

Challenges for the Teaching and Practice of Diplomacy in the Current Context: Perspectives from the Matías Romero Institute, the Mexican Diplomatic Academy

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Forty-seven years after its inauguration, the Matías Romero Institute continues to train hundreds of people who have chosen to dedicate their lives to public service and diplomatic careers. Adaptability to new scenarios and dynamics during this process have been fundamental aspects, as the international sphere has undergone numerous changes since 1974, one of the most important being the accelerated technological advancements framed by globalisation, which in recent years has triggered the automation of multiple procedures and has modified the nature of social interaction, which, currently and due to the COVID-19 pandemic, has been virtual.

Throughout this process, sectors, such as that of academia, have had to reinvent themselves to remain at the forefront of the challenges imposed by virtuality in communications, education and learning processes. Even before the pandemic transformed our lifestyles, the Matías Romero Institute was already designing a strategy to insert itself into the context of public diplomacy, while keeping up with the new forms of interaction between government institutions and citizens, which has exponentially increased the discussion of issues that are no longer a private matter.

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In this sense, the purpose of this text is to present the characteristics of this strategy, explain its vision and mission in the long term, as well as the achievements obtained since its implementation and the challenges that remain for the Mexican diplomatic academy both in the initial training of career diplomatic personnel and in their ongoing training. Although an outline will be made of the functions of the main areas, the text will focus on the aspects corresponding to the Diplomatic Academy, as this is the main topic.

The Matías Romero Institute and its three pillars

The Matías Romero Institute (IMR) is a decentralised body of the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs (SRE) that has among its main functions: to educate, train and update members of the Mexican Foreign Service (SEM), Foreign Ministry staff, as well as staff of other public administration agencies of the three levels of government and the three branches of the Union, through courses and diplomas on current issues in international politics. Its functions also include the dissemination of Mexico's foreign policy and other international issues through publications, conferences and podcasts, as well as links with other national and foreign educational and academic institutions, and the management and direction of the Foreign Ministry Museum.

In order to carry out these tasks, the Institute has (since 2020) three functional units, two of them dedicated to education and training and another one focused on dissemination. The Diplomatic Academy and the International Research Centre (also in charge of research and analysis of current issues related to Mexico's foreign policy) fulfil the first task, while the Foreign Ministry Museum fulfils the second. In turn, these three nodal areas are supported by other units that transversally shape the work carried out by the Centre, the Diplomatic Academy and the Museum. The areas of Dissemination and Digital Communication, International and Inter-institutional Liaison, Editorial Production and Administration are part of this transversal component of the Institute's structure.

The Diplomatic Academy

For many years, this pillar was the most important of the IMR, as it is responsible for coordinating and planning academic events for the education and training of SEM members and staff of all governmental agencies through face-to-face and distance learning courses, both in languages and current affairs.

Face-to-face training is scheduled according to whether or not there is a generation of new career diplomats in training. When this is not the case, language courses and lecture series are mainly provided, for which a certificate of participation is issued. It should be noted that following the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the face-to-face activities were adapted to the virtual modality.

At this point it is essential to highlight the work of the IMR's Virtual Campus, a key area for the Diplomatic Academy, thanks to which it has been possible to continuously train members of the SEM who carry out their functions in Mexico's representations abroad, and also personnel from other orders of government whose headquarters are located in other states of the republic. The Campus offers a wide range of distance learning courses that include topics such as consular diplomacy, protection of the rights of migrant children and adolescents, comprehensive care for victims of human trafficking, tourism promotion, ceremonial and protocol, and comprehensive training in consular services, among others.

It is worth mentioning that the coronavirus health emergency demonstrated both the relevance and versatility of the Virtual Campus, as the area worked uninterruptedly to give continuity to the ongoing training of staff. In this sense, it also highlights the importance of the instructional design that characterises the virtual campus courses, a fundamental pedagogical resource to enhance learning in distance learners, without which there would not be an optimal reception of information by the students.

All of the above actions are part of the strategy implemented in the Institute after the presidential transition in 2018, from which the mission of preparing and updating with academic excellence, national and foreign public servants and other publics interested in the different disciplines of foreign policy and international relations, with negotiation, management and analytical skills focused on diplomatic work, ensuring the integration of the

Mexican Foreign Service by public servants of high analytical and technical level in issues of diplomacy, international politics and foreign policy of Mexico.

If this mission is accomplished, it is expected that by 2024, the IMR Diplomatic Academy will be the most recognised institution of its kind in Latin America and the Caribbean, for the innovation of its entry, promotion and ongoing educational programmes, through both the classroom and distance learning modalities, seeking to be recognised for its highly specialised approach in the training of personnel prepared to conduct their activities with adaptability to the present and future challenges of international relations.

Internal and external challenges in the implementation of the strategy

In order for the actions implemented to be reflected in the fulfilment of the objectives set out in the new strategy, two types of challenges were considered: external factors (changes in public administration, in the global agenda, new priorities, among others) and internal factors (overcoming the inertia with which training courses were previously taught, and strengthening them by adapting teaching methodologies and processes to optimise the learning of the target populations).

Among the external factors, there are some specific points that had a direct impact on the working dynamics of the Diplomatic Academy:

1. Reforms to the federal public administration: the disappearance of ProMéxico, our country's economic promotion agency, and of the Mexican Tourism Promotion Council resulted in new attributions for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and, consequently, the need to adapt training to prepare staff to adequately develop these new responsibilities. The Institute's Virtual Campus currently has a course on tourism promotion developed jointly with the Ministry of Tourism of the federal government, and training is in the process of expansion.
2. Disruptive technologies: it has become increasingly important to integrate an interdisciplinary approach to deal with technically complex

issues such as artificial intelligence, Fintech or cybersecurity. Training should sensitise officials to the need to interact with other stakeholders and provide a common language for a better understanding of the issues with a view to generating realistic solutions.

3. The priorities of the current government: strengthening cultural diplomacy, sports diplomacy and science diplomacy from the Foreign Ministry, as well as consular actions and regional integration are some of the priority issues for the current government.
4. COVID-19 pandemic: as mentioned above, the health crisis forced the revision of the face-to-face academic offer to be delivered online, as well as other academic activities such as conferences and seminars.

For its part, some of the internal challenges faced by the Mexican Diplomatic Academy include:

1. Austerity and resource management: in view of the need to make better use of financial resources, it is essential to optimise the management of the courses that are developed and contracted in order to continue to meet training needs. As a result, courses have been developed with the support of other agencies (e.g. the Ministry of Tourism) to be integrated as part of the Academy's own offer. The selection of courses offered by other institutions such as the DiploFoundation or the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) has also been reviewed to cover thematic areas for which the IMR does not have an academic offer, as is the case, for example, with the topic of artificial intelligence.
2. More emphasis on transversal skills and competences without neglecting disciplinary rigour has also been proposed. The argument is that the development of competences such as analysis, communication, conflict resolution, innovation or teamwork should be part of the design of academic activities and should be an objective in itself, in parallel with the transmission of knowledge.
3. Process improvement: efforts have been taken to maintain close contact with the areas of the Secretariat that need to take our courses to see how the service can be improved. This has led us to modify some programmes to adapt them to the needs of the participants, for

example, by dividing a large course into several modules to better focus the training on certain topics. Sessions have also been reorganised for personnel assimilated and accredited to the SEM, establishing fixed dates, identifying topics that can be taught as a common core and giving greater flexibility to participants, favouring asynchronous learning.

It should be emphasised that, although we have done important work in training and education in the disciplines, the COVID-19 pandemic showed us that there are still challenges to be addressed in terms of skills such as the use of videoconferencing technologies, communication through digital platforms, collaborative work at a distance, etc. For this reason, we have also identified positive aspects of the use of these technologies for which, beyond waiting for a possible return to “normality”, we have chosen to design a strategy that allows us to continue to make the most of these tools.

The importance of ties with other academic institutions

With regards to inter-institutional ties, we identified that the IMR does not necessarily cover all possible areas of development required by people in SEM and other areas of the public service. Through collaborating with other academies and institutions, we have covered some of these needs. For example, a Russian language course was given with the support of the Russian Embassy in Mexico, and training was carried out during the Meeting of Ambassadors and Consuls (REC) in 2020 on trade and economic promotion, with the support of the School of Business Management of the Tecnológico de Monterrey. In this way, the intention has been and will continue to be to take advantage of the links with national and foreign universities, as well as with other diplomatic academies, to expand our offer by making use of the collaboration frameworks with these institutions.

Finally, we have identified national universities as a very receptive space for promoting Mexico’s foreign policy through academia. In addition to the lectures given to their students and professors, the Tecnológico de Monterrey

organised an exclusive refresher course for professors on Mexican foreign policy, given by officials in charge of each of the topics.

Long-term perspectives: speciality and master's programmes

Specialisation is central to the Diplomatic Academy's current strategy. While the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted its design process, it is envisaged that, in the long term, the Institute will implement a programme of Specialisation in Mexican Foreign Policy, as well as four specialised degrees in:

- Multilateral negotiations
- Consular affairs
- Trade and economic promotion
- Cultural and tourism promotion

This proposal aims to strengthen the SEM entry course and to offer other opportunities, among them:

- Greater prestige for the IMR, through the support of the Ministry of Public Education (SEP) with the official recognition of academic degrees.
- Better preparation for the new generations of SEM with a more solid programme, allowing for constant updating and flexibility in the implementation of calls to recruit members with a specialised profile.
- Ongoing specialisation options for active SEM members.
- Better programming of the Institute's budget and operation by having a single offer that takes advantage of the contents of the courses offered so far.
- Attention to the new functions of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in tourism, trade and cultural promotion.

The combination of the Specialisation in Mexican Foreign Policy with one of the above-mentioned specialisations would also allow for the awarding of a Master's degree.

Conclusions

For 47 years, the IMR has had the enormous responsibility of training career diplomatic personnel and maintaining the ongoing training of both members of the SEM and other people dedicated to public service. The second decade of the 21st century began with a phenomenon that tested our capacity for resilience and adaptability to new contexts, a challenge from which the world's diplomatic academies have not been exempt.

As can be seen, the pandemic has been a turning point in the international context and therefore in the exercise and teaching of diplomacy. In this scenario, the IMR has sought to reinvent itself and adapt its training programmes to the new demands of the present day. And although challenges persist, the intention has always been to overcome the new normality brought about by the health crisis, setting long-term goals and objectives that will turn the strategy presented here into a sustainable project, one that will withstand the onslaught of changes in government and foreign policy priorities.

We believe that with the support of the other two pillars of the Institute and the areas that act transversally, the strategy will consolidate and position the Mexican Diplomatic Academy as the most recognised in the region.