

NORTH AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION WEBINAR SERIES

Section 1: Overview of the U.S. Educational System

Presented by AACRAO · Webinar 1 of the trinational series with ARUCC (Canada) and ARSEE (Mexico)

K–12 System & the Pathway to Postsecondary



- No national curriculum — states set standards; local school districts control implementation and graduation requirements.
- A high school diploma (or equivalency credential, such as the GED) is the standard entry credential for postsecondary study.
- From high school, students can move directly into a two-year or four-year institution, or into workforce/technical training — there is no single mandatory path.

Institutional Types



Community College

Two-year, open-access institutions granting associate degrees and workforce certificates. Often the lowest-cost, most accessible entry point, and a major transfer pipeline into four-year institutions.



Four-Year College / University

Bachelor's-degree-granting institutions — ranging from small liberal arts colleges to large comprehensive universities. Public, private nonprofit, and private for-profit versions all exist.

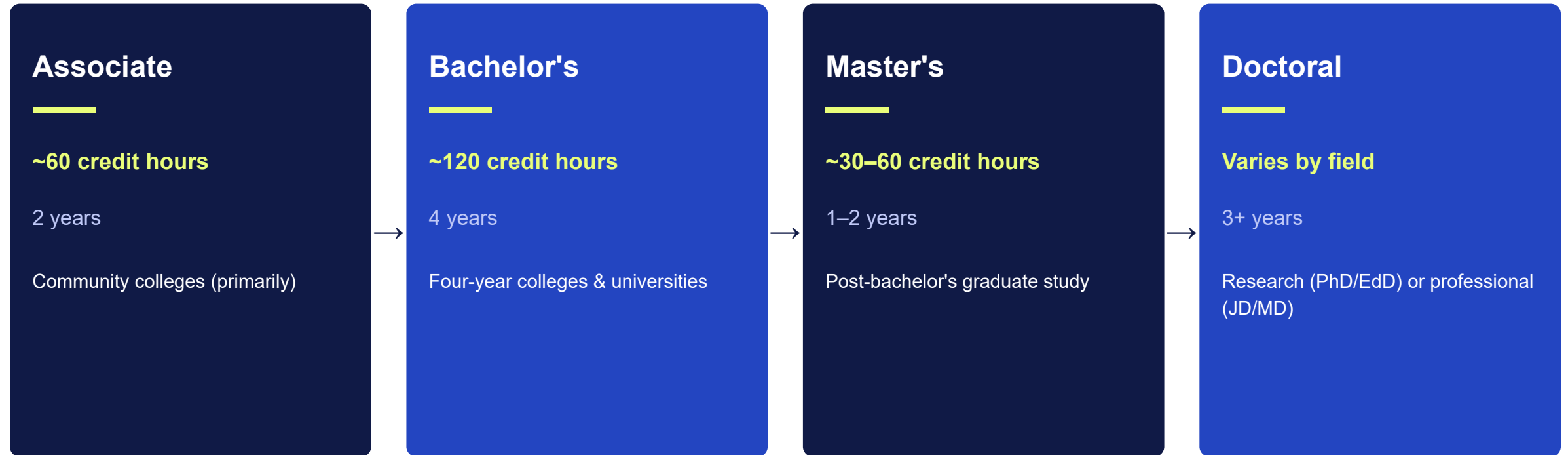


Graduate / Professional

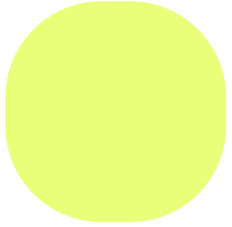
Master's, doctoral, and professional programs (law, medicine, business). Frequently housed within research universities, but governed by distinct admissions and accreditation processes.

All three sectors span public, private nonprofit, and private for-profit institutions — categorized further by the Carnegie Classification framework (e.g., R1/R2 research intensity).

Degree Levels

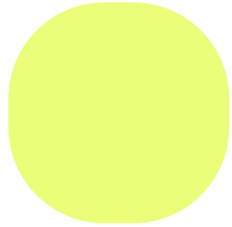


The credit hour is the common unit underlying every level — the mechanism that (in theory) allows progress and transfer to be measured consistently, even across thousands of independently governed institutions.



Decentralized Governance

- There is no national ministry of education controlling curricula, admissions, or degree standards.
- Authority is distributed across three layers: the federal government (funding, civil rights, financial aid), 50 individual state systems (licensure, public funding), and thousands of individual institutions (curriculum, degree requirements).
- The result is enormous diversity in offerings and quality — a defining feature of U.S. higher education, but also a real source of complexity for anyone outside the system trying to understand equivalencies.



Credit-Hour & Accreditation-Driven Structure

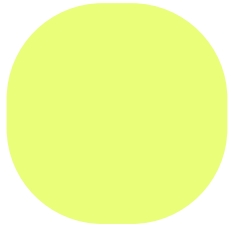
- The credit hour (rooted in the historic “Carnegie Unit”) is the common currency of academic progress — roughly one hour of class time per week across a semester, plus outside work.
- In place of government licensing of individual programs, quality assurance runs through voluntary accreditation — regional and national accreditors recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA).
- Institutional accreditation certifies the institution as a whole; programmatic (specialized) accreditation applies on top of that for certain fields, such as law, medicine, engineering, and nursing.
- Together, credit hours and accreditation are what allow transfer and articulation to function at all across a decentralized system — though, as many registrars know firsthand, not always consistently.

Enrollment Shifts

36M+

Americans with some college credit but no completed degree — a growing re-enrollment target audience.

- Total postsecondary enrollment has declined from its mid-2010s peak, driven largely by demographics.
- The “enrollment cliff”: a sharp drop in births following the 2008 financial crisis is now working its way into shrinking pools of college-age students.
- Rising public skepticism about the return on investment of a four-year degree has compounded the demographic pressure.
- Encouraging counter-signal: community college enrollment has stabilized and ticked up recently, alongside growing interest in re-engaging adult learners.



Reduced-Credit Degrees

- A small but growing number of states and institutions are piloting bachelor's degrees with fewer than the traditional ~120 credit hours — sometimes framed as “90-credit” or accelerated three-year completion tracks.
- The goal is to cut time-to-degree and total cost without sacrificing core learning outcomes, often by trimming elective and general-education requirements.
- This connects to the broader competency-based and stackable-credential movement, but is distinct in specifically targeting the credit-hour load of the traditional bachelor's degree itself.
- Driven by the same affordability and workforce-alignment pressures behind the enrollment trends we just discussed — expect this conversation to keep growing.

SECTION 1 RECAP

Three Takeaways on the U.S. System

- **Structure without a single track**

K–12 leads to a diploma, then to any of three institutional types and four degree levels — with no single mandated path.

- **Held together by two mechanisms**

Decentralized governance is offset by two unifying threads: the credit hour, and voluntary accreditation.

- **Enrollment is shifting, and so is degree design**

Demographic decline and affordability pressure are reshaping both who enrolls and how long a degree takes to earn.

The Association of Registrars of the Universities and Colleges of Canada (**ARUCC**) was founded in 1964, and is Canada's national association for post-secondary registrarial professionals, providing leadership in credential standards, student mobility, and registrarial leading practices to over 150+ members institutions and organizations.

Mission: ARUCC is a member-driven association whose mission is to foster the advancement of the registrarial profession in post-secondary education in Canada.

Vision: ARUCC's vision is to be a global leader in the transformation of registrarial practices.



Dr. Darran A. Fernandez

Chair, ARUCC

University Registrar, McMaster University

Canada's Postsecondary System

Decentralized, Diverse, and Collaborative

- No national ministry of education
- 10 provinces and 3 territories oversee postsecondary education
 - Unique structures with some province-wide colleges (e.g. Nova Scotia Community College) and college structures (e.g. CEGEPs in Québec)
- Public institutions form the foundation of the system
- Strong national collaboration despite provincial governance (e.g. U15, Universities Canada, Colleges and Institutes Canada)
- Globally recognized credentials and research excellence

Postsecondary Institutions and Credentials

Historical / Traditional Institution Types

- Universities
 - Bachelor's, Master's, Doctoral degrees
 - Research-intensive
- Colleges, Institutes, Polytechnics
 - Career-focused and applied learning
 - Industry partnerships
 - Applied research

Common Credentials

- Certificate
- Diploma
- Advanced Diploma
- Bachelor's Degree
- Master's Degree
- Doctorate
- Micro-credentials

Structures are evolving
and no longer always
seen as 'traditional' as
shared

Governance, Oversight and Funding

Provincial/Territorial Responsibility

- Institutional authorization
- Funding models
- Quality assurance
- Student policy and regulation

Federal Influence

- Funding to the provinces for social programs
- Research funding
- Student financial assistance
- Indigenous education initiatives
- International student and immigration policies

Funding of Post-Secondary

Provincial Funding

Most public universities and colleges receive annual operating grants from their provincial or territorial government.

These grants:

- Support day-to-day operations
- Pay faculty and staff
- Fund teaching and student services
- Are typically tied to government priorities and accountability measures

Tuition

Students contribute through tuition fees.

Key differences:

- Tuition is generally between \$3,500 - \$8,000.
- Domestic tuition is often regulated by provincial governments.
- International tuition is typically much higher and is set by institutions.

Only funds, depending on the province, between 55 – 70% of total cost of study in post-secondary; the difference is covered by grants, donations and government aid.

Emerging Trends and Opportunities

Emerging Trends

- Micro-credentials and digital credential growth
- Workforce-aligned education and performance-based funding changes from Provincial Governments
- Reconciliation with First Nations, Metis and Inuit peoples
- AI and digital transformation
- Globalization, Trans-National Education (TNE) and student mobility

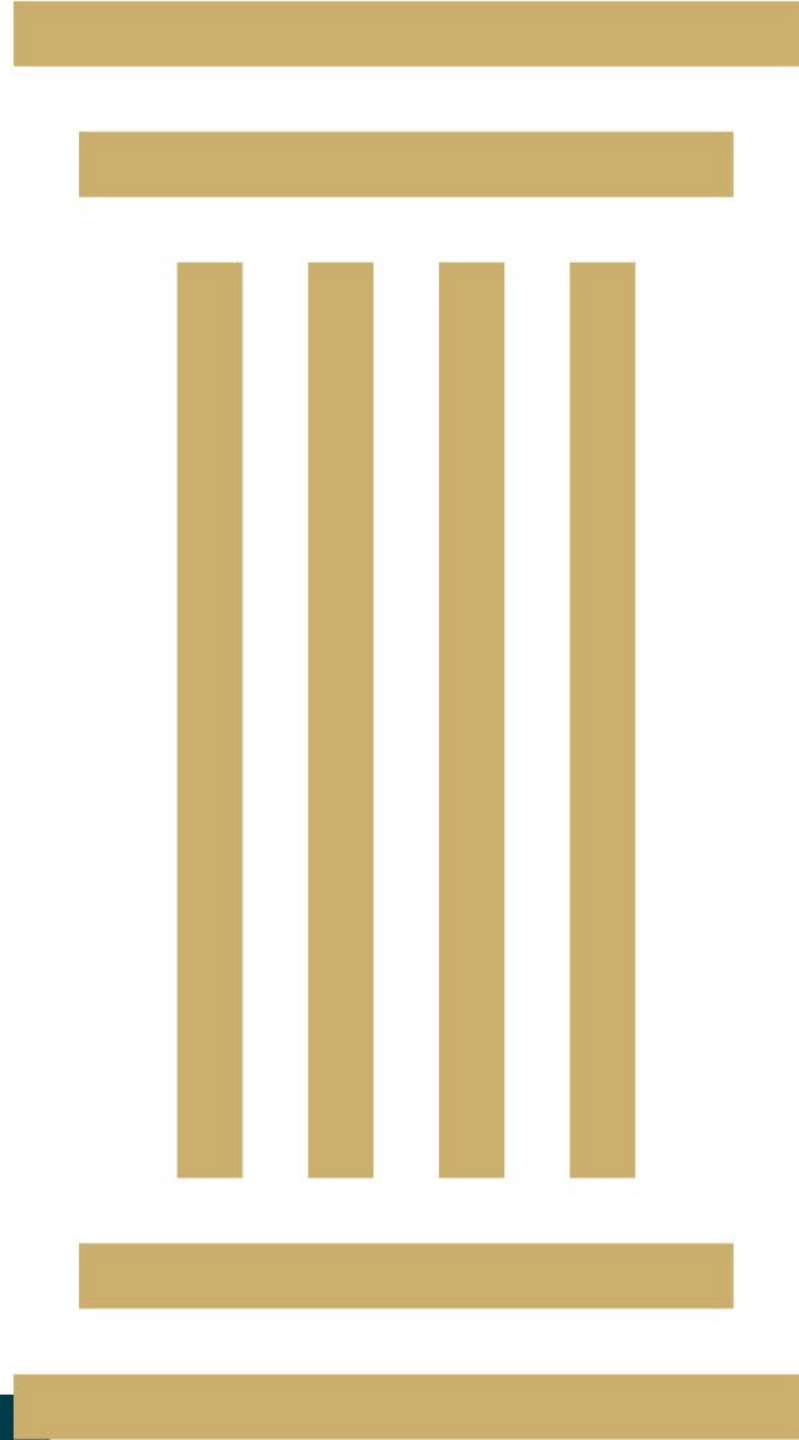
Opportunities

- Credential recognition
- Transfer and mobility frameworks
- Digital credential interoperability
- Research and data sharing
- Workforce development partnerships

Educational Model: México

Structure, Governance and Emerging Trends

Sergio Linares Pérez



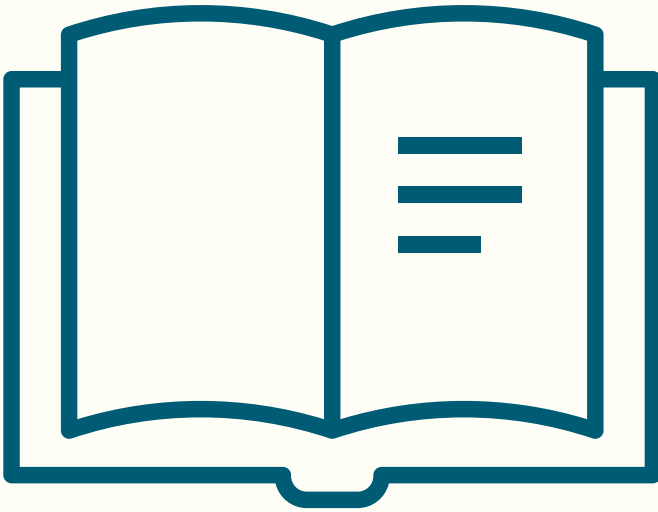
What is ARSEE?

Association of Registrars and Student Services Professionals of Mexico

ARSEE is a national professional association that brings together higher education leaders responsible for:



Structure of Mexican Higher Education



Higher education is the level of education provided after upper secondary education and is composed of the levels:

- Higher University Technician / Professional Associate
- Bachelor's degree
- Specialty Programs (Advance Certificate)
- Master's Degree
- Doctoral Degree.

The system includes university education, technological education, teacher training, and specialized professional education.

Educational Structure

Main characteristics of Mexico's educational system

The Mexican higher education system is characterized by being:

Complex and
heterogeneous

It consists of **13 subsystems** that vary according to the responsible government agency, funding source, size, enrollment, specialization, and location.

Institutionally
diversified

It includes autonomous public universities, state public universities, technological institutes, technological universities, polytechnic universities, pedagogical universities, intercultural universities, normal schools, research centers, and private institutions.

Educational Structure

Main characteristics of Mexico's educational system

Institutional classification

Higher education institutions (IES) in Mexico are classified into six major groups:

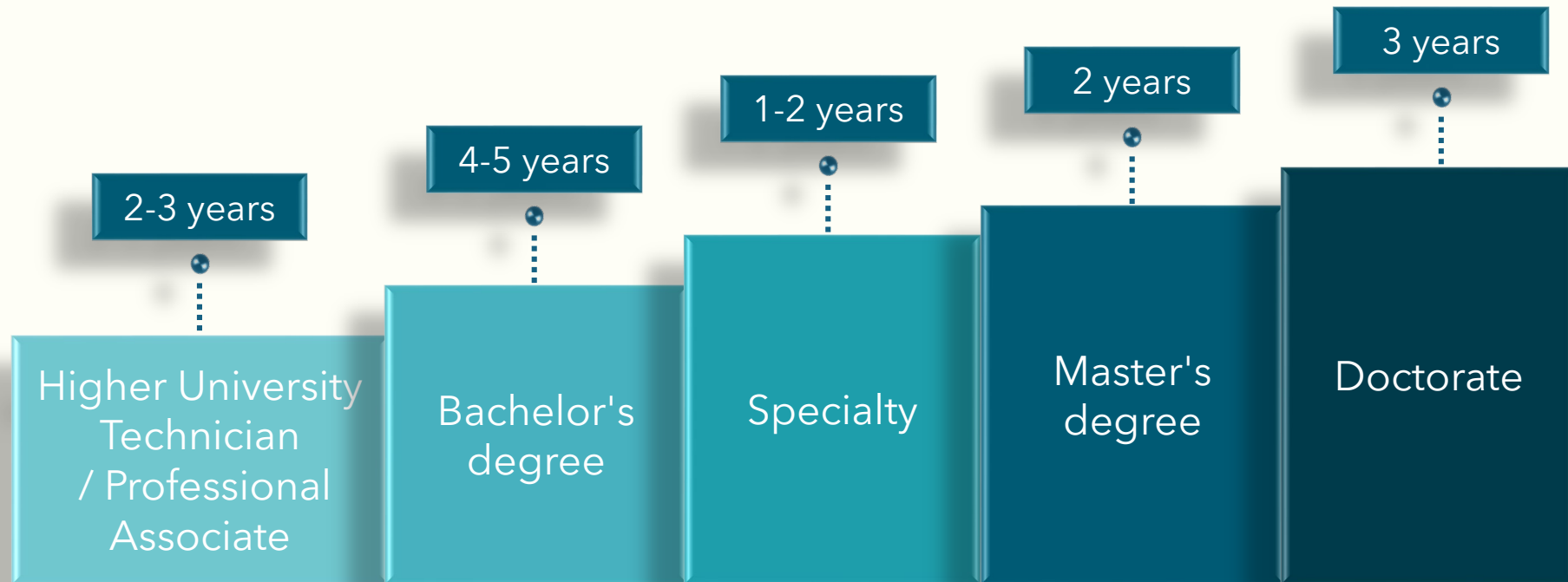
Subsystem	Main characteristics
Public universities	Include UNAM, UAM, autonomous state universities
Technological education	Federal and state technological institutes
Technological universities	Focus on technical-professional training
Private institutions	Private universities and centers
Normal education	Teacher training
Other public institutions	Research centers, intercultural universities, etc.

Educational Structure

Main characteristics of Mexico's educational system

Educational levels and program duration

The structure of educational levels in higher education includes:



Educational Structure

Governance and Regulation

The Mexican higher education system operates through a shared governance model involving:

- 1 Federal authorities (SEP)
- 2 State governments
- 3 Autonomous universities
- 4 Private institutions with official recognition (RVOE)

This model combines institutional autonomy with regulatory oversight and quality assurance mechanisms.

Key Characteristics

Microcredentials: An Emerging Development

Microcredentials are gaining attention in Mexican higher education as institutions seek:

- More flexible learning pathways
- Lifelong learning opportunities
- Faster responses to labor market needs
- Competency-based recognition models

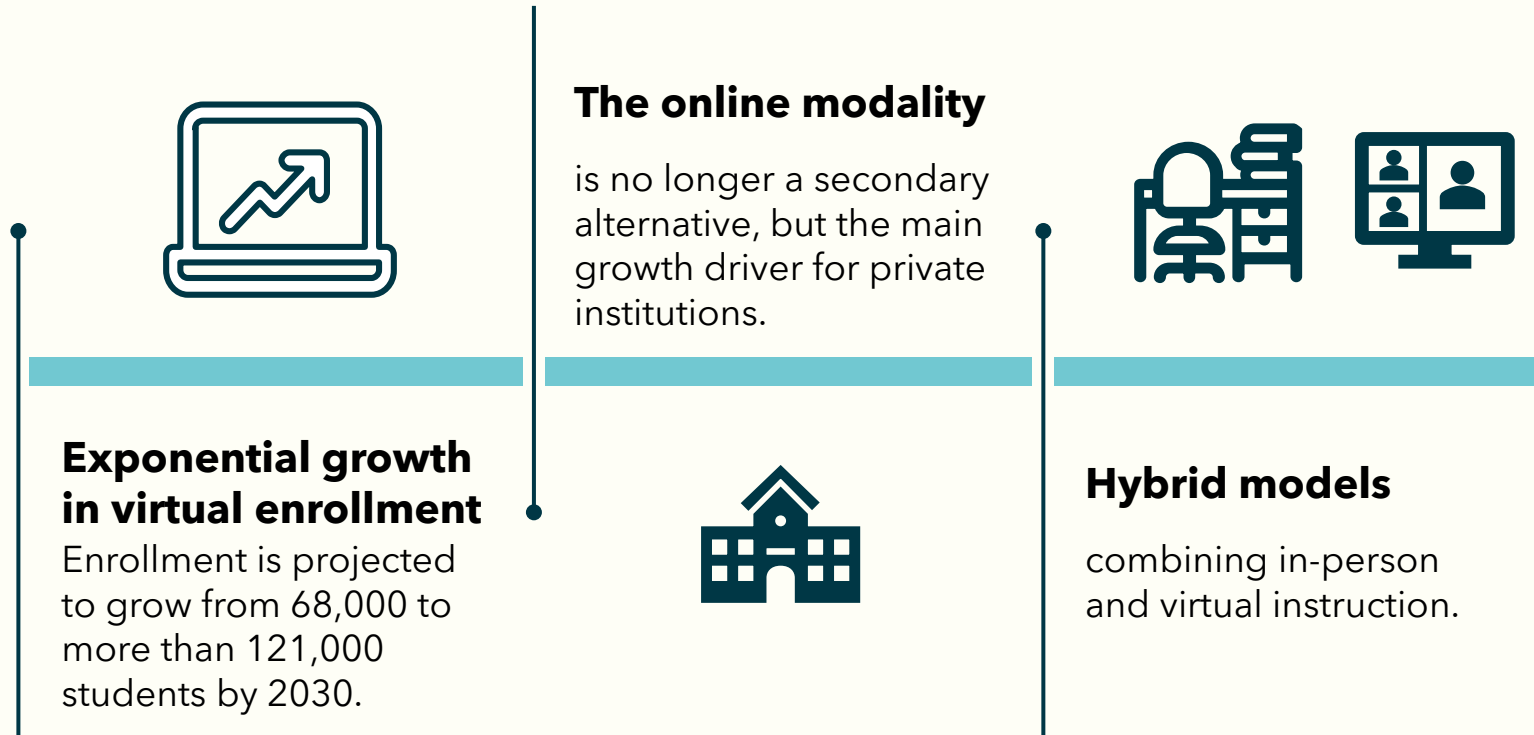
However, adoption remains uneven and institutions continue exploring governance, recognition, and implementation models.



Current Trends

Digital transformation and hybrid modalities

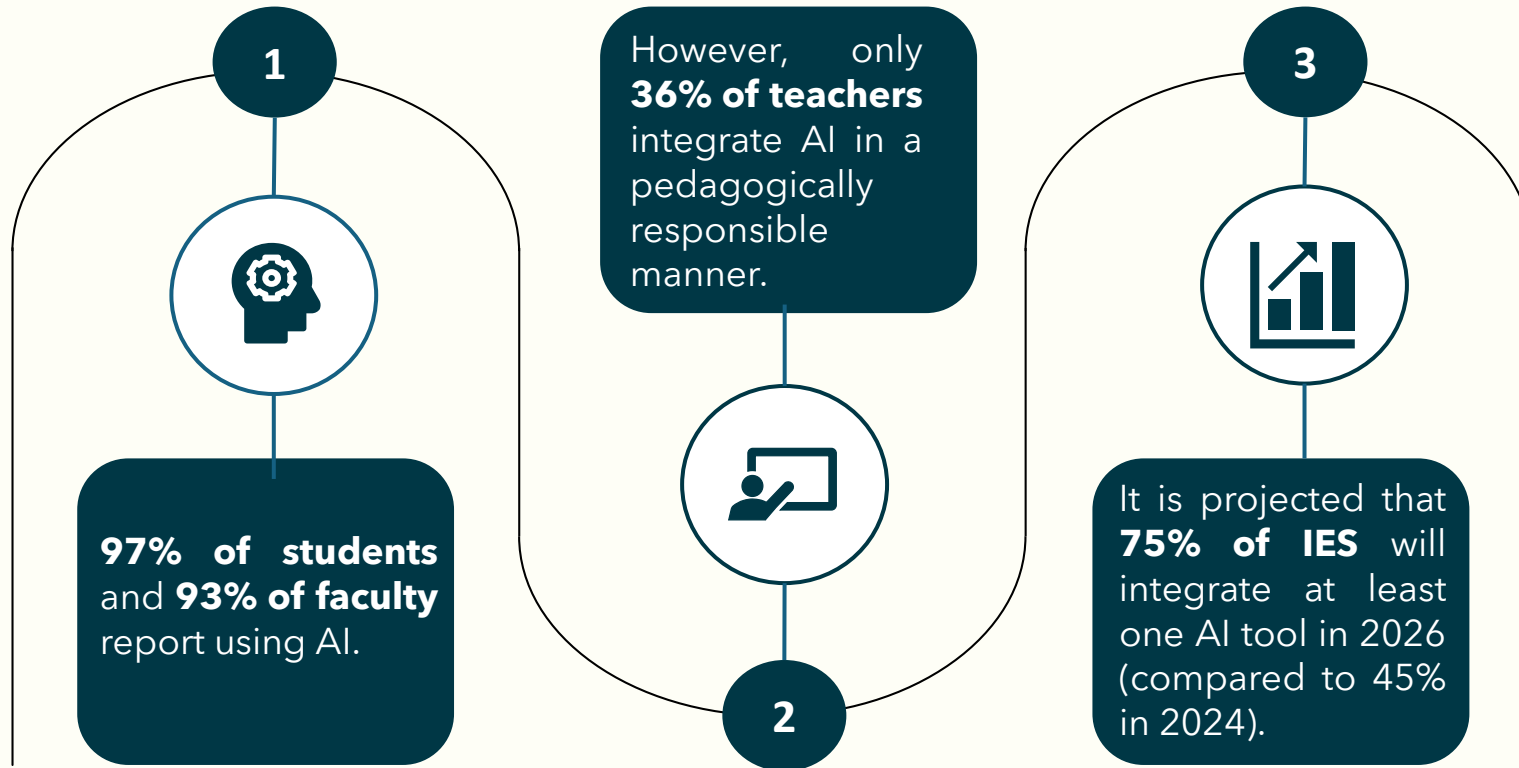
Higher education in Mexico is experiencing an accelerated shift toward online modalities.



Current Trends

Artificial Intelligence in higher education

AI adoption in Mexican higher education reached significant levels in 2026:



Current Trends

Internationalization and academic mobility

Internationalization has consolidated as a fundamental trend in Mexican higher education, driven by the demands of a global labor market.



International mobility

As a central component of internationalization: IES prioritize signing agreements with foreign universities to facilitate student and faculty exchange.



Collaborative Online International Learning

And virtual collaboration programs that allow interaction with international peers without physical mobility.



Academic collaboration

In regions with consolidated research clusters.

Challenges and Opportunities

Looking ahead, Mexican higher education institutions face several priorities:

Challenges

Expanding access
and equity



Closing skills gaps



Adapting to
technological
change



Supporting
lifelong learning



Opportunities

Digital
transformation



Artificial
intelligence



Microcredential



International
collaboration



Flexible learning
pathways



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