

INSTITUTIONAL INEQUALITY AND GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES IN MEXICAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

Nicolas Dominguez-Vergara, & Beatriz Merchand-Hernandez
Departamento de Sistemas, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (Mexico)

Abstract

Mexican public universities have faced recurrent strikes and institutional disruptions, revealing deep-rooted governance and salary inequality challenges. This paper examines structural tensions within one of Mexico's most significant public universities, focusing on salary inequality, faculty aging, and governance conflicts. Using payroll records and demographic data, the analysis reveals widening disparities between senior administrative officials and certain academic personnel compared with the rest of the workforce. While top gross annual salaries exceed US \$222,222.00, the institutional median remains near subsistence levels, fostering mistrust, labor unrest, and institutional fragmentation. This study draws on institutional payroll data, demographic trends, and documented events since the 2019 strike at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (UAM), which lasted 92 days. It examines breaches of the Collective Bargaining Agreement, the growing reliance on highly paid managerial personnel ("personal de confianza"), and hiring patterns that undermine long-term academic sustainability. The findings highlight systemic contradictions in universities that publicly advocate social equity while internally reproducing economic hierarchies—inequalities that persist today. The academic workforce is rapidly aging: the average age of tenured professors is 60 years, over 20 % are above 70, and 54.9 % are older than 61, whereas only 12.8 % of the Mexican population is older than 60. Institutional data show a decline from 3,088 tenured professors in 2018 to 2,771 by the end of 2024. Without regulatory reforms, transparent salary structures, and strategic investment in early-career academics, public universities risk deteriorating academic quality, losing labor legitimacy, and weakening institutional credibility. This paper argues that higher education governance must prioritize equitable resource redistribution and long-term planning.

Keywords: *Higher education policy, salary inequality, institutional governance, academic sustainability, organizational change.*

1. Introduction

Mexican public universities have historically served as a strategic pillar for knowledge production, the training of highly qualified human capital, and the promotion of social mobility. Since their consolidation in the twentieth century, these institutions have made substantial contributions to the country's scientific, technological, and cultural development. In recent years, however, they have faced growing tensions resulting from sustained financial constraints, shifts in higher education public policy, and the gradual adoption of administrative management models oriented more toward budgetary efficiency than toward strengthening the academic mission.

At the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (UAM), a combination of factors has contributed to an erosion of trust in university authorities. These include minimal direct salary increases for staff and faculty (approximately 3.66 % annually on average since 2019), a sustained decline in the number of tenured professors since 2018 (an average reduction of 53 positions per year), a steady increase in the hiring of temporary faculty (an average of 106 per year), and the fact that 37 % of the members of the Academic Council (the university's most important collegiate governing body) are functionaries. As a result, the sustainability of the public university model based on the figure of the professor-researcher who integrates research, teaching, outreach, and cultural preservation is increasingly questioned—activities that temporary faculty members find difficult to perform comprehensively, primarily due to the heavy teaching loads assigned to them.

In this context, the strike that occurred at UAM in 2019, which lasted 92 days, represented a turning point that brought long-standing structural problems into sharper focus (Dominguez-Vergara et al., 2019). These problems include extreme salary gaps between senior administration and most academic staff,

the progressive deterioration of working conditions, and the weakening of university governance mechanisms.

Within this framework, the present article analyzes institutional inequality at UAM across three interrelated dimensions. The first is salary distribution, which allows for an assessment of the magnitude of income gaps among different labor groups within the university. The second is faculty aging, a phenomenon that reflects the absence of systematic generational renewal policies and poses risks to academic continuity and innovation. The third dimension is the precarization of the academic hiring model, associated with the growth of temporary staff and the sustained reduction of tenured positions. The analysis is guided by the hypothesis that the interaction of these dynamics not only affects individual working conditions but also structurally compromises the academic sustainability and social legitimacy of the public university. By empirically documenting these trends, the article seeks to contribute to the broader debate on the future of Mexican public universities and the need to rethink governance, financing, and academic labor management in a context of growing social and productive demands.

2. Method

The study adopts a descriptive–analytical approach based on institutional and documentary sources. Official payroll records and salary tables from 2018 onward were analyzed to examine income distribution among senior administrative staff, academic personnel, and the remainder of the administrative workforce.

In addition, demographic data on faculty members were examined, including age, type of appointment, and the historical evolution of the academic workforce between 2000 and 2024.

Based on these sources, indicators of salary inequality, academic aging, and labor precarization were constructed. The information presented in the text draws on these indicators and is described narratively in order to highlight structural patterns and critical areas of concentration.

3. Results

Some academic staff members receive salaries comparable to those of senior administrators, largely due to factors such as length of service. These individuals, like senior administrators, may earn on average more than 100,000 Mexican pesos (MXN) net per month or even more than 150,000 MXN net per month. A substantial share of the income of all UAM employees consists of scholarships, incentives, and compensations, as the base salary does not exceed 35,000 MXN gross per month. At the end of 2025, the dollar-peso exchange rate was 18 pesos per dollar.

The analysis of the salary structure reveals pronounced inequality. While senior administrative officials receive gross annual incomes exceeding 4,000,000 MXN (222,222 US dollars), the median net monthly salary of the remaining temporary and permanent administrative staff remains below 9,000 MXN, an amount that is scarcely sufficient to cover the monthly cost of the basic consumption basket (Domínguez-Vergara et al., 2019).

This section summarizes the main empirical findings on salary inequality at the UAM, based on official net monthly salary data for all employees during the first quarter of the years 2018 to 2022 (Domínguez-Vergara et al., 2024). The results reveal a highly unequal and institutionally structured wage distribution that has deteriorated in real terms despite nominal salary growth.

At the aggregate level, the median net monthly salary increased from 11,735 MXN in 2018 to 14,086 MXN in 2022. After adjusting for inflation, however, the median salary declined by 1.57 percent in real terms. This contrasts with national labor market trends, where median real wages increased substantially over the same period, indicating that UAM’s internal wage-setting mechanisms failed to preserve purchasing power for the median employee.

The salary distribution exhibits extreme dispersion. Modal net monthly salaries remained between approximately 4,886 MXN and 5,788 MXN, levels associated with subsistence or near-subsistence income. In contrast, maximum reported net monthly salaries exceeded 350,000 MXN in 2019 and reached 462,693 MXN in 2021. In that year, the highest salary was nearly 35 times the median and more than 80 times the mode, reflecting pronounced vertical inequality within a public university setting.

Disaggregation by employment category reveals systematic stratification. Administrative workers and related staff constitute the lowest-paid group. In 2022, their median net monthly salary was 8,186 MXN, below the cost of the basic urban food basket for a four-person household, implying that at least half of workers in this category earned insufficient income to meet minimum subsistence needs. Although the aggregate salary mass for administrative personnel increased by more than 16 percent between 2018 and 2022, this growth did not translate into wage adequacy at the lower end of the distribution.

University authorities experienced sustained increases in average and median net salaries during the period analyzed. Their compensation structures include additional allowances and compensations that persist for up to two years after leaving administrative office, contributing to income concentration at the top of the distribution and reflecting weak internal constraints on cumulative remuneration.

Among academic staff, salary outcomes vary sharply by rank and employment status. Tenured full professors earned the highest median net monthly salaries, rising from 56,202 MXN in 2018 to 68,386 MXN in 2022, but with substantial internal dispersion (Domínguez-Vergara et al., 2024). In 2022, nearly 0.5 percent of full professors earned more than 150,000 MXN per month, while over 10 percent earned less than 25,000 MXN. Associate professors earned significantly lower median salaries, while assistant professors occupied the bottom of the academic wage hierarchy, with median salaries ranging from 9,663 MXN to 11,731 MXN, levels barely sufficient to cover basic living expenses.

These disparities are institutionally driven. Base salaries are relatively compressed and linked to rank and seniority, whereas a substantial share of total income derives from discretionary scholarships, incentives, and compensations determined centrally and subject to freezing or reduction. The increasing reliance on temporary faculty—who lack access to most incentive schemes—further reinforces inequality while containing short-term labor costs.

Overall, the results indicate that salary inequality at UAM is structurally embedded in its institutional design. The compensation system systematically concentrates rewards at the top while exposing a large share of employees to declining real incomes and income insecurity, despite the public and social mission of the university. The results for the salary inequalities up to the year 2025 will be presented in an extended paper elsewhere.

From a demographic perspective, the tenured academic workforce exhibits accelerated aging. The average age is 60 years, nearly 20 % are over 70 years old, and 35.7 % are older than 61, compared with only 12.8 % of the Mexican population in that age range (INEGI, 2023).

In addition, a sustained reduction in permanent positions is observed. Between 2018 and 2024, the number of tenured professors declined from 3,088 to 2,771. In 2024, only 17 permanent faculty members were hired, compared with 2,636 temporary instructors.

Since the 2019 labor conflict, the Independent Workers' Union of the UAM (SITUAM) has consistently argued that university authorities have engaged in systematic violations of the Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA). According to the union, these violations help explain the persistence of labor unrest, recurrent strike threats, and the erosion of institutional legitimacy within the UAM. The alleged violations can be grouped into four main areas: displacement of bargaining-unit work, expansion of managerial staff, breaches in hiring and payment practices, and the structural precarization of temporary academic labor.

First, one of the central claims raised by SITUAM since the 2019 strike concerns the displacement of bargaining-unit work traditionally performed by unionized staff. During the negotiations that ended the 92-day strike in March 2019, the union denounced the growing use of managerial personnel, professional service contracts, and outsourcing schemes to perform tasks contractually assigned to unionized workers. According to SITUAM, these practices constituted direct violations of specific CBA clauses and undermined employment stability for both academic and administrative staff. National media documented that the non-displacement of bargaining-unit work became a key issue in the negotiations and in the subsequent agreements signed between the union and the university.

A second cluster of allegations refers to the expansion of managerial or “trust” personnel and the lack of transparency surrounding their recruitment and remuneration. SITUAM has repeatedly claimed that UAM authorities failed to provide complete and updated information on the number of managerial positions, their functions, organizational location, and salaries, despite explicit post-2019 commitments to do so. From the union’s perspective, this lack of transparency violates the principles of bilateral governance embedded in the CBA and facilitates the concentration of decision-making power and financial resources outside the unionized workforce.

Third, the union has denounced direct breaches related to hiring practices and wage payments, particularly affecting temporary academic staff. In several pre-strike notices and internal communications, SITUAM has alleged that part-time and half-time instructors experienced abrupt contract terminations without prior notice, even while continuing to perform teaching duties. In multiple cases, the union reported delayed or missing wage payments and the non-payment of legally and contractually mandated benefits for work already performed. These allegations have been echoed in press coverage during subsequent bargaining rounds, reinforcing claims of systemic irregularities rather than isolated administrative errors.

Finally, a recurring theme in union discourse is the structural precarization of temporary academic labor, which SITUAM considers incompatible with both the CBA and the public mission of the university. In recent years, the union has publicly denounced the failure to pay year-end bonuses, food vouchers, and even regular biweekly wages to temporary faculty members. In December 2025, SITUAM again accused

university authorities of withholding wages and bonuses from workers who had fulfilled their contractual obligations, characterizing these actions as serious violations of the CBA and of Mexican labor law. Taken together, the allegations advanced by SITUAM since 2019 reveal a persistent pattern of contractual non-compliance, rather than episodic or exceptional disputes. These alleged violations form a central empirical component for understanding recurrent labor conflict at UAM and provide evidence of deeper institutional tensions between discourses of equity and actual labor governance practices. From an analytical perspective, they illustrate how institutional inequality is reproduced through everyday administrative decisions, contractual interpretations, and employment structures within a public university.

4. Discussion

Public funding for higher education in Mexico declined by 29 % in real terms between 2018 and 2025. The Mexican government has reduced, or at best maintained, funding for federal autonomous universities such as the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), the most internationally prestigious institution; however, it has increased funding for smaller universities created by administrations of the ruling party and for other institutions whose governance depends directly on the state, such as the Instituto Politécnico Nacional and the Tecnológico Nacional.

The 2019 strike cannot be understood as an isolated episode or as the exclusive result of failed contractual negotiations. Rather, it is embedded in a deeper institutional crisis characterized by the concentration of resources at upper administrative levels, wage stagnation affecting most academic and administrative staff, and the transformation of hiring practices toward increasingly precarious arrangements.

In some cases, these dynamics have produced paradoxical situations in which the salaries of certain administrative workers, and even some faculty members, have fallen below the national minimum wage, openly contradicting the institutional discourse of equity and social responsibility.

The results confirm the existence of profound contradictions in universities that promote social equity as a central element of their mission, yet in practice maintain significant economic inequalities within their own organizational structures.

5. Conclusions

The study demonstrates that institutional inequality in Mexican public universities undermines their academic sustainability and social legitimacy. In the case of UAM, the combination of extreme salary gaps, faculty aging, and labor precarization creates a high-risk scenario for the future of the public university model.

Without structural reforms oriented toward salary transparency, generational renewal, and the strengthening of the academic career, public universities face a process of progressive deterioration.

Acknowledgments

The authors gratefully acknowledge many useful discussions with colleagues, particularly Miguel Angel Abreu Hernandez and Agustin Flores Hernandez.

References

- Domínguez-Vergara, N., & Abreu-Hernandez, M. A. (2024). Understanding salary inequality at the Mexican UAM and its ramifications for academic prospects. *INTED 2024 Proceedings*, 5384–5393.
- Domínguez-Vergara, N., Ruiz Salvatierra, R. S., & Domínguez-Pérez, R. M. (2019). The 2019 strike and its impact on the future of the UAM. *EDULEARN 2019 Proceedings*, 7327–7336.
- Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía. (2023). *Estadísticas de población por grupos de edad*. Retrieved from <https://www.inegi.org.mx>