191 not autonomous federal universities with local or regional presence, exclusively, 226 non-autonomous state universities and 42 autonomous universities (SEP, Upepe, 2009). In addition, 88 centers for higher technical studies were identified, which are not considered universities. Of the total of HEIs —universities— the federal ones with national presence —other than the federal teacher training colleges and the *Universidad Pedagógica Nacional (UPN)*— are: *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM)*, *Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (UAM)*, *Instituto Politécnico Nacional (IPN)*, and the *Universidad Autónoma de Chapingo (UACH)*. Of these, only the IPN has legal status of heteronomy (Bryman, 2008).

Thus, the purpose of this essay is to give an overview of the evolution of university autonomy as an organizational feature of the HEIs that, although it does not eliminate conflicts arising from the interests of internal and external agents acting on them, it generates the best conditions so that they can meet the social functions assigned to them and their institutional mission.

Origin of autonomy as university feature

Achieving autonomy has been present in the life of university since its inception in the late twelfth century. These early institutions were *corporate associations of teachers and students equipped with their own statutes, seal, autonomous administrative structure, fixed curriculum and procedures for obtaining degrees*, regardless of whether their origin was spontaneous or articles of incorporation of the Empire or the Church (Tamayo, 1987, p. 8).

The specific historical context and the model through which the first universities came have been the conditioning aspects

trol. To Berdahl (1990, pp. 171-172), a more autonomous university will further protect academic freedom, so it can be said that in Mexico it is currently related to the following elements: a) the ability to self-regulation and self-governance of universities; b) the realization of the aims inherent to universities (teaching, research and dissemination of culture); c) academic and research freedom and the free inquiry and discussion of ideas within universities as a means to achieve their purposes; d) the ability of universities to determine their plans and programs; e) the authority of universities to set the conditions for enrollment, promotion and retention of academic staff; f) the ability of autonomous universities to manage their heritage (García Ramírez, 2005, Chapter V), as defined by Article III Section VII of the Constitution.

Exercise of autonomy in Mexico

In Mexico, the need for university autonomy was clearly raised by Justo Sierra since 1875, in the context of the creation of the *Escuela Nacional Preparatoria* (National Preparatory School), through his writings in newspapers and later as a professor in that institution. It was reiterated in 1910¹ when the *Universidad Nacional* was reopened (García Salord, 2009), but it was not until 1929, before a student strike, that president Portes Gil sent the Congress the bill to give autonomy to the University, giving the University Congress —composed of authorities, teachers and students— the power to appoint the rector from a shortlist submitted by the president of the Republic, and the status of principal authority of the university. Even though in these two moments the motivations that led the defense of university autonomy were different —because while Sierra was convinced that the university required a self-government and autonomy of management, president Portes Gil agreed to autonomy “grudgingly”— the legal reform promoted in 1929 extended the spaces of the Mexican social law (García Ramírez, 2005).

In 1933 the University’s internal conflict had intensified. Many aspects were being discussed, but one was key to its future: the University would be a plural space for the development of knowledge or would choose to adhere to a particular ideology. The victory of Case in these debates in favor of an open and pluralistic university clashed sharply with the dominant strands in the Mexican government and so in a very agitated environment, the reform was passed reiterating university autonomy but without forcing the State to its support (García Ramírez, 2005), which made it easy to predict a new period of great difficulties and conflicts.

The central government required a HEI related to its projects and ideology that would also give further support to its industrial development policies, the expropriations and the construction of a national political party. In this context (1936), the IPN emerged, as a HEI serving policies of the nationalist government. In its case, autonomy was denied from its inception. It was designed not to develop free thinking, but to train technicians to service the Mexican State².

In 1944 the University had two rectors, so that the government had to intervene and violate the autonomy to establish channels to overcome internal disputes. This crisis was resolved with the legal reform that, in a consistent fashion, prosecuted the work of this educational institution providing it with its attributes as it is known today: national

and autonomous, hence the emergence of the UNAM (García Ramírez, 2005).

Well, in 1945 the UNAM had legal autonomy in a situation of consolidation of the Mexican Revolution regime and the strengthening of the groups related to the dominant party in this movement. In this period, the UNAM enjoyed significant autonomy (Alcántara, 2009a), its influence on the formation of the leaders of the executive, legislative and judicial powers positioned it in the national political context that helped to maintain internal stability.

Ten years later, the conditions had changed. The hegemony of the forces of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI), within the UNAM weakened. In 1950 there were already 39 universities (Ibarra, 2003a; Galaz y Gil, 2009a). In 1956 over 100 thousand students went on strike throughout the country, the focus of these demonstrations was the demand for democratization of the governance of universities. During the 60’s, student protests were a constant. Semo (1982, p. 110), argues that the *opposition of the Cardenistas forces to the desires of democratization of this movement, forced its dilution in collaboration with governments, corruption and porrismo*.

In 1965 the socioeconomic reality of Mexico had significant changes, the industrial and service workers were most against agricultural workers, urban areas had been extended and also the high education institutions (Semo, 1982). From 1960 to 1965 the *per cápita* education expenditure had doubled from 52.35 to 106.59 pesos (Latapí, cited by Semo, 1982). The growth of the middle class was a product of those changes.

In 1966 —and as the result of a strike— the rector of the UNAM resigned. This movement was an expression of the *ideological, cultural, administrative and academic crisis* (Semo, 1982, p. 116), lived in the University, as well as the policies of its central governments. The student movement of 1968 was the continuation of these conflicts —although it was the result of a fight, like so many others, including students from two senior high schools— which questioned the federal government and its university policies. The result was the strengthening of university autonomy by

1 In 1917 the local Congress of *Estado de Michoacán* ordered by decree the constitution and organization of the *Universidad de Michoacán*, as an autonomous institution, its regulatory law was issued on August 11, 1919. In 1923 a local government decree transformed the *Instituto Científico y Literario del Estado* into the *Universidad de San Luis Potosí* (Alcántara, 2009b), the author notes that the incorporation of the autonomy of these universities was only formal.

2 According to Quintanilla, a researcher at the *Centro de Investigación y de Estudios Avanzados* (Cinvestav) the IPN opening in 1937, was a break with the university model promoted by the mediocrity of the nineteenth century, as well as a frontal attack to the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* (UNAM). Unlike the latter, which was born endowed with a relative legal independence from the State and throughout its life won full autonomy, the IPN was conceived and implemented as an organ belonging to the State body. It was not given any scope to act independently of the central government, nor it was given internal mechanisms for the election of its authorities and the participation of students and teachers in decision-making. In the long term, these absences would foster corporate authoritarian practices still in place (Quintanilla, 2008).

of the degrees of autonomy with which they have operated. The University of Bologna (XII century), was designed for the professional interests of lay people dedicated to the study of Roman law (Tamayo, 1987, p. 28), in which students began to create guilds or unions, according to the model of other medieval corporations typical of the city organization. These guilds were called "universitates", and like any other guild fought for privileges and against retaliation of traders and greedy owners (Tamayo, 1987, p. 30).

The University of Paris came through a guild or fraternity of lay teachers separated from the Church. The academic guild was conceived as an autonomous entity legally established, placed outside the church structure (Tamayo, 1987, p. 39), its fundamental studies were the logic and dialectics, and their teachers defined the content. In the thirteenth century, after bitter disputes with the authorities of the city (*chancelier*), students and teachers of the University of Paris won its final independence, granted by Pope Gregory IX (Tamayo, 1987, p. 42).

The University of Oxford started away from cathedrals and churches, although with a certain influence of the University of Paris, the *Chancellor* came from the very teachers' guild, which allowed that in the fourteenth century the recognition of the university authorities did not require the Episcopal confirmation.

The University of Berlin (1810), founded by Humboldt, linked from the beginning teaching with research and the concept of autonomy from the state as a constitutive feature in order to maintain knowledge outside power games (Pavón and Ramírez, 2009).

Unlike these models, universities in Latin America had the direct influence of the universities of Salamanca and Alcalá de Henares, where the power of the Crown —through the viceroys and the Church— was persistent (Tünnermann, 2008), a fact that in Mexico was amended in the early twentieth century with the re-foundation of the Universidad Nacional in 1910, and in Latin America as a result of the movements by the Córdoba University Reform that incorporated the issue of autonomy as a central aspect.

Political power throughout history has never left knowledge outside its sight because, as an explanation element of nature, society and man not only have had a contemplative function of the universe, but also have been instrument of affirmation or question of the prevailing social reality. Since the Middle Ages, the *Universitates* and everything they stood for, immediately fall (they already had) within the medieval strategy for the power struggle (Tamayo, 1987, p. 50).

Thus, from its inception, the university administration has been in constant tension between autonomy and the interference of political, economic and religious power. According to Díaz Barriga (2004), it was in medieval times when the "university enjoyed greater autonomy" since the unions of students and teachers enabled that the latter were the ones who guided the work of education in the context of the dominant view of the world.

The search for rational explanations of the universe and nature has given the HEIs the purpose to get away from both the political and economic power as well as from the religious one and give science "in action" a government which emerges from "science itself" (Sierra, quoted by García Ramírez, 2005),

where reason should have the right to speak publicly, for without this kind of power, reason could not manifest itself (Kant, 2002, p. 6). This claim has not eliminated in the course of history that universities —by becoming new social organizations and, therefore, new "institutional creatures" with their own interests and goals, like all public bodies— incorporate agents that are able to pursue their own objectives, using, if necessary and if allowed, the public resources and powers to defend their own positions of power and advantage (Ostrom, quoted by Arellano, 2007), and from the outside they are seen as a "coveted prey" (García Ramírez, 2005), to which it is better to intervene.

Implications of university autonomy

Autonomy comes from two Greek words: *auto* means "self" and *nomos* "law", i.e., the ability of agencies to determine their own law, their own control. Autonomy is a form of division of power, but does not mean sovereignty. Both concepts are mutually exclusive since sovereignty expresses independence from other powers, while autonomy is a legal condition that does not affect the distribution of functions provided by the constitution (Pedroza, 2002).

In history and in different contexts the concept of university autonomy has assumed specific content. Berdahl (1990), makes a distinction between academic freedom, substantive autonomy and procedural autonomy. He points out that academic freedom is the one that has the individual researcher —in teaching and research— to find the truth and conduct themselves without fear of punishment or termination of employment for having offended some political, religious or social orthodoxy. Russell (1993), argues that society and the State need the university to gain knowledge that improves decision making, social and natural problem solving and, in general, for their development; in turn, the university needs the State to exist because without its funding it would only be accessible to those with sufficient financial resources to defray it. The State —the governments— and universities need each other, but this dependence should not affect the academic freedom of higher education institutions because the nature of their functions is distorted (Russell, 1993). From the university science criteria must be defended, even if what results from there is not welcomed by those who hold the power. *Academic freedom is incompatible with the use of State authority over universities to cause a change in culture* (Russell, 1993, p. 46). *What the state can legitimately do is to persuade through words, but never impose. It must be absolutely impermissible to silence researchers* (Russell, 1993, p. 62).

Substantive autonomy or merits autonomy is the power the university has to determine its own goals and programs —the "what" of academia— as well as its procedural autonomy and the ability of the university to determine how their goals and programs will take place —the "how" of the academy. *Academic freedom involves teachers in an individual fashion, while the substantive and procedural autonomy involves the relationship between higher education institutions and the government con-*

weakening the forces of the hegemonic party from the inside, but also encouraged the formation of various leftist groups and currents that sought to transform the University in accordance with its ideological assumptions and not based on an educational project.

In the 70's the youth population growth led to the expansion of universities, then came the UAM, campuses of the *Escuela Nacional de Estudios Profesionales* (ENEP), among others, and the *Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología* (Conacyt). In 1972, an education reform project was promoted by the government to diversify the educational offering and create new educational curricula, to promote planning and teacher training policies (Díaz Barriga, cited by Luengo, 2004), in parallel, administrative and academic workers from the UNAM had relevant conferences demanding recognition of their professional bodies and the improvement of their working conditions. In such circumstances, university autonomy had limits imposed from several fronts. The central government intervened in the universities, in addition to the policies imposed by government agents which sought to limit the free expression of ideas and the independent organization of workers and students; also the unions movements —*Sindicato de Trabajadores y Empleados de la UNAM* (Steunam) and *Sindicato del Personal Académico de la UNAM* (Spaunam)— promoted the defense of the workers' interests through a *complex knot* of external relations (Woldenberg, 1988).

In 1980, the Congress of the Union decided to amend the third article of the Constitution and add the fraction VII, which includes university autonomy. The level of conflict in the universities was very high, and the government had been constantly the subject of the questioning of those movements. Therefore, and based on a set of proposals which had been submitted from the UNAM and the Anuies, the Congress agreed to grant to the universities, which had the name of autonomous, legal a very broad, substantive and procedural autonomy, since the fraction VII involved all areas of their performance.

In the 80's and with an outlook of greater diversity and influence of other

political currents in the universities, the conflicts worsened. The policy of accreditation of programs, professional certification, evaluation of academic programs and institutions, and the regulation of professions, among others, gathered momentum in Mexico. This process took place without regard to teachers in the definition of policies and introducing new criteria to rate their performance related to productivity, efficiency and competency (Luengo, 2004). It is in this period, when other countries in similar conditions to those of Mexico began their transformation with a boost in science and technology, as reflected in the *Plan Especial de Ciencia y Tecnología 2001-2006* (Conacyt, 2001). From specific diagnoses it was decided to deploy innovation policies to strengthen the autonomy of their organizations. In the case of Mexico, the policies were imposed which provoked that the universities rejected them and therefore were not successful.

Between the stagnation, the political struggle and the assessment and rationality practices —according with global trends to promote planning (Alcántara, 2009b)— universities were restricted in their autonomy or pushed into the background (Luengo, 2004), because their policy guidelines were determined from the outside, and this caused that the conflict between autonomy and external interference had a new episode of stress.

In addition, pressures toward HEIs were intensified in the international scope, the expansion of economic globalization and the emergence of the so-called knowledge society generated a widespread demand to improve the quality, relevance, equity and coverage of higher education in many countries. Social, business and academic groups, demanded to improve the quality of academic programs and to link the products of their activities to solve local and international problems facing contemporary societies, and to transform rote and short-range education into a *lifelong education*.

The Delors Report shows that the university should carry out four core functions:

1. Prepare for research and teaching.
2. Offer highly specialized types of training tailored to the needs of economic and social life.
3. Open to all to respond to the many aspects of what is called continuous learning in the broadest sense of the term.
4. Get international cooperation.

From the 90's, trends towards innovation in HEIs in Mexico were promoted from the outside, driven by globalization processes. These had as axes: linking the budget to the results, associate the training of students to the development of competencies, strengthen political links between universities and the productive sector, and facilitate the mobility of students as well, among the most important aspects. But also, the previous movements and processes in the universities generated reflections on the scope of government interference in their policies and ways to defend the autonomy. Initiatives emerged from these processes that led many HEI's to rethink their mission and vision.

Arguably, since forever, the State has systematically sought to intervene in Mexican public universities since they are a source of power and social conflict of great importance. Political forces in these institutions, moreover, cannot be isolated from the complex relationships and economic and social impact that the relationship with the State means. Both are actors who understand the impact and power they can represent.

Now, discussing autonomy as a critical variable for understanding universities as organizations is linked to the international context, where the arguments favor it (the autonomy) as a necessity: economic and information openness generates, in almost all countries, several windows of opportunity for schools, which can be exploited as long as they have flexible organizational structures capable of responding to multiple ties and social demands, not only in their own countries but abroad. International cooperation and involvement becomes essential to exploit and boost comparative advantages of institutions by creating networks for daily work, in which the ability to make timely decisions is a prerequisite for success, as well as the need for innovation in the productive, social and academic groups sectors in institutions.

Mexican universities

According to Ibarra (2003a), to understand the situation of Mexican universities it is necessary to properly locate the context in which they operate. The modernization process that began in the 80s has not been completed because, according to this author, it requires *further transformation, consolidation and correction of obvious progress unsuccessful aspects* (Ibarra, 2003a, p. 2).

Among the advances there is the growth of these institutions and thus the increase in enrollment: in 2009 there were 1 796 universities (SEP, Uepepe, 2009), when in 1950 there were 39 (Ibarra, 2003a; Galaz y Gil, 2009a), and approximately 2 million 750 thousand students enrolled (SEP, Uepepe, 2009). It can be said that today, students from rural areas and the provinces have closer alternatives to higher education, the supply has been diversified, women have a slightly higher percentage share than men, 1 million 358 thousand 883 women compared with 1 million 346 thousand 307 men (SEP, Uepepe, 2009), with a high percentage of teachers, 75% who were hired in college in the last 10 years and have post graduate education (Galaz y Gil, 2009b).

Other advances but with a partial nature are the increased budget—but still without having permanent rules for the federal budget allocation to ensure the viability of higher education regardless of political and economic fluctuations—however, inequity persists in the allocation of budget which generates a differential treatment for Mexican students; the growth of full-time teachers and the emergence of new educational programs. Although low enrollment persists in scientific and technological state of the art areas, the stagnation in the technical alternatives and the lack of new colleges that provide opportunities for thousands of marginalized young people with the possibility of higher learning.

Finally, a fundamental element, that government policies have misled, is the excessive centralization of decision making related to the task and the government of HEIs under the *Secretaría de Educación Superior* (SEP), which manifests itself in: emphasis on externally set performance criteria for all universities (Alcántara, 2009b), supervised autonomy (Ibarra, 2003b), cessation of teacher training colleges in considerable numbers, and inadequate working conditions of those teachers working without a contract (Galaz y Gil, 2009b), among the most relevant.

In this context, the governance of HEIs has remained but at the cost of not generating significant changes in their organizational structures and mechanisms of decision making, maintaining undemocratic vertical structures, distancing teachers from the minimum and indispensable conditions to encourage their contribution to the transformation processes.

The university is an organization and as such, argues Simon (1982, p. 37), *it is a complex design of communications and other relationships existing within a group of human beings*, which shapes beliefs and attitudes. To Ordorika (2003), public universities are government agencies and at the same time, conflicts and debates arenas, they are subjects of power relations with other State institutions, mainly the government, expressed in three dimensions, instrumental, control of the agenda and ideological.

Mexican public universities are heterogeneous organizations, not only because of their specific purpose and scope or social, cultural and political influence they have achieved, but also by virtue of the interests that in their creation and throughout their careers have been present. The UNAM, for example, was born in 1910 as an expression of liberal thought that collected the most recent discussions of that time on the "what should be" of the universities and the importance of autonomy; that is why, even though in the first law that defined its existence that feature does not appear, in the criteria of its founding expressed by Sierra it does. The university as a place for the exercise and development of free thought, pluralism of ideas, with no ties to a particular ideology, committed to social freedom.

The organizational purposes for which the UNAM was founded, summarized by Sierra as the political ideals of democracy and freedom, generated elements to form an institutional identity that expressed the ideals of the Mexican society. Simon says (1982, p. 207), that an organization is socially useful *when the identification model that*

it creates, produces a correspondence between social values and the values of the organization. During its early years, UNAM members were identified with those values that led them to the movement for autonomy in 1929 and to seek proper mechanisms of self-financing (1933), for the sake of the supreme value that had originated it: autonomy.

The IPN, established in 1936, was an equal expression of certain political values and of a social context that identified social justice with the government management of public agencies. The IPN emerged as a State organ, and in this quality it expressed the mechanism that could lead to an institution, trainer of technicians, to meet its social goals of building equity and justice for the economically disadvantaged. The knowledge and the conditions conducive to its development, science and technology, were not ends in themselves but means to achieve justice. Therefore, the fundamental criterion for accepting students into its classrooms was the origin of class. The instrumental view of the IPN was imposed from the government.

This Institute was able to identify its goals, interests and values to important segments of the population and this has been for seven decades, which has allowed its permanence and expansion, as well as the permanence and expansion of the UNAM in its 100 years of life. These two institutions from different origins, expressed the plurality and inequality in the Mexican society in the first half of the twentieth century, in a context of lack of democratic mechanisms for building social representation and fierce clashes between political groups and economic interests.

Currently, it is perceived in most Mexican universities an incipient trend to generate reflection processes from their specific conditions and local realities in which they are located, as well as the establishment of mechanisms for greater international presence that has been encouraged by supranational organizations of higher education (Rodríguez and Alcántara, 2003), for specific needs of the Mexican society and internal student movements.

How have the structures and rules changed in Mexican universities in the

past 15 years, during which they have grown significantly in number and generated changing processes in their inside? The structure and rules of the organizations *have two contradictory aspects, they are constraints that are imposed, but they are also the product of power relations*, says Crozier (1992). These are solutions that the “relatively free” actors, find to the difficult problem of cooperation.

According to Galaz (2003), only 25% of teachers have the desired profile³ to work in a higher education institution. Such situation expresses a structural weakness, product of regulatory restrictions and intellectual construction, but also of the correlation of forces that has kept in the universities bureaucratic groups who consistently have subordinated the academic criteria to disputes over power.

Although in the decade of 2000, 60% of new university teachers have a graduate degree, it has not been sufficient for them to develop the competencies that the new curricula demand, since it requires organizational processes and working conditions whose existence does not depend on teachers. Just 10 hours per week, on average, full-time teachers devote to scientific research, which encourages Mexican universities to continue being only reproducers of knowledge making them unable to be successfully inserted into the global world with friendly innovation to the educational social and productive context of the country. The aforementioned without considering that still about 50% of teachers are part-time and without a contract, that is, paid by the hour, which restricts any possibility of performing this job as a priority activity (Galaz y Gil, 2009b).

That being said, who makes the deci-

sions in the universities? According to Galaz (2003), of the universe of teachers: 51.6% believe that the government employees or the authorities determine or appoint new teachers, 46.6% say that these authorities decide the promotion mechanisms for teachers, 31.8% that they define the priority research lines and 35.4% the evaluation mechanisms, and although in the latter two items the percentage of those who believe that teachers choose is majority, 52.6 and 47.3% respectively, it is still very significant the proportion of teachers who believe that government employees are primarily responsible for these processes, this means that the university still has major challenges to overcome.

As for the power to appoint senior officials, according to Galaz y Gil, 2009b, 51.4% of researchers recognize that external interest forces or the government are the ones who make the decisions, while 40.7% of teachers of federal institutions considered that the governing bodies of their respective institutions are the ones who decide. On average, 54.4% of teachers surveyed, according to Galaz and Gil, said that in their organizations a vertical management style is the one predominating. This percentage is much higher in private institutions, 62.7%, as expected, and slightly less in federal autonomous agencies 47.3%, and 41%, on average, recognize that for decision-making there are collegiate mechanisms, and the highest percentage in the research institutions.

Galaz and Gil argue that universities put special emphasis on the fulfillment of their mission, so it was said by an average of 61.5% of teachers surveyed; 88.3% of teachers in private institutions and 53.8% of federal government agencies.

Is this situation conducive for universities to face the challenges that the knowledge society proposes? Do they allow timely and effective management of knowledge? According to Peluffo (2010), factors such as high bureaucracy, excessive response times from universities, lack of mobility of students and teachers, very rigid schedules, lack of attention to the needs of participants and lack of legitimacy are critical and risky factors to achieve a proper knowledge management to modern times. For Toledo (2010), the possibility that universities are prepared to face the challenges the knowledge society proposes, is related to the construction of new institutions relevant to the mission of the HEIs.

Conclusions

Finding a permanent balance between university autonomy and the interference of powerful and pressure groups inside and outside this institution, which enables it to perform its functions satisfactorily, does not seem a simple task because the HEIs as part of the social whole are constantly changing. Forms of government must comply with those changes inside and outside the university in order to achieve the internal governance and the development of specific functions —teaching, research, extension and dissemination of knowledge, social relationship— with the greatest possible success.

That is why the variable autonomy is important to understand both the internal and external effects of the action of public universities in a society like the Mexican one. Arguably, autonomy is a political and social construction that does not eliminate the conflict and tension between the political forces which from inside and outside want to realize their specific objectives, but that is critical to circumscribe the power organizational relations and, therefore, of research and teaching to a dynamic which has certain order and is generator of expectations and stabilities.

The extremely hierarchical formal rules that determine the performance of schools to the circles of power are not conducive to their relevance, since due to their nature they remain away from the daily lives of those who transmit, create and apply scientific knowledge. It could be said that the autonomy has been a major element to the institutional design of contemporary public universities. Adapting the exercise of autonomy to rules and governance mechanisms that enable the development of academic activities, according to criteria related to that activity, has been an ongoing challenge to the course of history. The submission of the academy to extra-university authorities

3 Under the rules of operation of the *Programa de Mejoramiento del Profesorado* (Promep), 2009, the desired profile in the state's public universities and related describes the university professor as someone who has a level of academic qualification higher than the educational programs he teaches, preferably has a PhD and also performs in a balanced way teaching generation and innovative application of knowledge, mentoring and academic management-bonding activities. In polytechnics, the university professor is described as someone who has a scientific-technological qualification higher than the educational programs he teaches, preferably with a PhD and also performs in a balanced way teaching, applied research or technological development, mentoring and academic management-bonding activities (SEP, agreement number 526 Promep operating rules in the Federal Official Journal, December 30, 2009).

critically affects the logic and governance of these institutions, altering their results and consequences as well.

Establishing rules for the exercise of these powers has been fundamental in generating political and organizational balance. The political acceptance of the benefits that the autonomy gives to academic work has been a tortuous process through the centuries. It could be argued, then, that it is likely that when non-autonomous institutional arrangements have hindered these balances, the university's academic life has been seriously damaged or suspended; either by the excessive interference or abandonment of the State or by the predominance of forces, internal or external, that put private interests before the functions of the university.

In this sense, the assumption has been retaken that the autonomous organizational construction has been a basic equilibrium condition in the HEIs, the best scenario for the development of their roles and the predominance of values and criteria related to school. It is just an eventual equilibrium, because the contradictory forces persist and thereby the pursuit of their own interests. However, despite this, the autonomy allows the orientation of the conflicts and the establishment of arrangements for decision making and power distribution, which minimize the instability and disruption of the tasks associated with the university alongside the existence of conditions more conducive to the quality and innovation of products and services.

If autonomy is a desirable feature throughout the history of universities, in the present context, of the knowledge society, it becomes more important as a prerequisite for higher education institutions to properly perform their functions. Not only do these organizations generate and disseminate knowledge, there are many spaces for that function, so if they do not want to be overtaken by those promoting a commercial mission of knowledge, their transformation is fundamental. Universities cannot work in isolation; it is essential that they get involved and cooperate on a regular basis to strengthen their activities and their results. It is also imperative to create domestic conditions that allow teachers to have a relevant role in their work, bond with their peers abroad, with companies and the various sectors of society without the constraints imposed by the extremely hierarchical and bureaucratic structures. Democratic governance through the exercise of autonomy is consistent with the values that universities seek to develop in the professional formation processes which are widely accepted by society: responsibility, freedom, participation, tolerance, dialogue, democracy. The university cannot publicly defend these values consistently if they are not performed within the institution, and without a democratic culture that enables the free expression and the freedom to create, it cannot accomplish the academic mission of innovation.

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