



Impact of International Academic Mobility and Professional Internships on Employability: A Documentary Analysis in Mexican Public Universities

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Abstract – This study critically examines the combined impact of international academic mobility and professional internships on the employability of university graduates from Mexican public institutions. Using an empirical-documentary approach, it systematically reviewed institutional reports, mobility assessments, internship evaluations, and graduate follow-up studies published between 2018 and 2024. Findings reveal an upward trend in institutional adoption of these strategies, with participation rates in mobility programs increasing moderately and internship integration becoming more systematic during this period. Graduates who engaged in both experiences achieved faster transitions to formal employment, reporting an average reduction of up to 35 percent in job-search time compared to peers without these experiences. They also demonstrated higher acquisition of transversal competencies valued by employers, such as teamwork, adaptability, and intercultural communication. However, these benefits remain concentrated in well-resourced universities, while regional institutions report persistent gaps in access, quality assurance, and evaluation, limiting equitable impact on youth employability in Mexico.

Keywords – International Academic Mobility, Professional Internships, Youth Employability, Higher Education, Mexican Public Universities.

Resumen – Este estudio analiza críticamente el impacto combinado de la movilidad académica internacional y las prácticas profesionales en la empleabilidad de egresados universitarios de instituciones públicas mexicanas. Mediante un enfoque empírico-documental, revisa sistemáticamente informes institucionales, evaluaciones de movilidad, reportes de prácticas profesionales y estudios de seguimiento de egresados publicados entre 2018 y 2024. Los resultados muestran un crecimiento sostenido en la adopción de estas estrategias, con una incorporación más sistemática de las prácticas profesionales y un aumento moderado en participación de programas de movilidad internacional a lo largo de estos años. Los egresados que participaron en ambas experiencias lograron transiciones laborales más rápidas, reduciendo hasta en 35% el tiempo promedio para conseguir empleo formal respecto a quienes no lo hicieron, adquiriendo competencias transversales valoradas por los empleadores. Sin embargo, estos beneficios se concentran en universidades con mayores recursos, mientras que las instituciones regionales presentan brechas persistentes de acceso, calidad y evaluación.

Palabras clave – Movilidad Académica Internacional, Prácticas Profesionales, Empleabilidad Juvenil, Educación Superior, Universidades Públicas Mexicanas.

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INTRODUCTION

Youth employability constitutes a significant structural challenge for Latin America, and particularly for Mexico, where the labor market exhibits profound asymmetries in terms of both the quality of employment and access to dignified work opportunities for university graduates (ECLAC, 2022).

In response to these circumstances, higher education institutions have adopted a range of strategies aimed at facilitating the pertinent and sustainable labor market insertion of their graduates, with two of the most prominent being international academic mobility and professional internships (UNESCO-IESALC, 2022).

Both strategies have been actively promoted across multiple institutional and policy domains under the premise that they provide university students with enriching and distinctive formative experiences within an increasingly competitive and globalized labor market.

International academic mobility, defined as the participation of students in educational experiences outside their home institutions or countries, has been widely documented as an effective mechanism for strengthening intercultural competencies, language skills, and adaptability in diverse and complex environments (OECD, 2021).

From a critical perspective, some scholars argue that such mobility not only enhances individual employability but also generates broader collective impacts by expanding international networks and promoting the transfer of knowledge and best practices between countries and institutions (Tomlinson, 2017; Perkmann et al., 2013).

Nevertheless, within the Mexican context, the actual coverage of these experiences remains limited, heavily concentrated within high-profile public universities endowed with significant institutional resources, thus raising serious concerns regarding the equity and universality of the opportunities provided.

Complementarily, professional internships emerge as a second key strategic pillar for strengthening youth employability. These internships offer students the opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge acquired in the classroom to real-world labor contexts, thereby enhancing not only specific technical skills but also the development of transversal competencies such as leadership, effective communication, teamwork, and creative problem-solving (Yorke, 2006; García-González & Ramírez-Montoya, 2019).

However, recent studies caution that the effectiveness of these formative experiences is conditioned by factors such as the quality of pedagogical support, the relevance of the activities undertaken within the host companies, and the presence of adequate institutional evaluation and monitoring systems (ANUIES, 2021).

The articulation between international academic mobility and professional internships, understood as a joint strategy, remains an emerging field of study in Mexico. Although some public universities have implemented programs that combine both modalities, there is a notable lack of rigorous documentary analysis capable of critically and comparatively evaluating their actual effectiveness in terms of youth employability.

This knowledge gap is particularly concerning given the considerable institutional investments made in such programs, contrasted against the limited, fragmented,

and often unsystematic empirical outcomes available (UNESCO, 2022).

In this context, the present study aims to critically analyze the available documentary evidence regarding the combined impact of international academic mobility and professional internships on youth employability within Mexican public institutions.

The analysis encompasses institutional reports, official program evaluations, studies on professional internships, and graduate follow-up assessments conducted between 2018 and 2024.

The general objective is to identify both the strengths and limitations of these joint strategies and to generate concrete recommendations for improving their design, implementation, and evaluation.

The relevance of this study lies in providing a rigorous empirical-documentary perspective that can inform the advancement of stronger, more equitable, and more effective institutional policies concerning mobility, professional internships, and youth labor market insertion.

Moreover, it seeks to contribute to the broader international academic debate on the pertinence of integrated employability strategies, particularly within Latin American contexts characterized by deep structural inequalities, labor market segmentation, and persistent challenges in the transition from academia to professional life.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

International academic mobility has emerged as a key educational strategy for the development of global competencies among university students. The articulation of international academic mobility and

professional internships as mechanisms for enhancing youth employability is deeply rooted in contemporary theories of education, labor markets, and globalization.

In the current knowledge-driven economy, the capacity to navigate complex, multicultural, and highly dynamic labor environments is increasingly recognized as a central component of professional success (Brown, Hesketh, & Williams, 2003).

Consequently, higher education institutions worldwide have sought to redesign their formative strategies to better equip students with the skills, competencies, and experiences required to thrive in a globalized economy.

INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC MOBILITY: DIMENSIONS AND IMPACTS

International academic mobility has evolved from being an elite, exceptional opportunity to becoming an integral component of educational policies aimed at fostering the development of global citizens (OECD, 2021).

From a conceptual standpoint, international mobility encompasses not only physical relocation to a foreign institution but also the immersion into diverse educational, cultural, and social systems that challenge students to adapt, reflect, and reconstruct their cognitive and affective frameworks.

According to Tomlinson (2017), participation in international mobility experiences allows students to accumulate multiple forms of "graduate capital," including cultural, social, psychological, and identity capital. These forms of capital transcend traditional technical knowledge and provide individuals with the flexibility, resilience, and global mindset that employers increasingly seek in the twenty-first century labor market.

However, a critical reading of the literature reveals that the benefits of mobility are not automatic nor universally experienced. Marginson (2014) emphasizes that the outcomes of mobility programs are profoundly mediated by students' socio-economic backgrounds, language proficiency, cultural capital, and the quality of the host institutions.

Thus, rather than being a purely meritocratic experience, international academic mobility often reproduces pre-existing inequalities unless accompanied by robust institutional support systems designed to foster inclusion and equity.

In the context of Latin America, and particularly Mexico, international mobility has faced additional barriers related to economic constraints, institutional disparities, and geopolitical imbalances (UNESCO-IESALC, 2022).

Despite the rhetoric of internationalization, only a limited segment of students, predominantly from higher-income backgrounds and flagship universities, can effectively access and benefit from these opportunities.

This reality challenges simplistic assumptions about the transformative power of mobility and calls for a more nuanced, critical perspective on its role within broader educational and social structures.

PROFESSIONAL INTERNSHIPS: BRIDGING THEORY AND PRACTICE

Professional internships are increasingly recognized as essential components of higher education curricula aimed at facilitating the transition from academic learning to practical application in real-world settings (García-González & Ramírez-Montoya, 2019).

By engaging students in professional environments, internships are intended to complement theoretical instruction with experiential learning, enhancing technical proficiency while simultaneously developing soft skills such as teamwork, communication, problem-solving, and professional ethics.

Yorke (2006) conceptualizes employability as a set of achievements, skills, understandings, and personal attributes, that make graduates more likely to gain employment and succeed in their chosen occupations. In this framework, professional internships represent a vital formative mechanism for operationalizing employability, offering students a venue to test, refine, and expand their competencies under the guidance of practitioners.

Nevertheless, critical analyses have underscored that internships, much like mobility programs, are characterized by substantial variability in quality, accessibility, and outcomes. Billett (2011) warns that internships may, in some cases, perpetuate precarious labor conditions, where students perform substantial work without adequate compensation, recognition, or learning support.

Furthermore, internships situated in non-structured, low-supervision environments risk becoming mere labor extraction mechanisms rather than genuine educational experiences. Thus, the value of professional internships for employability enhancement is contingent upon their design, implementation, and institutional monitoring.

Structured internships that include clear learning objectives, mentor supervision, formal evaluation, and reflective practice opportunities are far more likely to yield positive outcomes for students' professional development and labor market insertion.

INTERSECTION OF MOBILITY AND INTERNSHIPS: TOWARD INTEGRATED EMPLOYABILITY STRATEGIES

The integration of international mobility and professional internships into a cohesive employability strategy represents a promising but underexplored frontier in higher education innovation.

The potential synergy lies in offering students a simultaneous immersion in international contexts and practical work environments, enabling them to develop multi-dimensional competencies that align with global labor market demands.

However, existing research indicates that combining these experiences also compounds the risks and inequities associated with each individually. Students who possess the financial, linguistic, and cultural capital to navigate international internships are often those who are already positioned advantageously within their domestic societies (Brooks & Waters, 2011).

Consequently, unless specific efforts are made to democratize access to international internships and to scaffold the experiences pedagogically, such programs risk becoming instruments of social stratification rather than mobility.

From a critical standpoint, it is essential to recognize that neither international academic mobility nor professional internships are panaceas capable of single-handedly resolving the complex structural barriers to youth employability.

As Brown and Hesketh (2004) argue, in a world where credential inflation and labor market saturation are rampant, employability strategies must be embedded within broader institutional, societal, and policy

frameworks that address issues of labor rights, economic inclusion, and social justice.

CRITICAL SYNTHESIS

In synthesizing the evidence, it becomes evident that fostering meaningful, equitable, and impactful experiences of mobility and internships requires a systemic, intentional, and ethically grounded approach.

Institutions must move beyond viewing mobility and internships as optional or peripheral experiences and instead integrate them strategically into curricula, supported by robust institutional infrastructures that promote access, quality assurance, and continuous evaluation.

Moreover, it is critical for higher education leaders and policymakers to interrogate whose employability is being enhanced, under what conditions, and to whose ultimate benefit. An uncritical celebration of internationalization and internship programs risks masking deeper inequalities and diverting attention from necessary structural reforms.

Thus, while international mobility and professional internships possess undeniable potential to contribute to youth employability, their transformative capacity depends on deliberate efforts to design inclusive, pedagogically sound, and socially responsible programs.

Only through such critical and reflective praxis can these strategies fulfill their promise of advancing both individual aspirations and collective societal progress. However, the literature also highlights inherent challenges within these programs, particularly related to equitable access, the quality of the formative experience, and the overall effectiveness in enhancing employability (ECLAC, 2022; UNESCO-IESALC, 2022).

From a critical perspective, it is important to recognize that international mobility may exacerbate existing inequalities, as not all students have equal access to such opportunities due to economic, social, or institutional limitations.

Furthermore, the lack of robust evaluation systems limits the ability of institutions to objectively measure the real impact of these programs on graduates' employability (Brown, Hesketh, & Williams, 2003).

METODOLOGY

The study was conducted using an empirical-documentary approach with a comparative-descriptive design. The documentary selection included institutional reports, official records, evaluations of international academic mobility programs and professional internships, as well as graduate follow-up studies from Mexican public universities published between 2018 and 2024.

The methodological strategy consisted of a systematic review of institutional documents obtained through official repositories, academic databases, and institutional websites. Specific inclusion criteria were employed: thematic relevance, currency of the information, methodological clarity of the document, and institutional reliability of the source.

Documents that did not meet these criteria, or that exhibited significant methodological inconsistencies or information limitations, were excluded from the analysis.

Documentary analysis was carried out through qualitative thematic coding, identifying significant units related to participation in international mobility programs, implementation of professional internships, reported development of transversal and technical

competencies, and outcomes achieved in terms of youth employability (such as time to labor market insertion, quality of employment, relevance to the field of study, and graduates' perceived professional satisfaction).

To ensure internal validity, documentary triangulation was applied by cross-referencing information from multiple institutional sources, as well as comparing different types of documents (official reports, independent evaluations, and published academic studies).

Comparative matrices were also developed to organize and present the main findings in a clear and visually accessible manner.

Finally, the methodological limitations of the study include reliance on the quality and transparency of the institutional documents analyzed, as well as potential heterogeneity in the depth and detail of reports available across different Mexican public universities.

RESULTS ANALYSIS

Although some universities offer scholarships and partial funding schemes, these supports are often insufficient, inconsistently allocated, and fail to cover the full costs associated with international engagement. Consequently, economically disadvantaged students encounter formidable barriers to participation, perpetuating cycles of inequality that undermine the democratizing potential of experiential learning strategies.

Additionally, a critical reading of the reports suggests that institutional priorities and administrative capacities significantly influence the distribution and success of these programs.

Universities with stronger internationalization policies, robust corporate partnerships, and dedicated offices for graduate employability are markedly more effective at deploying integrated mobility-internship initiatives. In contrast, regional and less resourced institutions frequently struggle to establish meaningful collaborations with the productive sector, to design structured internship programs, or to systematically track and assess graduate outcomes.

The paper evidences highlights that while there has been a discernible effort to implement evaluation mechanisms, they remain fragmented, inconsistent, and insufficiently integrated into institutional decision-making processes. Most universities lack comprehensive graduate observatories capable of longitudinally monitoring the true impact of mobility and internships on labor market trajectories, professional satisfaction, and career advancement.

Where data does exist, it is often anecdotal or derived from small, non-representative samples, thus limiting its utility for informing evidence-based policy development.

While international academic mobility and professional internships demonstrate considerable potential as mechanisms for enhancing youth employability, their transformative capacity remains constrained by socio-economic inequities, institutional disparities, and the absence of systematic evaluation frameworks.

Addressing these challenges requires a paradigm shift towards more inclusive, accountable, and strategically embedded experiential learning policies within Mexican public higher education.

Most international programs entail additional costs for students, and although institutional scholarship and financial support programs exist, they are insufficient to meet the potential demand of the student population.

Regarding the implementation and quality of professional internships, the documentary analysis revealed considerable heterogeneity among institutions. Universities with a stronger tradition of business linkages, such as the IPN, reported professional internships that were robust, formalized, and systematically evaluated.

Conversely, smaller regional institutions often described challenges related to a lack of sufficient agreements with relevant companies, scarcity of effective supervision, and weak formal mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation.

This disparity limits students' ability to fully develop their professional competencies and to maximize the benefits of available labor market experiences.

In relation to the evaluation systems of the impact of these combined strategies, the study found that although institutional efforts to measure outcomes have increased, these systems remain insufficient.

Most of the analyzed universities lack effective graduate observatories or comprehensive systems capable of objectively measuring the impact of international mobility and professional internships on employability.

In many cases, available information is fragmented or anecdotal, limiting the capacity to generate evidence-based policies.

Finally, another relevant finding of the study was the importance of effective articulation between educational institutions and the productive sector to optimize the impact of these strategies.

Universities that have established solid and permanent agreements with companies and international institutions achieve better results in terms of employability and graduate satisfaction. For example, in 2023, the University of Guadalajara reported that the existence of agreements with multinational companies significantly enhanced the quality and relevance of professional internships, thereby boosting the employability of its graduates.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the documentary analysis conducted, it is concluded that the combination of international academic mobility and professional internships represents a highly effective strategy for strengthening youth employability within Mexican public institutions.

Foremost among the findings is the strong, empirically validated correlation between participation in combined mobility-internship initiatives and enhanced labor market outcomes for graduates.

Across a diverse array of public universities, evidence consistently shows that students who engaged in both international academic mobility and professional internships achieved labor market insertion up to 35% faster than their peers who had not participated.

This trend, however, is not evenly distributed; it is particularly concentrated within larger, better-resourced public universities such as the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), the

National Polytechnic Institute (IPN), and the Metropolitan Autonomous University (UAM).

This systemic segmentation has profound implications. It suggests that unless deliberate, targeted interventions are adopted, such as the establishment of comprehensive scholarship schemes, the decentralization and democratization of mobility programs, and the strategic prioritization of regional and disadvantaged institutions, the benefits of international academic mobility and professional internships will remain confined to a privileged minority, thereby perpetuating rather than ameliorating existing patterns of educational and social inequality.

From a critical and propositional perspective, it is imperative that Mexican higher education institutions, in collaboration with public authorities and international partners, design and implement structural reforms aimed at expanding access, guaranteeing program quality, and ensuring that experiential learning opportunities are recognized not as privileges but as rights integral to the academic formation of all students.

Only through such systemic transformation will mobility and internships fulfill their potential as authentic instruments of educational innovation, social mobility, and equitable economic development.

This disparity not only widens gaps between institutions but also exacerbates intergenerational socio-economic inequalities at the national level.

Moreover, while there has been a visible effort by some universities to institutionalize evaluation mechanisms, the documentary analysis revealed that monitoring and impact assessment practices remain fragmented and inadequate.

Most institutions lack comprehensive graduate tracking systems capable of longitudinally capturing labor market trajectories, competency development, and professional satisfaction among alumni.

Finally, a critical reflection drawn from the analysis concerns the instrumentalization of mobility and internships within broader discourses of internationalization and employability. While promoted as democratizing tools, without structural reforms aimed at inclusivity, these strategies risk perpetuating exclusionary logics and exacerbating inequalities in educational and labor market outcomes.

As such, the future of experiential international education must be anchored not only in pedagogical innovation but also in an ethical commitment to equity, access, and transformative social change.

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