

Original Article

Publishers and production of academic books in Mexico: 2013–2019

Esteban Giraldo-González¹✉, Edgar García-Valencia²,
Juan Felipe Córdoba-Restrepo³, Elea Giménez-Toledo⁴

¹Universidad Carlos III, Madrid, Spain

esteban.giraldo@alumnos.uc3m.es

orcid.org/0000-0002-1496-1668

²Universidad Veracruzana, Xalapa, Mexico

orcid.org/0000-0003-4941-1532

³Juan Felipe Córdoba-Restrepo

orcid.org/0000-0001-9024-9309

⁴Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Madrid, Spain

orcid.org/0000-0001-5425-0003

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E.G.G. and E.G.V. prepared the manuscript with contributions from all co-authors; J.F.C.R. and E.G.T. conceptualized the study, conducted the focus group, guided the sessions, and reviewed the manuscript.

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Abstract

Background: The project *Cartografía de la Edición Académica Iberoamericana* aims to analyze the production of academic books in Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking countries in the Americas. Following the path opened by similar studies in Colombia and Brazil, we present the results for Mexico.

Objectives: To analyze academic books published in Mexico between 2013 and 2019 to examine the entities that published the books and their respective shares in the total output.

Methods: A mix of quantitative and qualitative approaches was used to characterize the Mexican publishers of academic books based on data on ISBNs, the International Standard Book Numbers. The data comprised the information provided to the agency that assigns a unique ISBN to each book. We also used the Delphi method and formed discussion groups of experts. The groups were set up on the basis of responses to semi-structured questionnaires that sought to determine the criteria an entity must satisfy to be considered an academic publisher.

Conclusions: Of the 196 533 ISBNs issued in Mexico between 2013 and 2019, 117 929 (60%) were issued for books dealing with academic subjects. Commercial publishers accounted for the largest share of those books (63 044 ISBNs, or 53.4% of all the academic books), followed by university presses (29 628 ISBNs, or 25.1%). The group of experts suggested that among the 1289 publishers that requested ISBNs for academic books, only 151 (11.7%) can be considered truly academic publishers; 678 (52.6%) cannot; and 460 (35.7%) were borderline cases, as they meet some but not all the criteria for them to be considered truly academic.

Keywords:

Academic books, academic publishers, content circulation, Delphi panel, knowledge dissemination, Mexico

Introduction

Surveying and assessing the landscape of academic book publishing is of paramount importance, particularly for the humanities and social sciences,^{1,2} because in this domain, books continue to be the predominant mode of publication favoured by researchers and academics globally. Comprehensive studies evaluating both the quantity and quality of publications in this realm are indispensable. Such studies help authors secure publication with reputable publishers, help publishers attain recognition and eminence, and help agencies and institutions that evaluate research in formulating supportive public policies and budgets. Contextual nuances must be meticulously considered by these agencies and institutions to render judgments that acknowledge the distinct characteristics of their editorial domains and academic communities. Such considerations foster the advancement of scientific discourse and the dissemination of best practices within their respective spheres of influence. Consequently, scrutinizing this domain based on the volume of book production and publisher engagement emerges as a foundational endeavour. Such a scrutiny establishes a framework conducive to studies facilitating the survey, evaluation, and monitoring of academic standards maintained by publishers across various countries.³

Academic publishing in Mexico has drawn much interest from specialists, but it has not been studied in detail, mainly because of the difficulty in obtaining concrete data on the academic publishing industry.

The present study aligns with the general studies systematically published by Centro Regional para el Fomento del Libro en América Latina y el Caribe, or Regional Centre for Book Promotion in Latin America and the Caribbean (CERLALC), titled *El espacio iberoamericano del libro* (the Ibero-American

book space).⁴ Based on International Standard Book Number (ISBN) records, the series analyses the evolution of titles and copies produced, the impact of the different types of agents that publish them, and the characteristics of the published offerings in the last 5 years. The present study also consolidates the methods the team developed earlier from the EsCIENCIA platform (<https://pti-esciencia.csi.ces/>) and the ILIA (Investigación sobre el libro académico; the Spanish acronym translates to ‘research group on the academic book’) of the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas (CSIC, which is the Higher Council for Scientific Research in Spain).² The study’s precursor is the article *La edición académica española a partir de sus metadatos* (the Spanish academic edition from its metadata),⁴ along with another document titled *La edición universitaria española. Análisis de la producción editorial de libros* (Spanish university publishing: analysis of book publishing production)⁵ and an article about the impacts of academic publication in Spanish.⁶

This paper adds to the overview presented in the article on the production of academic books in Colombia between 2013 and 2019: an advance for comparative studies,⁷ and to the book chapter about the production of academic books in Brazil within the same time frame.⁸ From a Mexican perspective, there were no works in this regard until De la Mora, García, and Karp,⁹ whose method is based on the data from ISBNs assigned between 2009 and 2011.

Until today, only a few studies have been based on production, which could have used comprehensive information sources such as the ISBN database. Instead, pertinent reflections proliferated¹⁰ on the publishing trade, distribution, catalogue composition, and even research evaluation.

Taking into account these approaches, our study draws upon ISBN records, which are

recognized as the most comprehensive and universally accepted database for publishers to document their production.

Methods

Our method comprised two parts, namely data analysis (the quantitative approach) and a focus group (the qualitative approach).

Data analysis

Mexico's publishing output is registered by the state through the ISBN Agency within the National Copyright Institute (Indautor), a decentralized body attached to the Ministry of Public Education responsible for the protection and promotion of copyright as well as the management of ISBNs and International Standard Serial Numbers (ISSNs). The information is provided by publishers at the time of registration and the assignment of an ISBN through the platform provided by CERLALC to different Latin American countries. If the information is complete, an ISBN is assigned within about 5 days. The number is assigned almost towards the end of the publishing process when the book is 15 days away from going to press (for physical books). "One should consider that the application for ISBN number and in its case ISBN number and Bar Code certificate' should be made when the book is at most two weeks away for its entry to the printing workshops."¹¹

After compiling data on all ISBNs issued between 2013 and 2019, facilitated by the efforts of CERLALC, we proceeded with a comprehensive analysis of published output. This analysis aimed to identify all academic publications within the specified time frame. We chose the period 2013–2019 because it represents the longest stretch of time for which consistent and comparable data were available for every year. We followed the method used in earlier studies across all countries that are part of the Cartography of Ibero-American Academic Publishing.⁴

To refine the selection of academic books within the broader ISBN database, a specific process was undertaken: books registered by authors as publishers were excluded because such self-published books typically lack institutional support in the form of editors. Following this initial exclusion, books on non-academic subjects—as identified based on the Dewey Decimal Classification, a system historically employed by ISBN agencies in our respective countries—were also excluded. This confined our selection to academic subjects because, in registering for an ISBN, the subject category was specified by the publishers themselves, excluding the subjects described in Annexe 1. After this step, we compared the production of academic books to that of all books year by year and also grouped them using the following classification provided by CERLALC.¹²

- Commercial publishers.
- University publishers (including faculty, department, or specialized agency within a university or similar institution).
- Private entities other than publishers (any private company or organization whose primary activity is not book publishing but may engage in it occasionally).
- Public entities (public institutions that do not primarily engage in book publishing but may do so sporadically).

Focus group

Next, we began the phase of qualitative work comprising consultations with publication specialists in the country, based on a work scheme similar to that used in the Delphi method.¹³ The study recruited seven leaders from reputable publishing houses operating in both academic and commercial sectors, along with researchers and university professors who maintain established connections within Altexto, the network of university publishers in Mexico. More specifically, the latter were asked to categorize the publishers

as academic or non-academic, although they may have published books on scientific subjects.

Given the differences of opinion among Mexican publishing specialists, we held a focus group discussion to reach a consensus on who could be considered core academic publishers in Mexico.

In a session designed specifically to examine the challenges associated with determining whether a given publisher can be categorized as an academic publisher, the participants were asked a series of questions for each publisher on the list. Among the questions were the following:

- Are you familiar with the backlist or frontlist of this academic publishing house?
- Are you aware of any rigorous manuscript selection processes?
- Does this publishing house have specialized book series?

Based on this initial separation of academic publishers from non-academic publishers, the working group analysed the agreements and disagreements in the classification provided by the participants and reclassified the publishers as required. The sessions were facilitated by members of the research team responsible for the Ibero-American Academic Publishing Cartography, who are also the authors of this article.

Participants were provided with detailed information regarding the overarching objectives and scope of the research as well as the specific aims of the meetings. Written informed consent was obtained from the participants regarding their willingness to participate in the study.

Additionally, the study was conducted with the consent and support of Altexto, the association of university publishers in Mexico, and EULAC, the Association of

University Publishers of Latin America and the Caribbean.

Results

Data analysis (The quantitative phase)

In the 7-year period (2013–2019), a total of 196,533 ISBNs were issued, and commercial publishers accounted for a major share (58%) of the total (Table 1). They were followed by university publishers (17%), public entities (11%), private entities other than publishing houses (7%), author-publishers (5%), and miscellaneous agents (less than 1%). It is important to clarify that a single registration does not necessarily correspond to a unique title, because an ISBN can be issued for each distinct edition of a book, including physical, digital, or print on demand.

Across the study period, the share of commercial publishers declined, while that of public institutions and university publishers increased slightly (Table 1).

The participation of private publishers is in line with that in several Latin American countries. In other words, excluding author-publishers, private publishers are characterized by the absence of formal institutional backing, which labels them as self-publishers, and their output does not always enter the conventional book distribution networks. However, their inclusion in the present study broadens its scope.

Despite the sustained decline in applications, ISBNs related to academic subjects maintained a steady trend; even the slight decrease in 2016 was made up for in the following year. Although these figures are only part of the information, which will still be refined later, they clearly show a balanced market for, and sustained production of, academic books in a broad sense.

The first impression, namely that Mexico publishes a large number of academic books

Table 1. International Standard Book Numbers (ISBNs) issued in Mexico, by publisher category (2013–2019)

Year	Author-publisher		Commercial publisher		Others		Private non-publishing entity		Public entity		University publisher		Total
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	
2013	1574	5.3	16998	57.7	203	0.7	2377	8.1	3558	12.1	4754	16.1	29464
2014	1851	6.3	16916	57.3	235	0.8	2141	7.3	3716	12.6	4666	15.8	29525
2015	1626	5.5	17146	57.4	257	0.9	2008	6.7	3957	13.2	4901	16.4	29895
2016	1411	5.1	16881	60.4	200	0.7	1738	6.2	2968	10.6	4745	17.0	27943
2017	1055	4.0	15859	60.1	108	0.4	2100	8.0	2492	9.4	4804	18.2	26418
2018	1218	4.4	15604	56.5	173	0.6	2138	7.7	3322	12.0	5180	18.8	27635
2019	1245	4.9	14468	56.4	247	1.0	1967	7.7	2059	8.0	5667	22.1	25653
Total or average	9980	5.1	113872	57.9	1423	0.7	14469	7.4	22072	11.2	34717	17.7	196533

To conduct a more detailed analysis of the academic publishing sector, we removed the records associated with author-publishers and then, for the remaining publishers, we also removed titles related to non-academic subjects. This elimination left us with the numbers shown in Table 2.

every year, was confirmed later in the qualitative phase of the work involving experts in Mexican publishing. Dividing the total of 117929 (Table 2) into different categories of publishers (Table 3) showed the predominance of commercial publishers (53%), followed by university presses (25%). In fact, the university publishers were the only category that registered growth—from 23% in 2016 to more than 30% in 2019—during the study period, a modest but sustained increase despite the progressive decline overall as well as the marked drop in the share of public entities and especially making up for the declining share of commercial publishing.

Data analysis through the focus group (The qualitative phase)

Despite the eliminations mentioned earlier, we were left with a total of 1289 publishers, each with diverse profiles: large commercial publishers, state publishers of long standing,

university presses, small research centres functioning as publishers, and so on. This large number needed to be brought down to allow a more detailed study.

As a starting point to that end, we used the Delphi method, which involves several rounds of questionnaires sent to a panel of experts to arrive at a consensus. First, we surveyed five specialists in Mexican publishing selected by our team. The experts were asked to review the list of publishers initially identified and determine which of them can be considered academic publishers. This first round of consultation identified 90 (7.0%) among the list as academic publishers, 266 (20.6%) as non-academic publishers, and 933 (72.4%) as falling into the indeterminate category (the experts did not reach a consensus). This ambiguity led us to hold a focus-group discussion with experts—which revealed that there is no univocal definition of an “academic publishing house.” Some

Table 2. International Standard Book Numbers (ISBNs) issued in Mexico for titles on academic subjects published by entities other than author-publishers (2013–2019)

Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
ISBNs	17875	17892	17839	15991	15835	16934	15563	117929
Percentage of annual total	61%	61%	60%	57%	60%	61%	61%	60%

Table 3. International Standard Book Numbers (ISBNs) issued in Mexico for titles on academic subjects published by entities other than author-publishers, by publisher category (2013-2019)

Year	Commercial publisher		Others		Private non-publishing entity		Public entity		University presses		Total
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	
2013	9746	54.5	115	0.6	1591	8.9	2290	12.8	4133	23.1	17875
2014	10 027	56.0	178	1.0	1429	8.0	2161	12.1	4097	22.9	17892
2015	9739	54.6	188	1.1	1327	7.4	2361	13.2	4224	23.7	17839
2016	8721	54.5	117	0.7	1166	7.3	2080	13.0	3907	24.4	15991
2017	8436	53.3	71	0.4	1490	9.4	1578	11.1	4080	25.8	15835
2018	8579	50.7	101	0.6	1489	8.8	2375	14.0	4390	25.9	16934
2019	7796	50.1	157	1.0	1538	9.9	1275	8.2	4797	30.8	15563
Total or average	63 044	53.5	927	0.8	10 030	8.5	14 300	12.1	29 628	25.1	117929

experts considered only university presses as academic publishers, excluding commercial or institutional publishers that publish academic books, whereas other experts were more inclusive. Neither appointing external reviewers for manuscripts or specialized book series nor publishing books in a particular genre served as a definitive criterion of academic publishers for every expert. Appointing reviewers, according to some experts, should not be a criterion but rather an integral part of the process of publishing academic books

Finally, the focus group agreed that a publisher could be considered an academic publisher if it met at least two of the following three criteria.

1: The publisher is an institution of higher education with research as one of its substantive activities or is attached to a research center.

2: The publisher has a backlist available in physical or digital form.

3: The publisher has at least one book series devoted to any academic field so that original research is covered to some extent with more than two titles.

On reaching a consensus, we carried out a second round of consultation, which yielded quite different results: 151 academic publishers, 678 non-academic publishers, and 460 publishers of indeterminate status (Table 4).

This process enabled us to compile an initial core list of Mexican academic publishers, regardless of their administrative structure, whether public, private, national, or transnational. This core list also included publishers that were not unanimously agreed upon by the experts as academic publishers but were validated in transnational studies or databases, such as the Book Citation Index, SciELO Books, or Scholarly Publishers

Table 4. Categorizing of Mexican publishers as academic, non-academic, or indeterminate by specialists in publishing

Category	First round of consultation		Second round of consultation	
	n	%	n	%
Academic publisher	90	7.0	151	11.7
Non-academic publisher	933	72.4	678	52.6
Indeterminate status	266	20.6	460	35.7
Total	1289	100.0	1289	100.0

Table 5. Categories of Mexican academic publishers that formed the core list of such publishers

Category	Publishers	
	n	%
Public university	44	32.1
Public research centre	27	19.7
National commercial	24	17.5
International commercial	15	10.9
Private institution	14	10.2
Public institution	13	9.5
Total	137	100.0

Indicators, and were affiliated with a research institution. The list was not definitive, but served as a starting point and allowed us to identify those publishers that can be considered academic for different reasons. It is worth identifying those who were primary contributors to academic publishing, and in the core list, universities and publicly funded research centres were in the majority (Table 5).

Discussion

The imperative to enhance quality of data provided by publishers

In Mexico, the ISBN is the leading indicator of book production because it is mandatory for all publishing entities to register each title by obtaining an ISBN, as established by the Federal Copyright Law (Article 53, Section IV). Therefore, practically all the national published output passes through this registry, making the database an essential source for accurate figures on such output.

Moreover, in Mexico, the decrease in production, in terms of print copies, can be corroborated through the data that private publishers supply to Cámara Nacional de la Industria Editorial Mexicana (CANIEM, or the national chamber of the Mexican publishing industry). The data go into a yearbook of indicators of the private publishing sector.¹⁴ The yearbook

for 2017 showed a significant decrease since 2013, mainly due to the decrease in government purchases through the National Commission of Free Textbooks—which include books for scholarly education—that had once been very prominent. Between 2013 and 2017, these public purchases from private publishers accounted for almost half of their production.

Under the circumstances, the industry self-regulated its publishing to maintain its size and standards, lowered its risks by publishing fewer new titles, reprinted proven titles, and adjusted print runs and prices, besides increasingly experimenting with a format that would assume greater prominence, namely, the digital book.

The percentage of books dealing with academic subjects is strikingly high. In Spain, that share did not reach 20%.² However, in a similar study in Colombia in 2021, the percentage of scholarly books was as high as that in Mexico.⁷ A preliminary analysis of the titles and subject metadata, both in Colombia and Mexico, revealed many errors and inaccuracies in classifying the books submitted for the ISBN. Incorrect classification may stem from various factors, including outdated subject catalogues and insufficient training of personnel responsible for inputting metadata into ISBN databases within publishing houses. This, in turn, is probably related to a lack of awareness of the importance of the quality of metadata throughout the book chain. Not surprisingly, this quality is specifically addressed in some publishing industry programs, training courses, and working groups.^{8–10}

Exploring core academic publishers in Mexico

Two methodological issues should be emphasized in the process of mapping publications.

On the one hand, the enormous difference between the high initial number of publishers (1289) reporting publication of scholarly

books and the final, much lower number (151), once the qualitative phase was complete, underscores issues with the quality of metadata. Many books are assigned to subject categories such as sociology, economics, or anthropology, even though those books do not specifically deal with these academic disciplines. The lack of precision in assigning books to the correct subject category has a significant impact on the book chain because subject metadata are used by distributors, booksellers, and online platforms to find books on a given subject. Through this research, we found that the “noise” produced by the poor quality of metadata is remarkable, which undoubtedly suggests the need for sensitivity and bringing editorial teams up to date in terms of subject metadata and classification standards. Moreover, it is crucial to acknowledge the challenge of establishing a comprehensive and universally accepted definition of academic books and publishers. This study is part of the reflection needed to crystallize this definition, not by imposing prescriptive norms taken from foreign traditions but rather by recognizing the specific characteristics and practices of publishing houses in Ibero-America. We believe that the criteria agreed upon by the group of experts for a publisher to be considered scholarly represent a minimum requirement. Given that scholarly publishing is framed in scientific practice, which requires validation of results, a fundamental criterion for delimiting publishers would have to be some kind of original selection system.^{4,18,19} Furthermore, the evaluation of scientific activity requires the identification of publishers whose procedures for books are comparable to some extent with those used for journals, even if their projects and nature are different.

This research highlights the enormous diversity of publishers of academic books and thus

provides a tool that gives value to scientific production in Spanish. Without such a tool, the reality of academic publishing is diluted, leading to a lack of precision about a publishing subsector that is essential not only in the communication of science among specialists but also from academia to society.^{20,21} Working on the Ibero-American academic publishing sector also means focusing on Spanish and other non-English languages in science communication.

It is crucial to highlight certain limitations of this study. Firstly, neither “academic publisher” nor “academic book” has a universally acknowledged definition. Addressing this gap constitutes one of the primary objectives of the research group affiliated with this study. Secondly, it is imperative to underscore the importance of ensuring the accuracy and reliability of information during the process of registering a title for the ISBN. This responsibility primarily rests with editors and regulatory bodies governing publishing in the respective countries. Moreover, the research group overseeing this study is deeply committed to complementing its preliminary findings with initiatives aimed at enhancing the accuracy and validation of data recorded in the forms that underpin such registrations. Additionally, it is noteworthy to highlight the dearth of research facilitating meaningful dialogues not only among scholars and researchers but also among all stakeholders within the publishing domain across our regions. Such dialogues are essential for delineating and subsequently evaluating the significance of academic publications in Spanish and Portuguese within both regional and global contexts.

The results of the study identified 151 publishers considered academic by a group of specialists. It is a first reference that should serve, on the one hand, to underline the

consensus on academic publishing and transfer it to those who are competent in evaluating scientific activity. In this way, academic books produced in the region can be better assessed based on specific knowledge about their publishers, which will add greater depth in approaching the second phase of this project: the study of publishing practices of these imprints. Compiling this core list of publishers led us to go beyond the consideration—almost exclusively—of the world-renowned international imprints in terms of evaluating the place of books in the processes that attempt to evaluate scientific research.

Moreover, the present study draws attention to the editorial structures that produce scientific content in Spanish and in other languages of the region. Thus, the study introduces some reflections on the role played by the languages of the region in the connection between science and society. The availability of specific data on the academic publishing sector can increase institutional awareness of the importance of preserving content that covers topics not addressed by other publishers and thus guarantees plurality and bibliodiversity. The investigation also serves publishers, who will have at their disposal some agreed-upon coordinates for identifying academic imprints. In terms of book policies, the study provides global knowledge of the publishing sector. By identifying the imprints of this subsector, namely the academic imprints, the market structure, such as the size of the publishing houses, the average number of titles published per year, turnover, and average print runs will be better understood.

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