

The First 100 Years Of the National University

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The National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) is commemorating its first 100 years as a national institution of higher education. Over this century, it has built and consolidated itself on a voyage of achievements, complications, and conflicts as the cultural institution of greatest importance to the nation's development; as an unquestion-

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Gaceta UNAM

- **1929**
The university acquires its definitive name: the National Autonomous University of Mexico.
- **1933**
Manuel Gómez Morín crafts the document outlining the university's legal organization, approved by the University Council, defining the significance and scope of its autonomy, as well as relations between the university and the state.
- **1937**
University Radio begins broadcasting as a space for national culture. Its first director is Alejandro Gómez Arias.
- **1939-1940**



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After the end of the Spanish Civil War, a flood of Spanish exiles streams into Mexico. Among them are outstanding intellectuals who contribute to our country's cultural enrichment. The so-called "teachers of Spanish exile" become permanent members of the different institutions of higher education and research, and one of the great beneficiaries of this is the UNAM.

- **1946**
On April 6, the *Official Gazette* publishes the Law on the Foundation and Construction of University City. In September the gazette publishes the decree



Justo Sierra.

able cultural reference point for Mexicans and foreigners alike: a pluralist, critical, generous space.

It was thanks to the efforts of Justo Sierra, who since the 1880s had been putting forward the importance of creating a national university, that on May 26, 1910, the Charter of the National University of Mexico was passed, and on September 22 of that same year it was inaugurated against the backdrop of the celebrations for the Centennial of Independence.

As Minister of Public Education and Fine Arts Don Justo Sierra said in his speech at the ceremony, the National University was established to respond to the nation's scientific needs; to understand the origins and characteristics of the extensive, varied territory of Mexico, together with its complex population. To succeed in this endeavor, the intellectual energy of the country would be brought together to crown the great pyramid of national education. As a modern, secular body it would be responsible for training the intellectual elite, yet the benefits of its undertaking would have to extend to the whole population, like the water from a spring that "flows down to irrigate the plants germinating across our native land." Thus, it would serve all with the formation of good professionals, fostering peace, health, wealth, and civility.

The institution began its educational endeavors with six national schools:¹ a Preparatory School, Jurisprudence, Medicine, Engineering, Fine Arts—insofar as this covers architecture—and Advanced Studies.² Enrollment was not even 2 000; the buildings were in what is now known as Mexico City's historic downtown, and the first rector was Don Joaquín Eguía Lis.

Less than two months after the inauguration, the Mexican Revolution broke out. The university, created under the government of Porfirio Díaz, was not well-liked by the revolutionaries; nonetheless, and, amidst financial, political and

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1910 coat of arms.

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Today's coat of arms.

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logistical difficulties, academic work was to carry on for the duration of the armed struggle.

The following years bear the influence of José Vasconcelos, first from mid-1920 to mid-1921 as rector,³ and later as the first head of the newly-created Ministry of Public Education, the centralized institution for the development of education in Mexico.

The idea of university extramural education, as promoted by Vasconcelos, was retained and grew in subsequent years, showing the importance the institution acquired for the country. The National University participated in the literacy campaigns, in the provision of free health care and legal services, and in mapping and cleaning up the capital in the first years after the revolution.

Gradually, over its first few decades, the university created and incorporated several new academic bodies, such as the Nursing School and the National Schools of Dentistry and Industrial Chemistry, while it increased the number of high schools under its direction. In 1924 the National School of Advanced Studies became the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters. Besides rectors Joaquín Eguía Lis and José Vasconcelos, mentioned above, the institution had also been led by Ezequiel A. Chávez (twice), Valentín Gama y Cruz, José Na-

Justo Sierra Méndez (1848-1912)

Writer, poet, historian, journalist, and politician. As a federal deputy, he presented a bill, passed in 1881, establishing mandatory primary education and founding the National University of Mexico, although it was not until 1910 that it was actually formally created. In his inaugural speech, Sierra told the university community, "You are a group that is constantly being culled from society, and you have in your charge the achievement of a political and social ideal that can be summed up as democracy and liberty."

tividad Macías, Balbino Dávalos, Alfonso Pruneda, Antonio Caso Andrade, and Antonio Castro Leal, plus Mariano Silva y Aceves as interim rector.

GAINING AUTONOMY

The year 1929 was crucial for the university, which already boasted about 9 000 students, when the government of President Emilio Portes Gil drew up a new University Charter granting it limited autonomy, which came into effect on July

expropriating the land in Mexico City's southern neighborhood Pedregal de San Ángel, where University City would later be built.

▪ **1949**



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The Union of Universities of Latin America is created. UNAM enrollment totals a little over 23 000 students.

▪ **1950**

The cornerstone is laid for the School of Science, the first building of University City.

▪ **1954**



University City is formally handed over to the university. The *UNAM Gazette* begins publication thanks to the initiative of Henrique González Casanova.

▪ **1955**

New high school campuses and the new schools in University City bring enrollment up to over 36 000 students.

▪ **1956**

The dramatized poetry recital program "Poetry Aloud" begins, with the participation of Octavio Paz, Juan José Arreola, Antonio Alatorre, and Margit Frensdorff, among others, reading their own poetry.



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Old School of Medicine.



National Observatory.

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José Vasconcelos Calderón (1882-1959)

A graduate of the School of Jurisprudence, he was also a writer, philosopher, and politician, but above all, an untiring promoter of education in Mexico. From 1920 to 1921, he was rector of the university and the creator of its motto, "The spirit shall speak for my race," and its coat of arms. Among other initiatives, he reincorporated the National Preparatory School into the university and wrote the project creating the Ministry of Public Education, which he later headed up, making important strides forward in literacy by setting up traveling libraries and organizing the mass publication of classics from philosophy and literature.

10 that year. Ignacio García Téllez was designated as the new head of the university.

Along with training high school and university graduates,⁴ the new law sought to stimulate the institution's research and cultural dissemination functions, with the incorporation of the National Geology Institute, the Biology Institute, the El Chopo Museum, the House on the Lake cultural center, the National Observatory, and the National Library.

In 1933, President Abelardo L. Rodríguez decided to grant full autonomy to the institution with a new law for its operation that awarded it exclusive and absolute responsibility for its own orientation, and its own financial resources, while depriving it of its national status. It should be pointed out that the university never accepted this last aspect of the regulatory text. Manuel Gómez Morín, appointed rector under this

printing office and radio were established. Meanwhile community service activities were fostered, such as legal consultations, analyses of soil conditions and water quality, dental and medical care, veterinary attention, and so on.

This was also the period when several notable Spanish intellectuals, refugees from the Civil War, joined the university. With their training in philosophy, literature, history, anthropology, and politics, their work and teaching undoubtedly made a major contribution to the university and to Mexico.

In January 1945, during the presidency of Manuel Ávila Camacho, the charter still in effect today was passed, consolidating its public, national, and autonomous character.⁵ This date marked the beginning of an unprecedented development process, in which higher education in general and

new regime, set about a major regulatory and fund-raising effort.

In these difficult circumstances Gómez Morín was followed by Rectors Fernando Ocaranza, Luis Chico Goerne, Gustavo Baz, and Mario de la Cueva (interim), during whose terms in office the university continued operating. In the 1930s the School of Science was created along with institutes and centers for research in the humanities and sciences.

New publications appeared, including the *Revista de la Universidad de México* (University of Mexico Magazine) and the *Anales del Instituto de Biología* (Annals of the Biology Institute), and the university



Manuel Gómez Morín.

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Radio UNAM.

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José Vasconcelos.

the UNAM in particular would play a leading role in shaping urban growth, modernizing production facilities, expanding the middle class and cultural offerings, among other matters of national interest.

By these years the university boasted two faculties and 13 national schools,⁶ attended by over 22 000 students, in addition to the 12 institutes,⁷ the National Observatory, and the National Library. A renewed impetus came from the creation of what are still the Coordinating Offices for Research in the Sciences and Humanities. A new era was beginning for the university, which had been assigned a leading role in a Mexico with new horizons for growth.

THE CREATION OF UNIVERSITY CITY

The growth of the student body, of its academic staff, and its functions and departments meant that a point came when the university required facilities with greater capacity than those it occupied in the so-called “university neighborhood” in downtown Mexico City. In 1943 Rector Rodolfo Brito Foucher began the process of acquiring lands in the Pedregal de San



Ceremony to lay the cornerstone of the Science Tower.

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1958



The UNAM acquires the IBM 650 computer, the first in the UNAM, Mexico, and Latin America, and installs it in the School of Science.

1960

The Center for Literary Studies, the UNAM Film Archives, and the Health Center are founded.

1961

Enrollment grows exponentially to almost 67 000 students.

1966

The new General Exam Regulations are approved, giving students from university high schools and the National Preparatory School automatic admittance to college-level studies.

1968



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Conflicts begin that are the starting point of the student movement made up of UNAM and National Polytechnic Institute (IPN) students against the repressive administration of President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz. Starting July 1, police and army constantly harass



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The construction of University City.

University City's design and construction was the work of Mexican engineers, architects, and visual artists, an outstanding example of the consolidation of modern national architecture.



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Ángel neighborhood for the site of University City. In 1945, President Manuel Ávila Camacho introduced a bill for the Law for the Foundation and Construction of University City, approved by Congress and passed into law in April 1946.

On March 10, 1948, the preparatory drainage, leveling, and bridging work began. One year later, Carlos Lazo was named general manager of works, and by June 5, 1950, the cornerstone of the Science Tower had already been laid, symbolizing the start of construction of University City. In November 1952, Miguel Áleman, Mexico's first civilian president and an UNAM alumnus, attended the dedication ceremony for University City, and finally, in March 1954, President Ruiz Cortines led the first opening of courses in the university's new home. Enrollment exceeded 33 000 students.

The work had cost Mex\$150 million and lasted 28 months, thanks to the efforts of 150 architects and engineers, over

10 000 workers, and the university administrative personnel and authorities, particularly Rectors Salvador Zubirán, Luis Garrido, and Nabor Carrillo.

University City's design and construction was the work of Mexican engineers, architects, and visual artists. It constitutes an outstanding example of the consolidation of modern and national architecture, reminiscent of pre-Hispanic buildings. It combines great beauty and functionality with works of visual art.

University City's large scale made a significant impact on the country. On the one hand, it helped develop national industry, which would see a 6 percent growth over the following two decades, and supported the expansion of companies or increased their productive capacity. On the other, it also

had a significant influence on the city's growth, in extending the public transport system, and on tourism, to say the least.

University City is a symbol of those days of modernization and industrialization, as well as a turning point in the history of the UNAM and in higher education in Mexico.

EXPANSION AND INCREASING COMPLEXITY

In 1954, with University City in full swing, the UNAM began a period of stabilization and growth. Over the 1950s and 1960s enrollment soared, apace with the professional schools, research, and cultural dissemination. In 1955 the UNAM catered to over 37 000 students; by 1960, this figure had reached almost 60 000.

So, the expansion of National Preparatory School campuses continued until there were nine, and it increased to a three-year course. Meanwhile, the National School of Political and Social Sciences was created, together with new research institutes and extension centers, such as the Center for Electronic Calculation, which boasted the country's first computer, to mention but a few.

In 1968 a student movement emerged questioning the federal government's authoritarianism, and in which the UNAM community played a leading role. Then-Rector Javier Barros Sierra supported the students and led one of the most important marches. University City was occupied by the army, and the movement was brutally repressed on October 2 in the capital's Tlatelolco area. Nevertheless, 1968 was a wa-



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In the 1960s and 1970s the University established itself as a space for critical thinking and imagination.

the students. On August 1, Rector Javier Barros Sierra makes a famous speech defending university autonomy, saying, "We need to show the people of Mexico that we are a responsible community, that we deserve autonomy, but not only will we defend that; we will also defend the demand for the freedom of our imprisoned brothers and sisters (and) the halt of the repression."



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The National Strike Committee is created. The student movement puts forward six points on its list of demands, among them: freedom for political prisoners and the repeal of Articles 145 and 145b of the Criminal Code that stipulate the punishment for acts contributing to the disintegration of society. The media propagates the false idea that the student movement's objective is to sabotage the Olympic Games slated for inauguration in October in the University Stadium.

On September 13 the "March of Silence" takes place, headed by Rector Barros Sierra, an example of the student movement's civic responsibility. On September 18, the army occupies University City for 12 days.



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tershed in the country's political development, since it conquered once and for all a space for critical thinking and the imagination.

In the 1970s, the university not only grew, but diversified and became more complex. It started the decade with a little over 100 000 students and ended it with more than 280 000. The Science and Humanities High Schools (CCH) and the Open University System (SUA) were created. Later, the Na-

tional Schools of Professional Studies (ENEP) were founded—in Cuautitlán, Acatlán, Iztacala, Aragón, and Zaragoza—broadening the range of educational opportunities and the existing capabilities with a multi-disciplinary organization, associated with the northern and eastern sectors of the Mexico City metropolitan area. The Science Research City was also built, new majors were opened, the graduate schools grew, the National School of Social Work was founded, and the University Cultural Center was built.

The 1980s and 1990s were marked by rapid changes in international conditions. Mexico faced a series of financial crises, and the government reduced funding to social programs, in particular to higher education.

Nonetheless, the University, with its unrelenting spirit, grew and strengthened the development of its core functions. Thus the Humanities Research City was built, the campus ecological reserve was created, and new academic facilities were opened in other states around the country.

The beginning of the third millennium saw great efforts to bolster the university's academic functions, of note among which are the creation, updating, greater flexibility, and accreditation of study plans; broadening out of mechanisms for and of student mobility; and a decisive push for graduate studies and open and distance learning, backed up by the expansion of technological capacity.

The institution's solidity and the university community's commitment have meant that, from the second half of the current decade, the National University has been positioned as the best in Latin America in the international rankings that rate its academic level, Internet potential, and its standing on the labor market.

Today, the university that began with six schools and fewer than 2 000 students caters to nearly 315 000 students with an academic faculty of over 35 000. It offers three kinds of high school education (nine campuses of the National Preparatory School, five Sciences and Humanities High Schools, and distance education); 85 undergraduate majors in 13 faculties; five multi-disciplinary centers (the higher studies faculties); and four national schools; plus, of course, the 40 graduate programs. It also offers open and distance learning systems at all these levels.

The incipient research that began at the start of the twentieth century has been consolidated, and today accounts for about half of all that carried out nationwide, through 54 institutes, centers, and programs. Associated with this research undertaking, the university is also charged with a number of

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services of national scope. It makes available to the university community and to society as a whole an immense range of advisory and other types of services, among which may be highlighted the library network;⁸ the computer and communications infrastructure; publications; legal, fiscal, psychological, pedagogical, and social work advisory services; and medical, dentist, and veterinary services; as well as services for the pharmaceutical, chemical, and construction industries, among many others.

Committed to the cultivation and dissemination of the multiple manifestations of art and culture for the comprehensive education of members of the university and Mexican society as a whole, the UNAM also produces, programs, and disseminates the musical, visual, literary, film, theater, and dance arts through a network of concert halls, theaters, auditoriums, and museums of national and international standing.

Apart from the Mexico City metropolitan area, the UNAM has academic facilities in almost all states in Mexico. Meanwhile, the high school, undergraduate, and graduate study plans of 317 public and private educational institutions are incorporated into the UNAM, which furthermore provides revalidation services for studies carried out elsewhere in Mexico and abroad. Meanwhile, the university boasts five academic centers in the United States, one in Canada, and another in Spain.

On October 2, a rally held in the Three Cultures Plaza in Tlatelolco is repressed; many students are killed and most of the student leaders are jailed.

On October 12, the XIX Olympic Games are inaugurated in University City. After the games end, university activities tend to go back to normal, despite the fact that a large number of professors and students remain under arrest. On December 4, the student strike ends.

▪ **1970**

The student population reaches 107 056. The University Council approves a petition for amnesty for the members of the university community held as political prisoners, presented by Rector Pablo González Casanova.

▪ **1971**

On January 25, the University Council approves the creation of the Sciences and Humanities High Schools.



Juan Antonio López /Gaceta-UNAM

▪ **1972**

The Coordination of the Open University System (SUA) and the Permanent Extension School of San Antonio, Texas (EPESA) are established. EPESA, located on a space donated by the city of San Antonio, offers Spanish classes and courses in Mexican culture.

The UNAM is the largest higher education institution in Latin America. This is not only because of the number of its students, or academic staff, or courses offered, or research undertaken, or specialized and popular journals and magazines, or academic exchanges with institutions worldwide, or cultural, artistic and sporting activities. Rather, and above all, it is because of its presence in the nation, its contributions to the country's development, and its impact on all of Latin America.

In the last 10 decades, the university has trained hundreds of thousands of professionals, along with illustrious figures from the worlds of science, the humanities, culture, technology, and the arts in Mexico and Latin America. Graduates and academic staff have been leaders in the creation of the institutions that have fostered the country's development. The UNAM has also, naturally, been a generous instrument of mobility. Without the contributions of the National University the historical, social, economic, and cultural evolution of Mexico would be unthinkable.

Starting with the principles of liberty, plurality, and tolerance, the university has cultivated all disciplines and all trends of thought in a manner suiting their progress and the demands of the nation. As a public, national, secular, plural institution, it constitutes the most outstanding cultural reference point for twentieth-century Mexico.

The university constantly toils to fulfill to the utmost the mission set out by Justo Sierra in terms of "making science national and knowledge Mexican." In commemoration of its first centennial, it seeks to consolidate and build on this mission with an eye to the future, committed to the active construction of a better tomorrow for Mexican society. **MM**

NOTES

¹ In the UNAM, the difference between a school and a faculty is that the former does not include graduate studies, while the latter does. For the purposes of this article, therefore, we have translated both literally. [Translator's Note.]

² This latter was opened on September 18, 1910.

³ It was José Vasconcelos who established the National University's coat of arms and motto, "Por mi raza hablará el espíritu" ("The spirit shall speak for my race").

⁴ In the following faculties: Philosophy and Letters; Law and Social Science; Medicine; Engineering; Agronomy; Dentistry; Chemical Science and Industry; Business Administration; and the following schools: the

National Preparatory, Fine Arts (painting, sculpture and architecture), Higher Normal (for training primary school teachers), Physical Education, and Veterinary Medicine.

⁵ Article 1 states, "The National Autonomous University of Mexico is a public corporation —decentralized state body— endowed with full legal status whose aims are the provision of higher education to train professionals, researchers, university lecturers, and technicians of use to society; the organization and undertaking of research, particularly about national conditions and problems; and the widest possible distribution of the benefits of education."

⁶ Faculties of Philosophy and Letters and of Sciences; and national schools: Preparatory School, Schools of Jurisprudence, Economics, Business Administration, Medicine, Nursing and Obstetrics, Dentistry, Veterinary Medicine and Animal Husbandry, Engineering, Chemical Science, Architecture, Visual Arts, and Music.

⁷ Institutes of Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Geology, Geography, Geophysics, Biology, Medical and Biological Studies, Social Research, Historical Research, and Aesthetic Research, plus the Center for Philosophical Studies.

⁸ This network operates 139 libraries with over 12 million documents, the largest archive in the country.

