

Global challenges and global skills: lessons from the revision of a law degree study plan in Mexico

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Abstract

This article presents the intention, process, and results of a recent revision of the law degree study plan at *Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México* (ITAM), a university located in Mexico City. It reflects on the main lessons derived from this experience, so that its reading can be useful for other educational institutions that pursue similar purposes. The curricular reform described in this article responds to the need for modernization given the characteristics of current legal practice, as well as the purpose of improving the learning experience of students during their degree through effective and motivating pedagogy, in addition to a balanced workload.

The revision process started with a solid exercise of international, external, and internal consultations. The proposal derived from this exercise was subject to an open and collaborative dialogue with university authorities and the faculty of the Law Department. This is how the new curriculum is built, with the purpose of ensuring that graduates of this academic program develop knowledge, skills and attitudes enabling them to act as agents of social transformation, perform successfully in the different areas of the legal profession, and respond appropriately to changes in legal systems.

Keywords: Law degree, curricular revision, global skills, global challenges.

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Introduction

Given the complex characteristics and challenges of contemporary societies, study plans in universities around the world must be updated and revised in a rigorous and assertive way. In particular, the field of law is always changing and increasingly globalized. Thus, at the beginning of 2022, ITAM's authorities requested a revision of the law degree study plan to achieve a double purpose: on the one hand, to respond to the need for modernization given the characteristics of current legal practice and, on the other hand, to improve the learning experience of students during their degree. Before describing the process, results and lessons derived from this reform, it is important to delve into the global, national and institutional context in which it is developed.

The accelerated changes that have occurred in the global context of legal practice make it especially necessary to rethink the contents, the pedagogical methods, and even the purposes of legal education. Among these changes stand out artificial intelligence and automation of legal tasks; globalization of firms and organizations, calling for legal services that are more complex and cross barriers across countries; internationalization of legal systems and legal traditions; consequences of the worldwide pandemic of COVID-19; increase of remote work possibilities, among others.

In addition to the above, important changes in the global context of higher education must also be considered, such as new developments in instructional design, prioritization of skills-based education, and growth of online education. The current law school model is frequently based on a traditional approach to teaching and learning, but it has not evolved in response to advancements in cognitive science, learning theories, technological innovations, or the changing social backgrounds of modern students. In this traditional model, the learner is perceived as a passive entity, and knowledge is imposed externally, leading to predictable learning outcomes. However, this approach overlooks the complex internal factors that influence how individuals learn. Additionally, the current generation of entering law students is fundamentally different from previous groups, not just in terms of study habits but also in their broader competencies and expectations.¹ Significant shifts in the economic and demographic

¹ Rebecca Flanagan, 'Better by Design: Implementing Meaningful Change for the Next Generation of Law Students' (2019) 71 *MAINE LAW REVIEW*, 104, 110–115, <<https://digitalcommons.maine.maine.edu/mlr/vol71/iss1/5>>, accessed 12 January 2025.

landscape of legal education have occurred. Economic recession, organizational restructuring, and technological advancements have dramatically reshaped the legal marketplace, including the demand for law graduates.²

The local context is also relevant. Mexico's situation is unique in relation to regulatory and quality control mechanisms regarding legal education and the practice of law. In the last decades, there has been a substantial increase in both demand for legal services and supply of legal education programs. According to the Center for Studies on Legal Education and Learning (CEEAD, acronym in Spanish), during the 2022-2023 academic year, 2,107 higher education institutions had authorisation to offer bachelor's degrees in law and were actively teaching these programs. Among those institutions, 90.6% were private (1,910) and 9.4% public (197). Compared to the previous school year, this represents, on average, the creation of one new law school per month.³ The proportion of law schools per capita in Mexico is remarkable when compared to other countries, such as the United States and Brazil, which, despite having significantly larger populations, have a considerably smaller number of law schools.⁴

Unfortunately, having so many law schools has not resulted in legal education programs being more critical, pertinent, and oriented towards the construction of a more democratic society.⁵ Diverse factors have prevented the achievement of this goal.⁶ First, the establishment of new schools does not require significant initial investment nor is it necessarily subject to the strictest controls

² *ibid.*

³ Centro de Estudios sobre la Enseñanza y el Aprendizaje del Derecho (CEEAD), <<https://ceead.org.mx/como-transformamos/investigacion>> accessed 12 January 2025.

⁴ Ana María Zorrilla Noriega and Marco Sánchez Arias, 'Challenges for Skills Creation in Legal Education: An Analysis of the Mexican Context in Line with Global Trends' (2023) 13 HIGHER EDUCATION, SKILLS AND WORK-BASED LEARNING 1305, <<https://doi.org/10.1108/HESWBL-03-2023-0059>>, accessed 12 January 2025.

⁵ Gabriel Ignacio Gómez Sánchez, '¿Abogados para la democracia o para el mercado? Repensar la educación jurídica' (2016), 46 REVISTA DE DERECHO, UNIVERSIDAD DEL NORTE 225, <<https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=85147561009>>, accessed 12 January 2025.

⁶ Ana María Zorrilla Noriega and Marco Sánchez Arias, *supra* note 4.

by authorities.⁷ In fact, the legal requirements for opening new law schools are relatively easy to satisfy. Second, it is noteworthy that only 8.7% of the active law programs have some form of accreditation granted by institutions recognized by the Council for the Accreditation of Higher Education (empowered by the Ministry of Public Education), which reflects a lack of information and standardization in the quality of education offered.⁸ Third, unlike many other countries where the title is only one of several requirements someone has to fulfill in order to practice in the legal profession, in Mexico once someone has complied with the program's own requirements, they can freely litigate in all areas of law and in all federal entities. Fourth, in Mexico, there is no mandatory bar association membership or general examination to regulate access to the legal profession. Fifth, there is no general code of ethics for the legal profession, nor are there administrative procedures for revoking a professional license in the event of malpractice.

Even though initiatives have been presented to subject professional legal practice to compulsory membership and certification,⁹ as of today affiliation with professional associations remains voluntary. There are no general rules or standards to evaluate the quality of the legal practice. And even when there is a significant number of lawyers who support mandatory membership, they acknowledge that this alone cannot solve all the complex problems faced by the legal profession.¹⁰

The above-mentioned problems generate a sharp contrast in the quality of the education provided, diversity in legal practice which ranges from very traditional to highly sophisticated law firms and services, as well as poor or non-existent professional accountability mechanisms. Mexico needs lawyers with appropriate skills to tackle the country's widespread problems regarding

⁷ Héctor Fix-Fierro and Sergio López-Ayllón, '¿Muchos abogados, pero poca profesión? Derecho y profesión jurídica en el México contemporáneo' in Héctor Fix-Fierro (ed.), *DEL GOBIERNO DE LOS ABOGADOS AL IMPERIO DE LAS LEYES. ESTUDIOS SOCIOJURÍDICOS SOBRE EDUCACIÓN Y PROFESIÓN JURÍDICAS EN EL MÉXICO CONTEMPORÁNEO* (2006), <<http://ru.juridicas.unam.mx:80/xmlui/handle/123456789/26584>>, accessed 12 January 2025.

⁸ CEEAD, *supra* note 3.

⁹ Óscar Cruz Barney, *EL EJERCICIO DE LA ABOGACÍA EN MÉXICO, UNA PROPUESTA DE REORDENACIÓN: EL PROYECTO DE LEY GENERAL PARA EL EJERCICIO DE LA ABOGACÍA* (Mexico, *Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*, 2020), <<https://archivos.juridicas.unam.mx/www/bjv/libros/13/6026/10.pdf>>, accessed 12 January 2025.

¹⁰ Héctor Fix-Fierro and Sergio López-Ayllón, *supra* note 7.

structural inequalities, the rule of law, and access to justice. This is particularly urgent after a difficult pandemic experience, social and political upheaval and change, as well as major reforms in the legal system.¹¹

It is also relevant to describe the institutional context of the curricular reform being analyzed in this article. ITAM is a private, nonprofit, non-religious university that, for over 75 years, has strived to make higher education a critical factor in Mexico's social and economic development. ITAM's mission is to provide a comprehensive education to train professionals who will seek greater justice, freedom, and prosperity for all citizens.¹² To ensure the highest possible quality of teaching and research, all academic activities are carried out through departments that are grouped into divisions. ITAM's Law Department is part of the Division of Social Sciences. This Department offers two academic programs: the Undergraduate Law Degree and the Master's in Human Rights. At the undergraduate level, joint programs in Law and Economics, Law and Political Science, Law and International Relations, and Law and Accounting are also offered. In each joint program, the student completes the entire law program as well as the other degree program, while benefitting from a set of common core courses, taken by all ITAM students, in writing, computing skills, accounting, mathematics, cultural studies, and history.

ITAM's law school is ranked amongst the top educational institutions in Mexico and Latin America.¹³ It has been a pioneer in experiential and clinical legal education. These efforts are coordinated by the Center for Access to Justice, founded in 1994 as a pro-bono office that seeks to improve the access to justice of vulnerable groups by providing legal services in civil, commercial, and family matters. In subsequent years, various legal clinics have been created within the center, including diverse areas such as immigration, environment, criminal law, public policy, corporate law, labor law, as well as alternative dispute resolution.

This article presents the intention, process, and results of the most recent revision of the law degree study plan at ITAM, which came into effect as of

¹¹ Reformas Constitucionales | Poder Legislativo, Cámara de Diputados <<https://reformasconstitucionales.diputados.gob.mx/reformas/>> accessed 12 January 2025.

¹² Mission, Goals, Principles and Philosophy | ITAM, <<https://www.itam.mx/en/mission-principles-and-philosophy>> accessed 12 January 2025.

¹³ QS World University Rankings for Law and Legal Studies 2024 | Top Universities, <<https://www.topuniversities.com/university-subject-rankings/law-legal-studies?page=2>> accessed 12 January 2025.

the Fall 2024 semester. The analysis follows a set order. The section regarding materials and methods includes a description of the design and main results of the international, external, and internal consultation exercise that was carried out, as well as of the dialogue with university authorities and the faculty of the Law Department. The results section contains an explanation of the main changes implemented, considering the global trends in legal education and the skills currently required for the practice of law. Finally, the discussion section presents the main lessons derived from this experience, so that their reading may be useful for other educational institutions that pursue similar purposes.

Materials and methods: the revision process

To begin the revision process requested by the university authorities that was previously described, Sofia Charvel (who in that moment was the Director of the Undergraduate Law Program) and Miguel Messmacher (Dean of Social Sciences) designed a consultation exercise based on collaborative and transparent conversations with diverse profiles. International consultations were held with colleagues from various countries; external consultations with the federal judicial branch, law firms, professional associations, alumni, and other universities and research institutes; internal consultees included students and faculty of ITAM. Once all the opinions were obtained, they were systematized to identify the coincidence of proposals and the main areas of opportunity. With this basis, recommendations were collated, and a first proposal of curricular reform was generated, which was presented to ITAM to begin an open and collaborative dialogue with the university authorities and the faculty.

The proposal presented at that time was the result of the opinions of all the groups that participated in the consultation exercise, 92 people in total. It is important to note that, given the diversity of the groups consulted, a broad spectrum of opinions was obtained. Therefore, to develop the proposal, priority was given to the request of the university authorities in the sense of modernizing the courses according to the skills currently required in the practice of law and improving the learning experience that students have, which necessarily implied a reduction in courses and credits.

It is important to explain the method followed in the international, external and internal consultations. To obtain international opinions, Amrita Bahri and Guilherme Vasconcelos (full-time law professors at ITAM) developed a 7-

question survey and applied it to colleagues from universities in Australia, Colombia, Finland, Germany, Russia, Sweden, United Kingdom, Dubai, Hong Kong, and United States. The questions were structured to allow participants to express their opinions on the curriculum under revision in relation to the interests of international students, as well as to identify which courses should be included or eliminated from that perspective. The questions were the following:

1. Which courses can be eliminated without compromising the quality of the program?
2. What do you think of the curriculum from an international perspective? In other words, if you are considering sending students from your law school to ITAM, what are the three things you would like to change about our study plan?
3. Which courses, which you consider important, are missing from the curriculum?
4. What are the strategic skills that a legal professional should have?
5. What is your opinion of the balance between theoretical and practical courses, and between national and international law courses?
6. What is your opinion of the balance between mandatory and optional courses?
7. Do you have any additional comments?

Besides, in the exercise of external consultations, meetings were organized with the presence and support of professors from the Law Department. Before each meeting, the study plan under revision was shared so that participants could express their opinions. This exercise was very important to understand what the current expectations of employers are and what experiences have been had in other educational institutions. Among the participants in these conversations were directors and professors from other educational institutions, judges from the Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation, colleagues from the federal judicial branch, partners and lawyers from law firms, and former students. Some of the participants in these meetings teach as adjunct professors in the undergraduate law degree at ITAM. Finally, minutes from each meeting were shared with the participants in case they wanted to clarify any of their points.

Additionally, the internal consultation process involved full-time and part-time faculty, adjunct professors, and students. With the full-time and part-time faculty, a general meeting was organized in which four groups were organized, and a coordinator was appointed for each group. Participants worked within these groups to collectively build a proposal for a new study plan. Each proposal was carefully analyzed to extract the main points. Similarities and differences between the proposals were identified, which were subsequently contrasted with the opinions collected from the other consulted groups. For the consultation with adjunct professors, the same methodology was followed as with external groups, so the results obtained were systematized together with the opinions derived from the external consultation. For the consultation with students, undergraduates from different semesters were invited. These groups included students enrolled in the joint degrees that were mentioned in the introduction to this article.

Before describing the results, it is interesting to note that a thought that was usually present in these consultation exercises was the great challenge faced by universities in designing and teaching academic programs that offer a comprehensive education. That is, programs that do not just allow knowledge to be obtained but also foster the development of diverse skills and tools that shape holistic professionals. In this sense, fruitful debates were generated with the purpose of building a general vision for the graduate profile that is sought.

The first proposal of the revised study plan was presented to ITAM to undertake an open and collaborative dialogue with the university authorities and the faculty of the Law Department. From this point onwards, two general consultations with the law faculty and several meetings between the department leadership and the Dean of Social Sciences were conducted, including consultations with ITAM's Provost about various key changes. Finally, the plan was presented to the Academic Coordination Board of ITAM, composed of the Deans of all its divisions, the Registrar, the Provost, the Rector, and other key leaders such as the Director of Continuing Studies and the General Counsel. This Board approved the plan and then the Law Department proceeded to go through the process of official approval by the Ministry of Public Education. Official recognition of the new study plan was received in June 2024.

Results: the new study plan

The new study plan involves a lower load of courses and credits than the previous one. As may be observed in *figure 1*, this new plan consists of 62 subjects, 352 credits and 9 semesters, distributed in 8 semesters of 7 courses and one semester of 6 courses. The previous study plan had 73 subjects, 386 credits and 10 semesters. However, the structure and content of the new plan continue to ensure a comprehensive education in which theoretical training, writing and argumentation, clinics, interdisciplinary approaches, civic and ethical education, as well as internationalization are consolidated. These pillars have functioned during previous years and will continue to operate as the basis of legal education at ITAM.

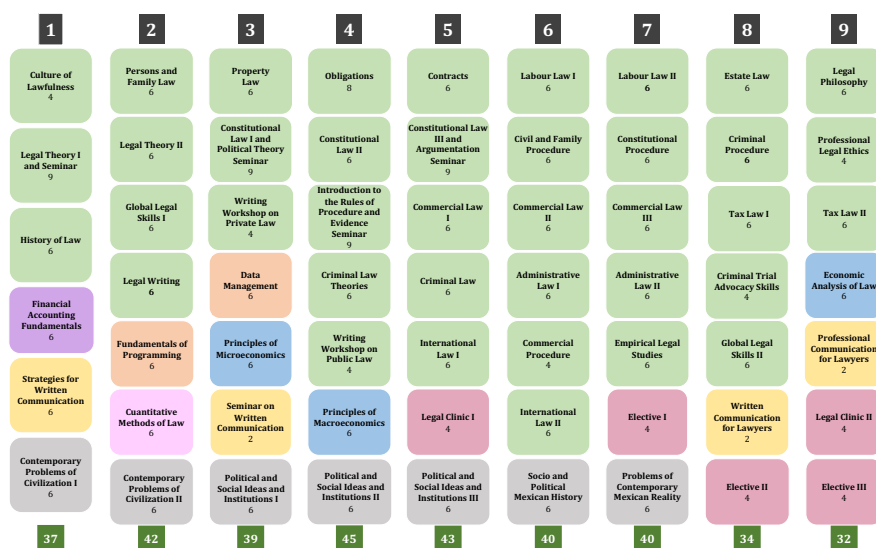


Figure 1: The new law degree study plan at ITAM. Source: The authors.

The new plan comprises a diverse group of courses, including the theory and philosophy of law; international, constitutional, administrative, regulatory, fiscal, labor, civil, criminal, commercial, and financial law; human rights; courses that strengthen areas of economic analysis of law, empirical legal studies and accounting; and courses that focus on the problems of contemporary social reality; as well as ones on the culture of lawfulness and professional ethics. Through effective and motivating pedagogical techniques, each student is expected to develop skills for assertive communication, oral and written argumentation, the construction of criteria regarding legal systems, the

identification of applicable regulations and the interpretation of normative texts. This is as well as fostering an understanding of interdisciplinary implications of legal problems. The Law Department has initiated diverse collaborative efforts with the faculty so that, through teaching and learning processes, certain attitudes are fostered in each student, such as teamwork, negotiation, leadership, resilience, humanity, professionalism, ethical behavior, and willingness to collaborate with their communities.

The main changes implemented in the study plan due to the consultation and revision process described above can be grouped according to six main purposes that ITAM's legal education seeks to achieve. Each of them finds support when considering the good practices used to address global challenges, given the unique characteristics of the Mexican context and the institutional features of ITAM. These six purposes are as follows:

- 1. Without sacrificing the academic quality of the program, the workload the study plan implies was modified to be more reasonable, considering the importance of creating a good balance with the holistic wellbeing of each student and their professional and economic need to work in the last two years.**

Some courses were eliminated to ensure that the degree involves a reasonable workload. It is important to note that no subject area was eliminated, but rather in some cases the number of courses per area was reduced. Some courses were also reorganized to ensure that students take more law subjects in the early stages of their degree, to increase their motivation with respect to the legal profession, and so that as they progress, they can start taking clinical classes and working in the legal field. During their last year, this will provide them with more time to advance with their undergraduate thesis, while accumulating professional experience. One more elective course was added, so that the new program has five elective courses in total, of which two are clinical. This evening out of the legal content across the degree will also help students to learn earlier on what areas of law and practice are more attractive to them and will better help them to choose specialized graduate programs after their degree at ITAM.

It has been noted that, since law students are becoming more aware of the fact that time is a scarce resource, they are usually focusing more on taking rational decisions about how they spend their time. As Tarrant explains, this has

coincided with relevant changes in the way students engage with their university and try to approach their careers in a more time-efficient manner.¹⁴ In this sense, in the implementation of the new program at ITAM, it is critical that professors recognize students' need to clearly understand the role of each course and component of the program in their academic and professional development, so that it can be ensured that the use of students' time in both in-person and asynchronous learning activities is employed in the most efficient manner.

2. In addition to maintaining the courses on global legal skills and international law, an increased emphasis was placed on preparation for moot courts and other student competitions.

The internationalization of legal education implies two complementary aspects: content (for example, courses and curricula) and practices (for instance, international exchanges or experiences).¹⁵ Both aspects are highly valued at ITAM's Law Department and have become stronger over time. Regarding the content, in addition to the subjects on global legal skills and international law, in various courses comparative law methodologies are followed and different legal systems are studied, considering the increasingly global environment in which the legal profession operates. Concerning the practical aspect of internationalization, in the new curriculum one of the elective subjects that will be offered on an ongoing basis is 'International Moot Courts', so that students interested in participating in such competitions can develop the necessary skills to do so. A full-time faculty member has been designated as 'Moots Coordinator' and a fund for which the Law Department raises money to support international travel to competitions has been developed. The Department focuses each year on one of the major international competitions, but also helps students to participate in more regional and national moots to develop their skills and interact in a network of students, professors, coaches, courts, and international organizations that enriches their learning experience and quite often leads to professional opportunities.

The impact of moot courts on the quality of legal education has recently been studied. In particular, it has been found that prioritizing moot courts in law

¹⁴ John Tarrant, 'Teaching Time-Savvy Law Students' (2006) 13 JAMES COOK UNIVERSITY LAW REVIEW 64 <<https://classic.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/JCULawRw/2006/4.html>> accessed 12 January 2025.

¹⁵ Ana María Zorrilla Noriega and Marco Sánchez Arias, *supra* note 4.

faculties has an effective role in developing students' skills that will be needed in their professional practice. In this sense, Abu Issa and colleagues recommend that moot courts should be an integrated part of the study curricula, with a course dedicated to it that grants all students the opportunity to participate.¹⁶

3. To strengthen the ethical and vocational elements of ITAM's legal education, while retaining the 'Culture of Lawfulness' course in the first semester of the study plan, a new 'Professional Legal Ethics' course was included in the final semester of the program.

Through the legal education offered at ITAM, each student is provided with comprehensive training to be an agent of change. This promotes the development of knowledge, skills and attitudes to understand, criticize and change social reality, improving people's lives through law. We prepare each student so that, within the area of specialization they wish to pursue, they act in a professional, rigorous, and ethical manner.

Since 2019, the 'Culture of Lawfulness' course has been taught at ITAM on a mandatory basis for all students entering the law degree. It is taken in the first semester since its main objective is to achieve a general understanding of the tools that law provides to combat the problems of daily life which affect the rule of law. In this way, students are expected to develop skills to act in a responsible and committed manner within the communities they belong to. The premise of this introductory course is that every person is able to apply concepts and theories to transform their immediate social environment. Everything they learn at the university commits them to act as agents of beneficial social change. Since 2021, this course includes a module on 'Professional Ethics' due to ITAM's participation from 2020 to 2023 in the Global Integrity Education Project of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.¹⁷

¹⁶ Hamzeh Abu Issa, Thair Kaddumi and Naji Alwerikat, 'The Impact of Moot Courts on the Quality of Legal Education: Students of the Faculty of Law at the Applied Science Private University as a Model' (2023) 23 JOURNAL OF HIGHER EDUCATION THEORY AND PRACTICE 266 <<https://articlegateway.com/index.php/JHETP/article/view/6681>> accessed 12 January 2025.

¹⁷ Integrity & Ethics | United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, <<https://www.unodc.org/e4j/cs/tertiary/integrity-ethics.html>> accessed 12 January 2025.

Additionally, the new study plan includes ‘Professional Legal Ethics’ so that students who are in their last semester finish their studies by achieving the following learning objectives: (1) understanding the implications of ethical obligations that derive from the legal profession, in light of social reality and the national context; (2) developing their critical thinking regarding potential ethical dilemmas that may arise in the different niches of the legal profession; and (3) reflecting on the role of bar associations and codes of ethics in developing accountability mechanisms and combating malpractice.

As Zavhorodnia and colleagues have proposed, the use of a value-oriented approach in legal education may be effective in fostering an ethical culture amongst students, developing proper ethical mindsets, and helping to acquire relevant knowledge. The authors conducted a pedagogical study to test a set of learning methodologies aimed at cultivating in law students a set of skills related with critical thinking and value-oriented reasoning. It was found that among the most efficient methods for achieving the above objectives were case study analysis and simulations, as well as value-based analysis of regulatory and administrative instruments.¹⁸

These findings coincide with the main pedagogical techniques that will be used in the ‘Professional Legal Ethics’ course, which are discussion of cases that arise in the reality of professional legal practice, group debates and simulations, dialogues with invited specialists, and team projects to study and propose improvements to the current regulatory framework in the fields of higher education and legal professional practice.

4. In the field of experiential learning, adjustments in the clinical program were implemented, with the purpose of clarifying the diverse goals of clinical legal education and relating the clinics more closely to the core courses.

As was previously explained, as an important effort of ITAM’s Law Department, the Center for Access to Justice was founded in 1994 as a pro-bono office that seeks to improve the access to justice of vulnerable groups. In subsequent years, various legal clinics have been created and are administratively attached to this center. Currently, there are the following eight

¹⁸ Vladyslava M. Zavhorodnia et al., ‘Implementing a Value-Oriented Approach to Training Law Students’ (2019) 8 *EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION* 677 <<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1228728.pdf>> accessed 12 January 2025.

clinics: the Clinic of the Center for Access to Justice, the Clinic for Criminal Litigation Against Serious Human Rights Violations, the Legal Clinic for Small Firms, the Law and Public Policy Clinic, the Mediation and Restorative Justice Clinic, the Refugee Services Clinic, the Clinic for the Improvement of Labor Justice, and the Sustainable Development and Environmental Law Clinic.

All these clinics are built on the concept of *learning by doing* and, under the supervision of the director, students manage real cases or projects that have an impact on people's lives. These clinical courses combine several aspects that resonate with the main principles of ITAM's educational approach. They enable students to practice with cases or projects as they cultivate their commitment to pro-bono practice and access to justice. For example, students in the civil, family, criminal, and labor clinics generally attend cases of people in vulnerable situations, who otherwise would not have good quality legal advice and representation. The clinics also allow students to find out earlier what areas of law most motivate and interest them. Finally, they are vehicles for social change, through impactful projects and strategic litigation.

As was previously noted, the curriculum in its revised version includes five elective courses, within which two are clinical. In other words, each student must enroll in at least two clinical subjects during their law degree. In all elective courses, both clinical and non-clinical, an effort is being made to maintain a balance between the areas of public law and those of private law, considering the characteristics of current legal practice and the interests of students.

To capitalize on the advantages that clinical legal education can generate, it is essential that each clinic be carefully designed and properly managed. These advantages include empowering students (because clinics allow them to understand and influence real problems that people experience);¹⁹ generating strong and lasting mentoring relationships with the clinical professor (because this person leads a process of collaborative reflection that brings students closer

¹⁹ James Marson et al., 'The Necessity of Clinical Legal Education in University Law Schools: A UK Perspective' (2005) 7 INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CLINICAL LEGAL EDUCATION, <www.northumbriajournals.co.uk/index.php/ijcle/article/view/95> accessed 12 January 2025.

to their professional goals);²⁰ and enhancing various skills²¹ (to ensure that graduates are well-prepared to adapt to the job market's needs);²² as well as providing a first-hand view of the legal profession's strategic and ethical dimensions.²³ In this sense, teaching lawyering skills, such as interviewing, counseling, negotiating, legal research, and trial advocacy, can be effectively accomplished through the problem method, which emphasizes techniques lawyers use in practice.²⁴

5. Quantitative and interdisciplinary elements were maintained in the new study plan, while the courses 'Empirical Legal Studies', 'Fundamentals of Programming' and 'Data Management' were included.

The pedagogical approach of ITAM's law degree allows students to build a toolbox that prepares them to be professionals who respond to the global challenges of contemporary societies. Through the various curricular and elective courses that integrate the study plan students grasp different aspects of social problems, not exclusively from law but also from other disciplines such as economics, mathematics, or political science.

ITAM's students in all undergraduate degrees take several core courses, and in each case, the courses from other disciplines are taught by professors of the academic department in question, and students from all degree programs are mixed. This ensures that the courses are taught at the same level to all students

²⁰ Clinical and Experiential Learning | Yale Law School, <<https://law.yale.edu/studying-law-yale/clinical-and-experiential-learning>> accessed 12 January 2025.

²¹ Juliet Turner et al., 'Reasons Why Law Students Should Have Access to Learning Law through a Skills-Based Approach' (2018) 52 LAW TEACHER 1 <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03069400.2016.1201739>> accessed 12 January 2025.

²² Omar Madhloom, 'Do Law Firms Benefit from University Law Clinics?' (*Law Gazette*, 15 November 2018) <<https://www.lawgazette.co.uk/commentary-and-opinion/do-law-firms-benefit-from-university-law-clinics/5068310.article>> accessed 12 January 2025; Francina Cantatore et al., 'A Comparative Study into Legal Education and Graduate Employability Skills in Law Students through Pro Bono Law Clinics' (2020) 55 LAW TEACHER 1 <https://pure.bond.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/77183247/AM_A_comparative_study_into_legal_education.pdf> accessed 12 January 2025.

²³ Clinics | Georgetown Law, <<https://www.law.georgetown.edu/experiential-learning/clinics/>> accessed 12 January 2025.

²⁴ Gregory L Ogden, 'The Problem Method in Legal Education' (1984) 34 JOURNAL OF LEGAL EDUCATION 654, 660 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/42897979>> accessed 12 January 2025.

and allows interaction and group work between students of disciplines as diverse as Law, International Relations, Applied Mathematics, and Robotics Engineering.

This university-wide core includes twelve courses. Seven are taught by ITAM's General Studies Department, on 'Political and Social Ideas and Institutions' (I, II, and III), 'Contemporary Problems of Civilization' (I and II), 'Social and Political Mexican History', and 'Problems of Contemporary Mexican Society'. Two are basic economics courses, 'Principles of Microeconomics' and 'Principles of Macroeconomics'. One course focuses on 'Financial Accounting Fundamentals', and two newly renovated courses cover 'Fundamentals of Programming' and 'Data Management'.

In addition to the core, in the new law study plan three courses are included to strengthen interdisciplinary methods for legal analysis. 'Quantitative Methods for Law' allows students to grasp principles of logical proofs, probability, and statistics, providing a strong foundation for 'Empirical Legal Studies' and 'Economic Analysis of Law'.

All these changes are in line with the global tendencies, in the sense that 'interdisciplinarity has become the keyword for any debate on legal education reform'.²⁵ However, what is meant by interdisciplinarity and how it should be achieved is still open for discussion.²⁶ Beyond this discussion, in the curricular design of ITAM's law degree the study of social problems from the perspective of law and various other relevant disciplines is prioritized, in order to gain a more complete understanding. Likewise, it is understood that to grasp the complexity of legal systems, it is necessary to analyze the law *in its context*, the law *in action* and the law *from a comparative perspective*. As Resta points out, comparative law is an apt methodology to confront the challenges of complex societies and to 'give specific content to the paradigm of the jurist as a social engineer'.²⁷

²⁵ Giorgio Resta, '“So Lonely”: Comparative Law and the Quest for Interdisciplinary Legal Education' (2024) 37 INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR THE SEMIOTICS OF LAW 1569 <<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11196-024-10143-1>> accessed 12 January 2025.

²⁶ See, for example: Mariana Valverde, 'Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Legal Studies Beyond Both Disciplinarity and Interdisciplinarity' (2014) 1 Critical Analysis of Law (CAL) 51 <<https://cal.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/cal/article/view/20923>> accessed 12 January 2025.

²⁷ Resta, *supra* note 25.

6. Maintaining the strong emphasis on legal writing and oral argumentation, especially in view of the developments towards oral procedures in the legal systems in Mexico and the Latin-American region.

In terms of legal writing, ITAM has included courses in its previous two study plans, since 2015. For the new study plan, the legal writing subject area was evaluated and steam-lined, in accordance with the goal of preserving a strong emphasis on writing skills while seeking to reduce the number of courses and workload of the program. A balance between written and oral argumentation was also sought, especially since our legal system has moved strongly towards oral argumentation, with new procedural rules putting oral hearings in the center of civil, family, commercial, criminal, and labor lawsuits.

It is important to offer students a variety of rich learning opportunities and align the study plan with the ‘writing-across-the-curriculum movement’ that emphasizes the importance of developing legal writing skills throughout law school. The American Bar Association recognizes the need for competency in ‘written communication in the legal context’ and requires at least one writing experience after the first year.²⁸ Teaching written advocacy involves helping students adopt a persuasive writing mindset, enhancing argument coherence, and crafting narratives that resonate with their audience.²⁹

In this sense, in the second semester of their law degree, ITAM’s students take ‘Legal Writing’, in which they learn the basic principles of structured legal research and writing, and practice basic genres such as case briefs and notes, memoranda, and legal argumentation essays. The basics are reinforced in later semesters with two writing workshops, one focused on Private Law and the other on Public Law. In each of these courses, students practice diverse forms of writing closely related to these broad areas of law, including client opinion letters, contracts, and judicial opinions. Through this program, students are also expected to strengthen their reading comprehension and become capable of identifying the theses, arguments, concepts, and logical articulations that make up a text.

²⁸ Tamar Ezer, ‘Teaching Written Advocacy in a Law Clinic Setting’ (2021) 27 *CLINICAL LAW REVIEW* 167, 168
<https://repository.law.miami.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2000&context=fac_articles>
accessed 12 January 2025.

²⁹ *ibid.*

Regarding oral argumentation, students take three courses that are connected to the new procedures in litigation. These include ‘Oral Proceedings in Civil and Family Law’, ‘Commercial Law Proceedings’, and ‘Criminal Trial Advocacy Skills’. In these courses, students practice with simulations and internal moots of hearings in the different legal fields and often visit federal and state-level courts to attend real hearings that follow the procedures they are studying. Oral argumentation skills are further reinforced through the elective course ‘International Moot Courts’, as well as in exercises focused on learning the basics of common law legal systems, in the courses on ‘Global Legal Skills’ (I and II).

A broader comparative analysis with similar institutions in the region highlights that the six purposes described here are reflected in curricular reforms that have taken place recently. Notable examples are found in countries such as Colombia and Argentina. To explore these reforms, the authors of this article interviewed Eleonora Lozano Rodríguez³⁰ and Martín Federico Böhmer³¹ about their leadership experiences in curricular reforms of law programs.

In the first case, the authors noted important similarities between the ITAM reform and the new curriculum³² for the Law School at *Universidad de los Andes* (UNIANDES). Based on key competencies and a problem-oriented and project-based learning methodology, the central proposal of this new curriculum is to implement an experiential education approach. In this new scheme, active teaching methodologies are incorporated with the purpose of allowing students to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world contexts. Another similarity is the reduction in credit load that the new curriculum at UNIANDES implies, to motivate students to undertake postgraduate plans, job opportunities, or even other careers. Ethics and civic culture also receive considerable attention. But, instead of having specific courses as the ITAM law program does, key civic and ethical competencies form part of the basis on which the curriculum is built. The same occurs regarding legal writing and oral communication. While at ITAM law students necessarily take ‘Fundamentals of Programming’ and ‘Data Management’, at UNIANDES they can choose

³⁰ Interview with Eleonora Lozano Rodríguez, January 9th, 2025.

³¹ Interview with Martín Federico Böhmer, January 10th, 2025.

³² The interactive curriculum can be accessed here: <https://derecho.uniandes.edu.co/sites/default/files/nuevo-pensum-academico-pregrado.pdf>

them among other elective courses. Finally, regarding the consultation process for revising the plan, both institutions involved the entire faculty and discussed the proposal on various occasions with key stakeholders such as students, alumni, and colleagues from other institutions.

Martín Böhmer shared with the authors his reflections on the curricular design and reform processes he led at *Universidad de San Andrés*³³ and *Universidad de Palermo*.³⁴ Talking to him about his experiences allowed the authors of this article to reflect on four relevant challenges that law schools in the region often face when revising study plans. The first is to ensure that higher education addresses uneven educational backgrounds with courses that *teach how to learn* through projects and research work, that have a high component of ethical education, and that prepare students to understand the more advanced courses of the program. The second challenge is to achieve a successful migration to a renewed pedagogical model that addresses the characteristics of today's youth and the legal profession, for which it is essential to involve the faculty and motivate its members to renew their teaching techniques. The third challenge is that to implement a structural reform, a curriculum requires great financial support, which is difficult to achieve in most higher education institutions in Latin America. Especially, having high-quality clinical programs is expensive. The fourth challenge is to foster creativity and inspiration that are needed to transform pedagogical methods but also involving teachers in this process.

Discussion: lessons and future steps

After having explained the design of the consultation process and the main institutional dialogues that were held, as well as the changes that make up the new study plan of the law degree, this section presents the main lessons that the authors of this article draw from the experience. They are intended to be useful for colleagues in other educational institutions who pursue similar goals for improving their academic programs.

1. *Identifying and listening to all stakeholders is necessary for buy-in.* Before determining the exact process, we engaged in a mapping of important stakeholders. This allowed us to structure the process around substantive consultations with all these actors, including our

³³ Current study plan: <<https://udes.edu.ar/departamento-de-derecho/abogacia/plan-de-estudios>>

³⁴ Current study plan: <https://www.palermo.edu/derecho/abogacia/plan_estudios.html>

own university community, students, alumni, full-time professors, clinical professors, and adjunct professors, as well as outside stakeholders such as major employers, that included law firms and the judiciary, and academic colleagues within Mexico and from other countries. The feedback we received was substantively important to define the core content, strengths, and areas for improvement in the previous study plan. But it also increased buy-in, as many stakeholders are now able to identify specific ways in which their opinions and advice were considered.

2. *Consultations at an early stage are useful to get all the picture aspects agreed on.* One virtue of the consultation exercise is that it was carried out at an early stage of the revision process. This allowed us to come to a 'big picture', a consensus on some of the major changes we had to implement. Although the details took time to work out, early consultation allowed us to develop clear goals that guided us through the process.
3. *The process matters.* Our curriculum review was an intensive process with consultations held with very diverse groups from our university community and outside stakeholders, as was outlined in this article. In many cases, we were fortunate to receive feedback and advice that could be considered consistent across different actors. But this was not always the case; at the last stage of the process, we did have to choose some points of view over others in certain areas of the program. We found that, especially in these cases, the process mattered. Due to their significant participation in the process, even when some recommendation of a stakeholder could not be implemented in the result, they were satisfied with the process of transparent consultation and open dialogue.
4. *Give space to both political and technical discussions.* During the consultations and debates, some points were very technical, but others were political considerations, for example, what importance to give to positioning our students well for practice in the local market for legal services, as compared with cultivating a more global, interdisciplinary, and international focus. While we strongly prioritize the latter, we had to cover the former adequately and convince local stakeholders that one focus does not weaken the other, but quite the opposite. This is

more of a political than a technical discussion, and our many consultations helped us to make this point, bringing important actors on board.

5. *Consider what worked and what did not in previous study plans.* In our consultations, analysis, and planning, it was crucial to start with an honest diagnostic of what had worked and what had not in the previous two study plans, that started in 2015 and 2019 respectively. For example, we had included double the number of writing seminars in the 2019 study plan. In our analysis for the current revision, we discovered that there was some unnecessary repetition across some of these writing seminars, while at the same time, we were short-changing oral argumentation courses, especially in the light of major procedural changes in our legal system, that favor oral proceedings in almost all areas of law. Thus, we took the decision to reduce the number of explicit writing courses while increasing the courses on oral argumentation.
6. *Maintain the fundamental pillars but innovate and rationalize the workload.* This was important to achieve the double purpose of the revision process: modernize the program but also improve the balance between student's academic obligations and their wellbeing. As such, while we reduced the size and workload of our study plan by about ten percent with respect to its immediate predecessor, we carefully balanced and maintained all its fundamentals: skills-based instructional design and teaching, legal vocation and ethics emphasis, strong theoretical foundations with experiential learning, and an interdisciplinary, international, and global focus.
7. *Build a more mature approach to the global focus.* Over two previous study plans in which we focused heavily on global legal skills, we learned about how many courses we really needed and how to best focus them. For example, in the 2019 study plan students took two courses on 'Legal Argumentation in English', and then three courses on 'Global Legal Skills'. As with the writing component, we realized that students perceived some repetition in materials and felt that there were too many courses within this category. In the new plan, there are two 'Global Legal Skills' courses, focused on learning the basics of common law systems, as well as transversal comparative components

in our constitutional sequence, ‘Empirical Legal Studies’, ‘Economic Analysis of Law’, and the elective on ‘International Moot Courts’. These courses will together provide a strong global skills emphasis, while at the same time giving students experience-based and interdisciplinary legal education.

8. *Emphasize the skills-based approach.* Courses are developed under a methodology that allows the development of skills to solve conflicts, support positions with arguments, and think in a critical and structured manner. Student participation in their own learning is always pursued, which allows the development of not only cognitive aspects, but also interpersonal, socio-emotional, technological and professional skills.
9. *Strong emphasis on modern instructional design.* The courses’ syllabi are structured based on a main purpose, from which specific learning objectives are derived. Each objective is based on skills that are sought to be developed. Derived from this base, learning activities, interaction channels, feedback mechanisms, and evaluation criteria are designed.
10. Although there are no specific mandatory courses on these matters, *there must be cross-cutting themes such as environment, gender, interculturality, among others.* Based on full recognition of cultural plurality and social diversity, our curricular model promotes the understanding of different perspectives and adapts to the specific needs of each context. This flexibility recognizes the need to base professional action on basic principles such as equality, justice, and the guarantee of human rights.

As occurs with any approved reform to an academic program, the following steps that are necessary to achieve the desired results in the learning experience for each student focus on the implementation of the new study plan. The management and administration of the academic program must be carried out in a careful, efficient, and organized manner, with clear schedules and calendars that enable the planning and roll out of the program across its nine semesters. In addition, there must be mechanisms to monitor the progress of those enrolled in the program, which ensures personalized support in both human and academic terms.

Learning is made possible by the excellent professors who give the courses that are part of the curriculum. In this sense, it is necessary to motivate them to focus on the learning objectives in each syllabus, while introducing innovative teaching strategies and channels of interaction that motivate students and help them to develop into problem-solvers in the legal profession. We also need to ensure effective communication across subject areas and especially between professors who teach courses in the same sequences, to make sure that at the level of course content, we have the best coordination possible.

It is also essential to maintain strategic alliances with diverse institutions and organizations that provide students with opportunities to collaborate on joint projects, access additional resources and stay abreast of trends, reforms and areas for improvement in legal systems.

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