

University Autonomy in Mexico: Constitutional Foundations, Structural Tensions and Contemporary Challenges

Alberto Merced Castro Valencia^{1*}, César Omar Mora Pérez²

¹Tecnologico Nacional de Mexico/Instituto tecnologico Jose Mario Molina Pasquel y Henriquez, Zapopan, Mexico

²Centro Universitario de Ciencias Económico Administrativas, Universidad de Guadalajara, Zapopan, Mexico

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.1026EDU0385>

Received: 08 June 2026; Accepted: 13 June 2026; Published: 26 June 2026

ABSTRACT

University autonomy constitutes one of the foundational principles of Mexican higher education and a defining feature of the relationship between the state and its public universities. This article analyses the constitutional configuration of university autonomy in Mexico and examines the principal challenges that currently condition its exercise. The study pursued three objectives: to reconstruct the historical and juridical trajectory through which autonomy was consolidated in Article 3, Section VII, of the Mexican Constitution; to identify the structural tensions that constrain autonomous governance in practice; and to propose an analytical framework that integrates these tensions into a coherent research agenda.

A qualitative, documentary-hermeneutic design was employed, combining the systematic review of constitutional texts, organic laws and the Ley General de Educación Superior of 2021 with the analysis of official budgetary information and a corpus of specialised scholarship on higher education governance. The findings indicate that, although autonomy enjoys robust constitutional protection, its effective exercise is increasingly fragile. Four fields of tension were identified: pronounced financial dependence on federal and state subsidies, recurrent budgetary crises within public state universities, intensified demands for accountability and transparency that are frequently deployed as instruments of political pressure, and an expanding regulatory framework that redefines the boundaries of institutional self-government.

The article concludes that safeguarding autonomy requires moving beyond a defensive, juridical understanding of the principle towards a model of responsible autonomy, sustained by multi-annual funding guarantees, strengthened internal governance and transparent accountability regimes; to enhance its practical applicability, this model is operationalised through a set of observable governance indicators. As a documentary study, the analysis is framed as a structured set of hypotheses, and the article sets out an agenda for future empirical research, based on interviews, surveys and comparative case studies of universities with differing levels of autonomy, together with a basis for comparative work on state–university relations in Latin America and for the design of public policy that reconciles institutional independence with legitimate public oversight.

Keywords: university autonomy; higher education policy; Mexico; governance; accountability

INTRODUCTION

Few principles occupy a more prominent place in the institutional architecture of Mexican higher education than university autonomy. Enshrined in Article 3, Section VII, of the Political Constitution of the United Mexican States, autonomy grants public universities the legal capacity to govern themselves, to determine their academic programmes, to define the terms of admission, promotion and permanence of their academic staff, and to administer their own assets (Constituciónmaribel acuña garcia Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos, 1917/2024). The principle is simultaneously a juridical guarantee, an organisational arrangement and a political

symbol: it embodies almost a century of struggle by Mexican universities to secure a sphere of intellectual and administrative independence from the state that funds them (Marsiske, 2010; Silva Herzog, 1974).

Yet the constitutional robustness of autonomy contrasts sharply with the fragility of its everyday exercise. Over the past decade, Mexican public universities have confronted recurrent financial crises, prolonged disputes over federal and state subsidies, intensified demands for transparency and accountability, episodes of political interference in internal governance, and a new regulatory framework introduced by the Ley General de Educación Superior of 2021, which redefines the obligations of autonomous institutions within the national higher education system (Cámara de Diputados del H. Congreso de la Unión, 2021; Mendoza Rojas, 2017). These pressures have reopened a long-standing question in the scholarship on state–university relations: how can institutional independence be reconciled with the legitimate interest of the state and society in the responsible use of public resources (Berdahl, 1990; Levy, 1980)?

The question is far from rhetorical. Public autonomous universities enrol a substantial share of Mexican undergraduate and postgraduate students and conduct most of the country’s scientific research (ANUIES, 2023; OECD, 2019). The conditions under which they govern themselves therefore bear directly upon national capacities for human capital formation, knowledge production and social mobility. At the same time, the international literature has documented a global trend towards the recalibration of university autonomy, in which governments combine formal declarations of institutional independence with increasingly dense instruments of steering, evaluation and conditioned funding (Estermann & Nokkala, 2009; Neave & van Vught, 1994; Pruvot & Estermann, 2017). Mexico offers a particularly instructive case for examining this tension because its constitutional model confers an unusually strong formal guarantee whilst its funding model generates an unusually strong material dependence.

This article pursues three objectives. First, it reconstructs the historical and juridical trajectory through which university autonomy was consolidated in the Mexican constitutional order, from the foundational concession to the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) in 1929 to the constitutional reform of 1980 and the legislative developments of 2019–2021. Second, it identifies and characterises the principal structural tensions that condition the contemporary exercise of autonomy, with particular attention to financial dependence, accountability regimes, political interference and regulatory expansion. Third, it integrates these findings into a conceptual framework intended to orient future comparative research and policy design. The guiding research question may be stated as follows: to what extent, and through which mechanisms, do contemporary financial, political and regulatory conditions constrain the constitutionally guaranteed autonomy of Mexican public universities?

The article is organised in six parts. Following this introduction, the second section reviews the conceptual and comparative literature on university autonomy and situates the Mexican configuration within the Latin American tradition. The third section describes the methodology. The fourth section presents the results in five analytical movements: the historical trajectory, the legal architecture, the financial dimension, the accountability dimension, and the political and regulatory dimension, culminating in a conceptual synthesis. The fifth section discusses the findings in the light of the international literature, and the sixth section offers conclusions and policy recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Concept of University Autonomy

University autonomy is a multidimensional concept whose meaning has shifted with the transformation of higher education systems. In its classical formulation, autonomy denotes the capacity of an academic community to govern itself without external interference in matters that are constitutive of its mission: who teaches, what is taught, who is admitted and how knowledge is validated (Clark, 1983). Berdahl (1990) introduced an influential distinction between substantive autonomy, understood as the power of the university to determine its own goals and programmes, and procedural autonomy, understood as the power to determine the means by which those goals are pursued. The distinction remains analytically productive because contemporary governments rarely

attack substantive autonomy directly; instead, they reshape procedural conditions, notably funding formulas, evaluation systems and reporting obligations, in ways that indirectly constrain substantive choices.

A second canonical distinction separates institutional autonomy from academic freedom. Whereas autonomy is a property of organisations, academic freedom is a right of individual scholars to teach, investigate and publish without censorship or retaliation (Altbach, 2001). The two are mutually reinforcing but not identical: an autonomous institution may restrict the academic freedom of its members, and a state may respect individual academic freedom whilst curtailing institutional self-government. Contemporary monitoring exercises, such as the annual reports of the Scholars at Risk Network, document that pressures on universities increasingly operate at the intersection of both concepts, combining budgetary leverage over institutions with intimidation of individual academics (Scholars at Risk, 2023).

For comparative purposes, the operationalisation developed by the European University Association (EUA) has become a standard reference. The EUA Autonomy Scorecard distinguishes four dimensions: organisational autonomy (internal governance structures and leadership selection), financial autonomy (the capacity to manage budgets, borrow, retain surpluses and own assets), staffing autonomy (recruitment, remuneration and promotion of academic and administrative personnel) and academic autonomy (admissions, programme design and quality assurance arrangements) (Estermann & Nokkala, 2009; Pruvot & Estermann, 2017). Although the scorecard was constructed for European systems, its four dimensions provide a serviceable analytical grid for the Mexican case and are adopted in this study as sensitising categories.

Autonomy in the Latin American Tradition

Latin American university autonomy possesses a distinctive genealogy that differentiates it from the Humboldtian and Anglo-American traditions. Its symbolic origin is conventionally located in the University Reform of Córdoba, Argentina, in 1918, which articulated a programme of self-government, co-governance by students and professors, academic freedom and the social commitment of the public university (Marsiske, 2010; Tünnermann Bernheim, 2003). The Córdoba movement diffused rapidly across the region and transformed autonomy from an administrative arrangement into a political ideal: the university came to be conceived as a critical conscience of society, entitled to independence precisely because of its public mission.

This tradition produced a characteristic institutional form, the autonomous public university established by an organic law, endowed with juridical personality and its own patrimony, governed by collegiate bodies and funded predominantly by the state. It also produced a characteristic vulnerability. Because autonomy in Latin America was conquered from, and remains funded by, the state, the relationship between governments and universities has oscillated historically between accommodation and confrontation, with funding serving as the principal instrument of leverage (Levy, 1980). Episodes of open violation of autonomy, including military occupations of campuses during the authoritarian cycles of the twentieth century, endowed the principle with an emotional and political charge that persists in contemporary debates (Ordorika, 2003).

The Mexican Constitutional Configuration

Mexico codified this tradition with unusual juridical force. The reform published in the *Diario Oficial de la Federación* on 9 June 1980 elevated university autonomy to constitutional rank, initially as Section VIII and, following the reorganisation of Article 3 in 1993, as the current Section VII (*Diario Oficial de la Federación*, 1980). The constitutional text grants universities and other higher education institutions to which the law confers autonomy the power and the responsibility to govern themselves; to realise their purposes of educating, researching and disseminating culture in accordance with the principles of freedom of teaching and research; to determine their plans and programmes; to fix the terms of admission, promotion and permanence of their academic personnel; and to administer their patrimony. The same provision subjects labour relations within autonomous universities to a special modality of the federal labour regime, an arrangement designed to reconcile collective labour rights with institutional self-government.

The Mexican scholarship has examined this configuration extensively. Historical studies have reconstructed the conflictive origins of UNAM's autonomy in 1929 and its consolidation in the organic laws of 1933 and 1945

(Marsiske, 2010; Silva Herzog, 1974). Political-organisational studies have analysed the governance structures that autonomy produced, characterised by strong rectorates, collegiate councils and complex internal political arenas (Acosta Silva, 2009; Ibarra Colado, 2001; Ordorika, 2003). Policy studies have traced the transformation of state–university relations since the late 1980s, when unregulated expansion gave way to a regime of evaluation, accreditation and conditioned extraordinary funding that reshaped institutional behaviour without formally amending the constitutional guarantee (Kent, 1993; Ordorika & Lloyd, 2015). The present article builds upon these literatures but differs in its integrative ambition: rather than examining a single dimension, it maps the contemporary configuration of challenges as an interconnected system and relates that system to the four-dimensional comparative framework described above.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative, documentary-hermeneutic design, appropriate for research questions that concern the meaning, evolution and practical operation of juridical and institutional arrangements. The design proceeded in three phases.

Research Design and Sources

In the first phase, a documentary corpus was assembled comprising four families of sources: (a) primary juridical texts, including Article 3 of the Constitution and its reforms of 1980, 1993 and 2019, the organic laws of selected autonomous universities and the Ley General de Educación Superior published on 20 April 2021; (b) official statistical and budgetary information, principally the statistical yearbooks of the Asociación Nacional de Universidades e Instituciones de Educación Superior (ANUIES) and federal budget documentation concerning ordinary and extraordinary subsidies to public universities; (c) reports of international organisations on Mexican higher education, notably the OECD review of labour market relevance and outcomes (OECD, 2019); and (d) peer-reviewed scholarship on university autonomy, governance and financing in Mexico and Latin America, identified through systematic searches in Scopus, SciELO and Redalyc using combinations of the descriptors autonomy, university, governance, financing and Mexico, in both English and Spanish, for the period 1980–2025.

Analytical Procedure

In the second phase, the corpus was analysed through qualitative content analysis with a directed approach: the four dimensions of the EUA framework (organisational, financial, staffing and academic autonomy) served as initial deductive categories, whilst additional categories were permitted to emerge inductively from the material. Two emergent categories proved analytically indispensable for the Mexican case: accountability and transparency pressures, and political-security interference. Each document was coded by both authors independently; discrepancies were resolved by discussion until consensus was reached, a procedure that strengthens the dependability of qualitative findings. In the third phase, the coded material was synthesised into the historical reconstruction, the tension fields and the conceptual model presented in the results.

Limitations

Three limitations should be acknowledged. First, and most importantly, the design is documentary and does not incorporate primary empirical data. It captures institutional and juridical dynamics but not the lived perceptions of university actors; the analysis would therefore be substantially enriched by primary evidence gathered through semi-structured interviews with rectors, governing-board members and senior administrators, surveys of academic staff, and structured consultation with higher education policymakers. The integration of such empirical material constitutes the principal avenue for future research outlined below. Second, budgetary information for public state universities is heterogeneous in coverage and classification, so the financial figures reported here should be read as robust orders of magnitude rather than as exact accounting values. Third, the analysis concentrates on public autonomous universities; technological institutes, intercultural universities and private institutions, which operate under different regimes, fall outside its scope. These limitations do not compromise the validity of the central argument, which concerns the structural configuration of autonomy rather

than the precise measurement of any single variable, but they do delimit its empirical reach and define the agenda set out in the conclusions.

RESULTS

Historical Trajectory of University Autonomy in Mexico

The Mexican trajectory of university autonomy may be periodised in four stages. The first stage, from 1917 to 1929, corresponds to the post-revolutionary construction of a state-led educational project under Article 3 of the 1917 Constitution, within which the National University remained a dependency of the federal government. The student strike of 1929, triggered by curricular and examination disputes but rapidly transformed into a broader demand for self-government, concluded with the Ley Orgánica of 10 July 1929, which converted the institution into the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México and conceded a limited autonomy under continuing governmental tutelage (Marsiske, 2010; Silva Herzog, 1974).

The second stage, from 1929 to 1945, was one of conflictive consolidation. The organic law of 1933 granted the university full self-government but simultaneously withdrew the guarantee of public funding, an arrangement that pushed the institution towards financial asphyxia and demonstrated, at the very origin of the model, the structural connection between autonomy and subsidy that runs through the entire subsequent history. The Ley Orgánica of 1945, still in force, re-established stable public funding and created the governance architecture of governing board, university council and rectorate that became the template for autonomous universities throughout the country (Acosta Silva, 2009; Ordorika, 2003).

The third stage, from 1945 to 1980, combined expansion with recurrent confrontation. Autonomous public universities were created or reorganised in most federal entities, massification multiplied enrolments, and the student movement of 1968, repressed with violence and accompanied by the military occupation of university premises, converted the defence of autonomy into a central cause of Mexican public life. The constitutional reform of 1980, negotiated in the aftermath of intense labour conflicts within the universities, elevated autonomy to constitutional rank and simultaneously defined a special labour regime for university personnel, thereby closing a cycle of juridical uncertainty (Diario Oficial de la Federación, 1980; Levy, 1980). The fourth stage, from 1980 to the present, has been characterised not by frontal assaults upon autonomy but by its progressive resignification under successive policy regimes: the evaluative state of the 1990s, with its apparatus of assessment, accreditation and merit pay (Ibarra Colado, 2001; Kent, 1993); the expansion and diversification of the system during the 2000s; the educational reform of 2019, which rewrote Article 3 around the right to higher education whilst preserving Section VII intact; and the Ley General de Educación Superior of 2021, which created a new coordination architecture for the national system (Cámara de Diputados del H. Congreso de la Unión, 2021). Figure 1 summarises this trajectory.

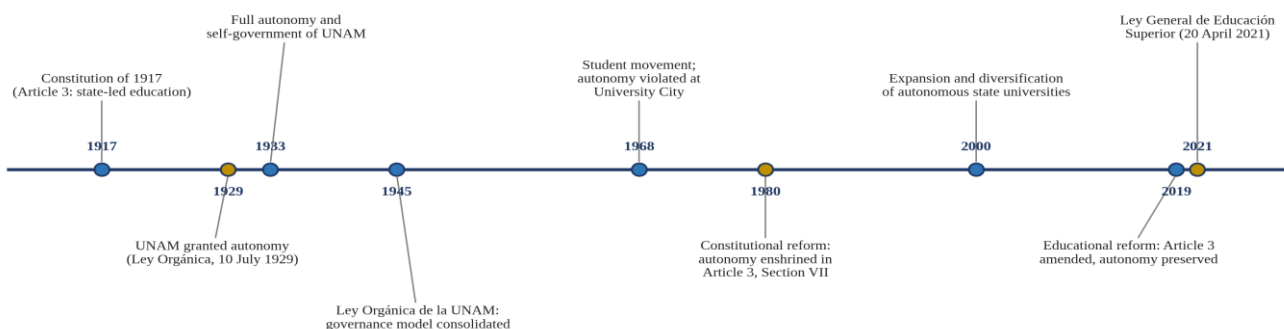


Figure 1. Milestones in the historical and juridical trajectory of university autonomy in Mexico, 1917–2021

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Marsiske (2010), Silva Herzog (1974) and primary legislation.

The Legal Architecture and Its Ambiguities

Read in isolation, Article 3, Section VII, provides one of the strongest formal guarantees of institutional autonomy in comparative perspective: it protects organisational self-government, academic self-determination, staffing decisions and patrimonial administration in a single constitutional clause. The Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation has reinforced this protection in a consistent line of jurisprudence, characterising autonomy as a constitutional guarantee of institutional self-determination that public authorities must respect, whilst clarifying that autonomy does not place universities outside the constitutional order, exempt them from accountability for public resources or confer sovereignty upon them.

The architecture nonetheless contains three ambiguities that matter in practice. First, autonomy is conferred by ordinary law: it is the legislature, federal or state, that grants autonomy through each university's organic law, and what a legislature grants it may, in principle, amend. Reforms to state university organic laws have therefore become a recurrent arena of conflict, since modifications to governance bodies, electoral procedures for rectors or oversight arrangements can be presented as ordinary legislative activity whilst operating as instruments of political intervention. Second, the Constitution guarantees the power to administer patrimony but does not guarantee the size of that patrimony: no constitutional rule fixes a funding floor for autonomous universities, leaving the material basis of autonomy exposed to annual budgetary negotiation. Third, the boundary between legitimate state coordination and illegitimate interference is not self-defining; it is constructed case by case through political practice, judicial interpretation and administrative regulation. The Ley General de Educación Superior of 2021 illustrates this ambiguity: the statute explicitly commits the state to respect university autonomy and creates participatory coordination bodies, yet it also expands planning, information and evaluation obligations whose cumulative effect upon institutional self-government will depend entirely on implementation (Cámara de Diputados del H. Congreso de la Unión, 2021).

Financial Dependence and Budgetary Vulnerability

The financial dimension constitutes the most acute contemporary challenge. Mexican public autonomous universities derive the overwhelming majority of their ordinary income from public subsidies, federal in the case of national institutions such as UNAM, and shared between the federation and the states in the case of public state universities (universidades públicas estatales, UPES). Self-generated income, including fees, services and continuing education, rarely exceeds one fifth of total ordinary income, and tuition in many institutions is symbolic for historical and political reasons (Mendoza Rojas, 2017; OECD, 2019). Figure 2 presents the approximate composition of ordinary income for selected institutions and for the UPES subsystem as a whole.

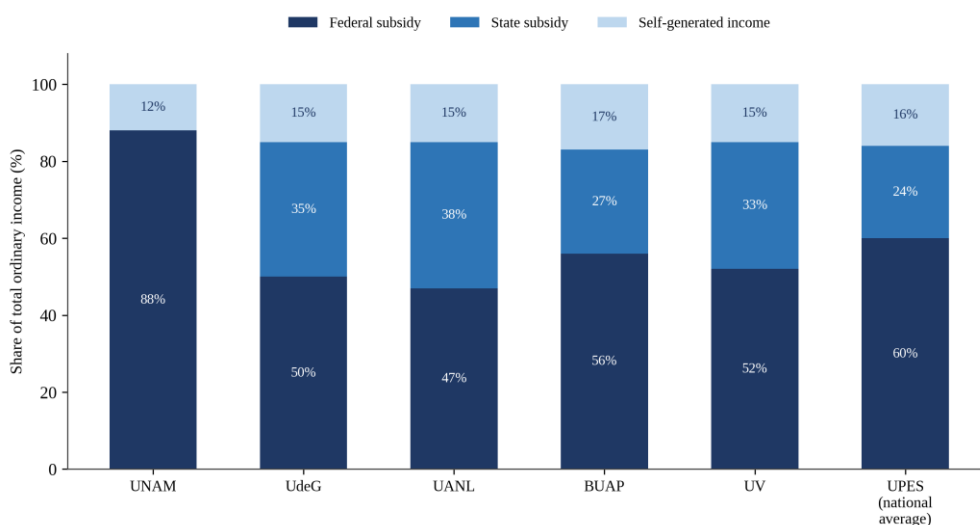


Figure 2. Approximate composition of ordinary income of selected Mexican public universities and of the public state university subsystem (percentage of total ordinary income, circa 2023)

Source: Authors' elaboration with approximate orders of magnitude based on ANUIES (2023), Mendoza Rojas (2017) and federal budgetary documentation. Figures are illustrative and rounded.

Three consequences follow from this structure. First, dependence converts the annual budgetary cycle into a permanent negotiation in which universities possess limited bargaining power, particularly during periods of fiscal austerity. Real-terms stagnation or contraction of subsidies, documented for substantial parts of the past decade, obliges institutions to absorb enrolment growth and cost inflation without commensurate resources (Mendoza Rojas, 2017). Second, the bipartite funding of the UPES creates a characteristic vulnerability: when state governments delay or reduce their agreed contributions, universities face liquidity crises that no internal decision can remedy. Third, structural liabilities, above all pension and retirement regimes negotiated in earlier decades, have pushed a group of state universities into recurrent insolvency episodes, in which the payment of salaries and end-of-year obligations has depended upon extraordinary federal rescues that arrive accompanied by conditions, oversight and political exposure. A financial autonomy that must be rescued annually is, in any meaningful sense, a diminished autonomy.

It is important to state the analytical point with precision. The problem is not public funding itself, which is the appropriate basis for a public university system, but the combination of near-total dependence, annual discretionality and the absence of multi-annual guarantees. Under such conditions, procedural autonomy in Berdahl's (1990) sense erodes silently: institutions adjust their substantive choices, programme openings, research priorities, staffing structures, to the anticipated preferences of funders, without any formal instruction ever being issued.

Table 1. Fields of tension affecting the exercise of university autonomy in Mexico

Field of tension	Principal mechanism	Dimension of autonomy primarily affected
Financial dependence	Annual, discretionary subsidies; bipartite federal–state funding; structural pension liabilities; extraordinary rescues with conditions	Financial autonomy; indirectly, academic and staffing autonomy
Accountability and transparency	Audit observations, transparency obligations and media scrutiny deployed, at times, as instruments of political pressure	Organisational autonomy; institutional legitimacy
Political interference	Reform of organic laws, contested rectoral successions, budgetary retaliation, pressures from state governments	Organisational autonomy; academic freedom
Regulatory expansion	Planning, information and evaluation obligations under the Ley General de Educación Superior (2021) and sectoral programmes	Academic and organisational autonomy, depending on implementation
Security environment	Criminal violence affecting campuses and academic communities; tension between institutional self-government and public security intervention	Organisational autonomy; conditions for academic work

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Governance, Accountability and Transparency

A second field of tension concerns the relationship between autonomy and accountability. The Mexican transparency regime constructed since the early 2000s correctly treats autonomous universities as obligated subjects: they receive public resources and must therefore report on their use, respond to information requests and submit to external audit. The principle is not contested in the scholarship; as Berdahl (1990) argued for the British case, accountability is the legitimate counterpart of public funding, and a mature autonomy presupposes rather than excludes it.

The tension arises from two directions. From within, governance structures inherited from earlier periods, characterised by concentrated rectoral authority, weak external participation in governing boards and limited professionalisation of financial management, have in some institutions produced opacity, clientelism and, in documented episodes, the diversion of public resources through irregular agreements with public entities. Such episodes inflict a double damage: they harm public finances and they erode the social legitimacy upon which the defence of autonomy ultimately rests. From without, accountability instruments are sometimes deployed selectively, with audit findings, transparency litigation or media campaigns intensifying precisely when a university is in political conflict with a government. When oversight becomes contingent upon political alignment, it ceases to function as a guarantee of probity and begins to function as a mechanism of discipline. The analytical conclusion is symmetrical: autonomy without accountability degenerates into corporatism, whilst accountability without autonomy degenerates into control (Acosta Silva, 2009; Ibarra Colado, 2001).

Political Interference, Security and Regulatory Expansion

A third field of tension involves direct political pressure upon institutional self-government. The repertoire is well documented in the Mexican and Latin American literature: legislative modification of organic laws without university consent, intervention in rectoral successions, budgetary retaliation against institutions perceived as adversarial, and public delegitimisation campaigns (Levy, 1980; Ordorika, 2003). Recent years have supplied prominent examples of open conflict between state governments and their public universities over governance and resources, disputes that have reached the federal judiciary and have been resolved, in several instances, through constitutional litigation in defence of university self-government. The persistence of such conflicts a century after 1929 confirms that autonomy in Mexico is not a settled achievement but a permanently contested boundary.

Two further pressures complete the contemporary picture. The first is the security environment: in regions affected by organised criminal violence, universities confront threats to students and staff, extortion attempts and the difficult question of how public security forces may act in relation to campuses without reproducing the historical trauma of occupation. Violence does not target autonomy as a juridical category, but it corrodes the practical conditions, safety, mobility, freedom of expression, under which autonomous academic life is possible (Scholars at Risk, 2023). The second is regulatory expansion. The Ley General de Educación Superior of 2021 reaffirms autonomy textually and establishes obligatory consultation spaces; at the same time, it inserts autonomous universities into a national planning and information system whose instruments, registries, evaluations, programme alignments, could evolve either into a respectful coordination framework or into a dense apparatus of administrative steering. Which trajectory prevails is an empirical question that future research must monitor (Cámara de Diputados del H. Congreso de la Unión, 2021).

A Conceptual Synthesis of Contemporary Challenges

The findings may be integrated into a single conceptual model. At its core stands the constitutional guarantee of Article 3, Section VII, which protects four dimensions of autonomy consistent with the comparative framework: organisational, academic, financial and staffing autonomy (Estermann & Nokkala, 2009; Pruvot & Estermann, 2017). Surrounding this core operate four contemporary pressure fields, budgetary dependence, accountability and transparency demands, political and security interference, and regulatory expansion, each of which acts upon specific dimensions through the mechanisms summarised in Table 1. The model, depicted in Figure 3, emphasises that the challenges are systemic rather than discrete: financial dependence amplifies political leverage, governance weaknesses invite accountability offensives, and regulatory instruments acquire their meaning from the budgetary and political context in which they are applied.

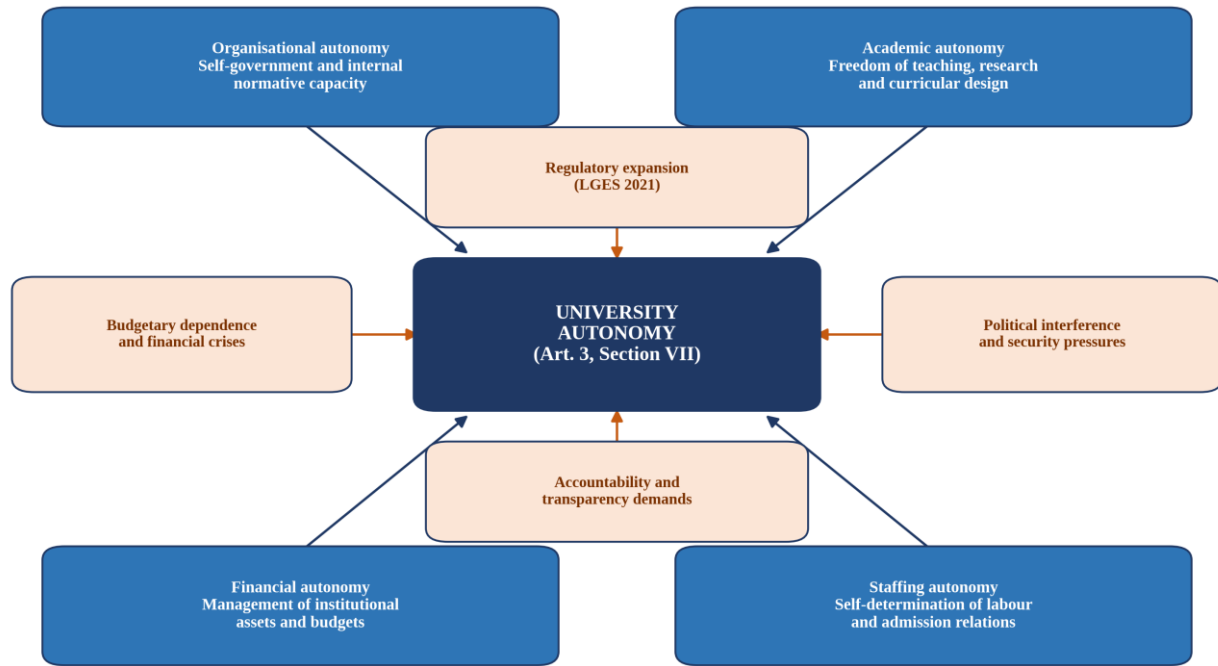


Figure 3. Conceptual model of the dimensions of university autonomy in Mexico and the contemporary pressure fields acting upon them

Source: Authors' elaboration based on the four-dimensional framework of Estermann and Nokkala (2009).

DISCUSSION

The results invite three lines of interpretation. The first concerns the paradox of juridical strength and material fragility. Mexico exhibits what may be termed a constitutionalised autonomy with a discretionary material base: the formal guarantee is among the strongest in comparative perspective, yet the funding model leaves the conditions of its exercise to annual political negotiation. This configuration inverts the pattern observed in several European systems, where formal autonomy is statutory rather than constitutional but is accompanied by multi-annual funding agreements that stabilise procedural autonomy (Pruvot & Estermann, 2017). The Mexican case thus confirms, from an unusual angle, a central proposition of the comparative literature: the effective autonomy of universities is determined less by the solemnity of its legal source than by the architecture of its funding (Estermann & Nokkala, 2009; Neave & van Vught, 1994).

The second line of interpretation concerns the transformation of state steering. Consistent with Kent's (1993) early diagnosis and with subsequent analyses of the evaluative state in Mexico (Ibarra Colado, 2001; Ordorika & Lloyd, 2015), the findings indicate that contemporary constraints upon autonomy operate predominantly through indirect instruments, conditioned funds, evaluation regimes, information obligations, planning alignments, rather than through frontal juridical attack. Berdahl's (1990) distinction proves prescient: substantive autonomy remains formally intact whilst procedural autonomy is progressively reorganised, and through it, substantive choices are reshaped. This does not imply that direct interference has disappeared; the recurrent conflicts between state governments and their universities demonstrate the contrary. It implies, rather, that the defence of autonomy can no longer concentrate solely on repelling visible intrusions, but must extend to the quieter terrain of funding formulas, regulatory design and information systems.

The third line of interpretation concerns the normative reframing that the findings suggest. The traditional Mexican discourse of autonomy is defensive: it conceives the principle as a shield against the state. The analysis presented here indicates that a purely defensive conception has become insufficient, because the principal contemporary threats, insolvent pension regimes, governance opacity, legitimacy erosion, cannot be repelled by

a shield; they must be resolved by institutional reform. The concept of responsible autonomy, implicit in the jurisprudence of the Supreme Court and convergent with the international literature on accountability (Altbach, 2001; Berdahl, 1990), captures this reframing: autonomy is best protected not only by litigation and mobilisation but by demonstrable probity, professional financial management and transparent self-government, which together rebuild the social legitimacy that constitutes the deepest guarantee of institutional independence.

So that this concept may move from principle to practice, it is necessary to operationalise it. Building upon the four-dimensional framework of Estermann and Nokkala (2009) and the scorecard logic of Pruvot and Estermann (2017), responsible autonomy can be rendered measurable through a set of observable indicators organised in three governance pillars. The first pillar, financial sustainability and self-determination, can be assessed through indicators such as the proportion of multi-annual versus annually negotiated funding, the share of own income in total ordinary income, the actuarial coverage ratio of pension liabilities and the frequency of extraordinary rescues over a defined period. The second pillar, governance quality and integrity, can be captured through the existence and powers of external members on governing boards, the degree of professionalisation of financial management, the proactive publication of audited financial statements and the number and resolution of audit observations. The third pillar, accountability and academic self-government, can be measured through the timeliness of responses to transparency requests, the presence of independent internal-control units, and the protection of collegiate decision-making in admissions and programme design. Combined into a composite autonomy maturity model with ordinal levels, these indicators would convert responsible autonomy from a normative aspiration into a diagnostic instrument capable of situating each institution and of guiding targeted reform. Table 2 summarises this operationalisation.

Table 2. Operationalisation of responsible autonomy: governance pillars and illustrative indicators

Governance pillar	Illustrative measurable indicators	Autonomy dimension assessed
Financial sustainability and self-determination	Share of multi-annual vs. annually negotiated funding; proportion of own income in total ordinary income; actuarial coverage ratio of pension liabilities; frequency of extraordinary federal rescues.	Financial autonomy
Governance quality and integrity	Presence and powers of external members on governing boards; degree of professionalisation of financial management; proactive publication of audited financial statements; number and resolution rate of audit observations.	Organisational autonomy
Accountability and academic self-government	Timeliness of responses to transparency requests; existence of independent internal-control units; protection of collegiate decision-making in admissions and programme design.	Academic and organisational autonomy

Source: Authors' elaboration, drawing on the autonomy scorecard logic of Estermann and Nokkala (2009) and Pruvot and Estermann (2017).

Placed in regional perspective, the Mexican case offers lessons for Latin America as a whole. The Córdoba tradition endowed the region with a powerful ideal of the autonomous public university (Tünnermann Bernheim, 2003), but the material conditions of that ideal were never institutionalised with comparable force.

As governments across the region experiment with results-based funding, national evaluation agencies and digital information systems, the Mexican experience suggests that the decisive battlegrounds of twenty-first-century autonomy will be budgetary architecture and regulatory implementation, and that universities which neglect their internal governance will fight those battles from a position of weakness.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article set out to analyse the constitutional configuration of university autonomy in Mexico and the challenges that condition its contemporary exercise. Three conclusions follow from the analysis. First, autonomy in Mexico is the product of a century-long historical construction, from the concession of 1929 to the constitutionalisation of 1980, that endowed public universities with one of the strongest formal guarantees of self-government in comparative perspective; this achievement is real and must not be relativised. Second, the effective exercise of that guarantee is currently constrained by an interconnected system of pressures, near-total financial dependence without multi-annual guarantees, accountability instruments vulnerable to political instrumentalisation, recurrent political interference at the state level, an expanding regulatory framework and, in parts of the country, a security environment hostile to academic life. Third, the adequate response to this configuration is neither nostalgic restoration nor resigned adaptation, but the construction of a responsible autonomy that combines institutional independence with demonstrable probity and professional governance.

Four recommendations follow. For federal and state legislatures, the priority is to provide the material basis of autonomy with juridical stability, through multi-annual funding agreements, objective allocation criteria and a definitive, transparent solution to the structural pension liabilities of public state universities. For governments, the priority is self-restraint: reforms to university organic laws should proceed only with the consent of the university communities concerned, and oversight instruments must be applied uniformly rather than selectively. For universities, the priority is internal reform: professionalised financial management, strengthened collegiate governance, proactive transparency and rigorous internal control are today constitutive elements of the defence of autonomy, not concessions to its adversaries. For the research community, the priority is to subject the framework advanced here to empirical scrutiny and to monitor systematically the implementation of the Ley General de Educación Superior of 2021, whose coordination architecture may evolve towards respectful articulation or towards administrative steering.

Agenda for Future Empirical Research

Because the present study is documentary in nature, its findings should be regarded as a structured set of hypotheses about the configuration of autonomy rather than as the final word, and they define a clear empirical agenda. Three lines of enquiry are particularly pressing. First, the lived experience of autonomy should be investigated through primary qualitative methods: semi-structured interviews with rectors, governing-board members, financial officers and union representatives, complemented by surveys of academic staff and by structured consultation with state and federal policymakers, would reveal how the structural tensions identified here are perceived, negotiated and resisted by the actors who govern universities day to day. Second, the operational framework proposed in the discussion should be tested and refined through a comparative, multiple-case design. Selecting public universities that occupy contrasting positions, for instance a financially robust national institution, a public state university in recurrent fiscal distress and a younger institution in a region marked by political conflict or insecurity, and applying the governance-pillar indicators of Table 2 to each, would make it possible to observe how financial dependence and regulatory pressure actually operate in practice, and how differing levels of effective autonomy correlate with governance arrangements and institutional outcomes. Third, longitudinal monitoring of the implementation of the Ley General de Educación Superior, including the adaptation of autonomy scorecard methodologies to federal Latin American systems, would generate the time-series evidence required to determine whether the new coordination architecture strengthens or erodes institutional self-government. Together, these studies would convert the analytical map offered here into a cumulative, evidence-based programme of research on state–university relations.

A century after the strike of 1929, the question that animated it remains open in a new form. The university won the right to govern itself; the unfinished task of the Mexican state and of the universities themselves is to construct the financial, regulatory and ethical conditions under which that right can be exercised in full. Upon that construction depends not only the institutional fate of the public university, but a substantial part of the country's capacity to produce knowledge, form citizens and imagine its own future.

Ethical Considerations

This study is based exclusively on the analysis of publicly available documents, legislation and published scholarship. It did not involve human participants, personal data or animals; consequently, ethical approval was not required.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest in relation to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

Data Availability Statement

All sources analysed in this study are publicly available. Primary legislation may be consulted in the Diario Oficial de la Federación (www.dof.gob.mx); statistical information may be consulted in the ANUIES statistical yearbooks (www.anuies.mx). No new datasets were generated.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors thank their respective institutions, Universidad Panamericana and Universidad de Guadalajara, for the academic environment that made this research possible. Any errors remain the sole responsibility of the authors.

REFERENCES

1. Acosta Silva, A. (2009). *Príncipes, burócratas y gerentes: El gobierno de las universidades públicas en México*. Asociación Nacional de Universidades e Instituciones de Educación Superior (ANUIES).
2. Altbach, P. G. (2001). Academic freedom: International realities and challenges. *Higher Education*, 41(1–2), 205–219.
3. Asociación Nacional de Universidades e Instituciones de Educación Superior. (2023). *Anuario estadístico de la educación superior 2022–2023*. ANUIES. <https://www.anuies.mx>
4. Berdahl, R. (1990). Academic freedom, autonomy and accountability in British universities. *Studies in Higher Education*, 15(2), 169–180.
5. Cámara de Diputados del H. Congreso de la Unión. (2021, 20 de abril). Ley General de Educación Superior. *Diario Oficial de la Federación*. <https://www.diputados.gob.mx/LeyesBiblio/ref/lges.htm>
6. Clark, B. R. (1983). *The higher education system: Academic organization in cross-national perspective*. University of California Press.
7. Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos. (1917, con reformas). Artículo 3.º, fracción VII. *Diario Oficial de la Federación*. <https://www.diputados.gob.mx/LeyesBiblio/ref/cpeum.htm>
8. Diario Oficial de la Federación. (1980, 9 de junio). Decreto por el que se adiciona una fracción al artículo 3.º de la Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos en materia de autonomía universitaria. Secretaría de Gobernación.
9. Estermann, T., & Nokkala, T. (2009). *University autonomy in Europe I: Exploratory study*. European University Association.
10. Ibarra Colado, E. (2001). *La universidad en México hoy: Gubernamentalidad y modernización*. Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.
11. Kent, R. (1993). Higher education in Mexico: From unregulated expansion to evaluation. *Higher Education*, 25(1), 73–83.
12. Levy, D. C. (1980). *University and government in Mexico: Autonomy in an authoritarian system*. Praeger.
13. Marsiske, R. (2010). La autonomía universitaria: Una visión histórica y latinoamericana. *Perfiles Educativos*, 32(número especial), 9–26.
14. Mendoza Rojas, J. (2017). Financiamiento de la educación superior en la primera mitad del gobierno de Enrique Peña Nieto: ¿Fin del periodo de expansión? *Perfiles Educativos*, 39(156), 119–140.

15. Neave, G., & van Vught, F. A. (Eds.). (1994). *Government and higher education relationships across three continents: The winds of change*. Pergamon Press.
16. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2019). *Higher education in Mexico: Labour market relevance and outcomes*. OECD Publishing.
17. Ordorika, I. (2003). *Power and politics in university governance: Organization and change at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*. RoutledgeFalmer.
18. Ordorika, I., & Lloyd, M. (2015). International rankings and the contest for university hegemony. *Journal of Education Policy*, 30(3), 385–405.
19. Pruvot, E. B., & Estermann, T. (2017). *University autonomy in Europe III: The scorecard 2017*. European University Association.
20. Scholars at Risk. (2023). *Free to think 2023: Report of the Scholars at Risk academic freedom monitoring project*. Scholars at Risk Network. <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org>
21. Silva Herzog, J. (1974). *Una historia de la Universidad de México y sus problemas*. Siglo XXI Editores.
22. Tünnermann Bernheim, C. (2003). *La universidad latinoamericana ante los retos del siglo XXI*. Unión de Universidades de América Latina (UDUAL).