International Journal of Current Science Research and Review
ISSN: 2581-8341
Volume 09 Issue 07 July 2026
DOI: 10.47191/ijcsrr/V9-i7-57, Impact Factor: 8.048
IJCSRR @ 2026
www.ijcsrr.org

Research Skills and Degree Completion Efficiency: A Diagnosis of the Obstacles to Graduation by Thesis

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ABSTRACT: The expansion in the number of options for obtaining a professional degree at Mexican universities has not translated into an improvement in students' scientific output. On the contrary, indicators show a gradual decline in the choice of the thesis over standardized examinations, amid an ongoing debate about the usefulness of degree-qualifying projects given the lengthening of graduation times and the delayed entry into the labor market. This article analyzes the socioeconomic, personal, pedagogical, and methodological problems that students of the Bachelor's program in Communication and Media at the Universidad Autónoma de Nayarit (UAN) face when developing their thesis. Using a quantitative approach and a descriptive cross-sectional design, a questionnaire was administered to a sample of 78 eighth-semester students. The results reveal a contradiction: although the curriculum includes five consecutive research courses, 71.7% of the student body prefers to graduate through the EGEL-CENEVAL examination because they regard it as a faster process. Meanwhile, the 17.8% who consider writing a thesis face long working hours (91%), a lack of accessible advising (73.1%), and a theory-based form of teaching that does not translate into practical scientific-writing skills. It is concluded that the lag stems from factors related to pedagogical and institutional support; therefore, restructuring the research courses into production-workshop formats is proposed.

KEYWORDS: communication and media, degree completion efficiency, higher education, research skills.

INTRODUCTION

The Context of University Graduation in Mexico

Over the past few decades, higher-education policies in Latin America have centered on degree-completion efficiency indicators. Under the assumption of the knowledge society, raising graduation rates was thought to have an impact on economic competitiveness and on the development of regional critical thinking. However, this drive to raise statistical indicators altered traditional academic processes (Tenti Fanfani, 2021).

Historically, the bachelor's thesis was the central requirement for beginning professional practice. This work validated both the student's technical knowledge and their ability to pose a problem, design a methodology, collect field data, and argue their conclusions in writing. Faced with the lag in graduation caused by the difficulties inherent in this process, institutions relaxed their regulations and introduced alternative options: graduation by grade-point average, a report on work experience, refresher seminars, and CENEVAL's General Examination of Knowledge (De Garay, 2023).

This tendency to replace the thesis is part of the current academic debate. Various institutional initiatives, and even legislative proposals, seek to diversify graduation pathways on the argument that the thesis can unnecessarily delay young people's entry into the labor market (Publimetro México / H. Congreso de la Unión, 2025). Data from the National Association of Universities and Institutions of Higher Education (ANUIES, 2025) indicate that a significant percentage of graduates do not obtain their degree in the first few years after completing their credits, pointing to the degree-qualifying document as one of the main causes. This situation affects access to formal employment for graduates who lack the certifying document.

Legislative Initiatives Aimed at Addressing the Graduation Lag and Strengthening Scientific Skills

Act for the Promotion of Comprehensive Graduation and Administrative Simplification in Higher Education

Objective: To ensure that public and private universities establish graduation mechanisms that do not represent a bureaucratic or economic barrier for the graduate, encouraging graduation processes to be completed in parallel with the final year of study (De Garay, 2023; García García, 2019).

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Key points:
Curricularization of the process: Requiring curricula to include practical, mandatory-production graduation seminars in the final year, ensuring that students graduate with a completed project (García García, 2019).
Free processing of the first degree: Waiving institutional fees for obtaining the first professional degree for young people from vulnerable groups or those who enter the labor market early (Covo, 1993; Tenti Fanfani, 2021).
General Act for the Development of Research and Scientific Skills from the Undergraduate Level
Objective: To modify educational-quality assessment policies so that "degree-completion efficiency" is measured not only quantitatively (how many students graduate) but also qualitatively (what critical-thinking, written-argumentation, and problem-solving skills they acquired) (De Garay, 2023; Estrada-Araoz et al., 2024; Reyes-Rodríguez, 2025).
Key points:
Funding for local projects: Creating an economic support fund for bachelor's theses directly linked to solving public, social, or communication problems in the regions (Maldonado et al., 2023; Rizo, n.d.).
Incentives for mentoring: Recognizing teaching hours and granting genuine administrative-load reductions for full-time and part-time professors who devote themselves to personalized thesis advising, mitigating methodological distance (Ynoub, 2022).
Reform of the General Act on Higher Education (Flexibility for Working Students)
Objective: To protect and provide incentives for the graduating student population who must carry out work activities simultaneously with their university studies, preventing the abandonment of the research project due to time constraints (ANUIES, 2025; Reyes, Leyva & Durán, 2024).
Key points:
Hybrid advising modalities: Mandating the implementation of digital platforms, communities of practice, and flexible schedules for the support and mentoring of degree-qualifying projects by working students (Reyes, Leyva & Durán, 2024; Ynoub, 2022).
Collaborative graduation residencies: Incentives for institutional schemes that link the student's practical experience with the writing of their document, remedying the methodological weaknesses carried over throughout the program (Aguilar, 2002; Calvo, 2004).

Consequences of the Relaxation of Regulations

Although regulatory reforms succeeded in raising graduation percentages and made it possible to meet institutional statistical targets, a corresponding weakening in the development of research capacities at the bachelor's level is observed. The thesis went from being the culmination of university training to being perceived as a complex administrative process. Statistics from public universities across the country show that the number of students who opt for the traditional thesis has steadily declined over the past two decades, consolidating a reality in which most prefer alternatives that do not require the production of extensive scientific texts (López et al., 2013).

Students perform a cost-benefit analysis of the available options. If both regulations and the labor market treat a one-day multiple-choice test as equivalent to a year of research, the common choice is to opt for the administrative route. As a result, universities reduce their production of knowledge applied to the problems of their local environments.

The Situation in the Communication and Media Program at UAN

This problem is observed at the Universidad Autónoma de Nayarit (UAN), specifically in the Communication and Media program, attached to the Academic Unit of Social Sciences. Here there is an internal contradiction: the graduate profile aims to train critical professionals capable of "analyzing the media and sociocultural processes of the state of Nayarit" (García García, 2019, p. 14). To this end, the curriculum includes a methodological track of five consecutive courses dedicated to research, distributed from the third semester through the end of the program. Despite this curricular load, the percentage of students who complete a thesis is low. Most resort to the EGEL-CENEVAL examination to close out their academic cycle.

In light of this, it is necessary to ask: Why does a five-semester research track fail to consolidate the skills students need to write their thesis? What material barriers do young people encounter when producing this document? In what way do teaching practices or the structure of the university influence student scientific output? The aim of this work is to answer these questions through an empirical diagnosis of the personal, economic, and pedagogical variables that shape UAN students' choices regarding their graduation.

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THEORICAL FRAMEWORK

Nature and Attributes of Scientific Research in Higher Education

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have the responsibility of actively contributing to scientific and technological development at the national level. In this domain, research should not be conceived as a mere administrative formality but as the process of rigorously applying the scientific method. According to Tamayo (1994), research is a dynamic process that, by methodological means, seeks to obtain relevant and reliable information with the central aim of understanding, verifying, correcting, or enriching existing knowledge.

From a complementary perspective, Rodríguez (2005) notes that the validity and impact of any scientific study rest on three essential elements: the researcher's intrinsic creativity in formulating novel questions, the methodological rigor of the design, and the ethical integrity with which the inquiry is conducted. Research also has fixed structural attributes: it requires systematization and accuracy, demands objectivity and logical coherence, calls for a clear delimitation of the object of study, and adopts a systemic approach in which the construction of knowledge proceeds not linearly but recursively. The ultimate purpose of this intellectual effort is to produce facts and ideas that feed back into critical thinking within professional practice.

To consolidate this progress, Yuren (2000) stresses that research attains the status of science only when it manages to move from scattered data, laws, and hypotheses toward the solid construction of theories. Theory is the indispensable link of scientific activity, since all inquiry begins with specific questions and culminates in the building of compact systems of ideas that explain reality holistically.

The Epistemic and Formative Concept of the Thesis

Historically, the thesis has been established as the ideal mechanism for assessing whether a student has internalized the scientific competencies of their discipline. According to the academic specifications of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM, 2019), the thesis is formally defined as a concrete proposition concerning a topic of disciplinary interest to the student, which is posed, analyzed, verified, and concluded rigorously through a systematized research process appropriate to the level of study held.

Beyond its structure as a final written report, the thesis represents the outcome of a long formative process that demands disciplined intellectual work, characterized by the deployment of complex skills in comprehensive reading, academic writing, analysis of variables, and the systematization of social problems. As López et al. (2013) note, despite the diversification of graduation pathways that has eased the terminal burden in some HEIs, the thesis is preserved as the core modality in the university imaginary because of its capacity to activate the student's reflective profile. However, the intrinsic demand for writing that presupposes high levels of methodological abstraction is, at the same time, the main cognitive barrier where students experience helplessness in the face of prior gaps in their training or the absence of effective tutorial support.

Historical Background of the Graduation Lag in Mexico

The problem of low degree-completion efficiency via the thesis modality has been a focus of concern, studied systematically in Mexico since the late twentieth century. During the 1980s and 1990s, institutional analytical efforts tended to prioritize bureaucratic and administrative factors, overlooking the psychopedagogical and formative dimensions of thesis writers. Nonetheless, pioneering research began to shift away from this single-factor view. Milena Covo (1993), through an exploratory study at UNAM's ENEP Acatlán, demonstrated that personal socioeconomic history, prior reading and writing preparation, and the quality of the lived experience inside university classrooms act as direct determinants of success or abandonment in the graduation process.

During that same period, Josefina Granja (1993) proposed a qualitative approach to decipher the obstacles to graduation, locating them within the complex web of interactions, discourses, and power relations configured in the everyday space of the school, which invisibly affect graduate performance. During the 2000s, research on graduation matured as it became a central object of study in national graduate programs. Ángeles Cabrera (2000), analyzing the dynamics of the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional (UPN Ajusco), identified a multifactorial phenomenon in which problems of methodological teaching in the classroom, serious deficiencies in students' prior technical training, and the practical inoperability of curricular designs—operating disconnected from the real demands of thesis writing—were intertwined.

In parallel, Mónica Calvo (2004) brought to light the institutional tensions produced by the rigidity of traditional regulations in the face of emerging graduation programs, showing that a homogeneous view of graduation and top-down advising styles generate cognitive friction that demotivates students. Finally, Virginia Aguilar (2002) confirmed that the epicenter of the low graduation rate

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lies directly in the professional and methodological training weaknesses carried throughout the program, which are not fully remedied in the final stretch of the curriculum.

This national landscape connects directly with the reality analyzed at the Universidad Autónoma de Nayarit. According to Rizo (n.d.), students show a marked tendency to perceive research as an excessive theoretical burden detached from solving real problems, which produces a phenomenon of pragmatic apathy in which interest is reduced to passing the regular course rather than consolidating a graduation project to make an impact on their social environment.

Degree-Completion Efficiency and Institutional Indicators

To understand the decline in thesis production, the concept of degree-completion efficiency in the context of higher education must be analyzed. Various studies warn that these indicators tend to function as administrative targets that do not necessarily reflect the quality of the competencies acquired (De Garay, 2023). Degree-completion efficiency relates the number of students who graduate to those who enrolled in the same cohort. However, this calculation omits the qualitative dimension of graduation. When institutions facilitate graduation through standardized tests, a statistical improvement is generated, but graduates may enter the labor market with deficiencies in complex writing, abstract thinking, and the design of autonomous projects. Degree-completion efficiency thus risks becoming a bureaucratic indicator that neglects the student's intellectual maturation.

Research Training and Cognitive Skills

From the perspective of developing a research habitus inspired by Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, Chamboredon & Passeron, 2002), and drawing on contemporary theorizations about competencies in higher education (Estrada-Araoz et al., 2024; Reyes-Rodríguez, 2025), the production of knowledge requires a continuous process of academic socialization within the university. These competencies are divided into four main areas:

Methodological and problematizing: the ability to turn a social problem into a theoretically structured object of study.

Heuristic and managerial: the ability to search for and select information sources in indexed repositories and databases.

Cognitive-practical and hermeneutic: the interpretation of empirical data on the basis of theoretical frameworks in order to solve problems in the environment.

Communicative and discursive: the writing of clear scientific texts under international citation standards.

Studies in the Mexican context (Maldonado et al., 2023; Tapia & Cardona, 2024) show that university models have difficulty developing these skills during the program. When the educational trajectory does not consolidate this learning, students develop distrust of research. This situation produces insecurity and steers students toward graduation options that avoid writing.

Pedagogical Mediation and Advising Processes

The literature agrees that producing a thesis is a practical, individualized learning process (Eco, 2018; Sabino, 2014). One does not learn to do research passively through textbooks; rather, it requires the constant support of an advisor who guides the scientific work (Ynoub, 2022). Nonetheless, this model has limitations given the conditions of today's public universities. The massification of student groups, the increase in administrative tasks for full-time professors, and part-time hiring all constrain the mentoring system. Faculty members do not always have the hours needed to review writing, discuss the theoretical framework, or correct the methodological design in a personalized way. This methodological distance is often associated with students abandoning their projects (Reyes et al., 2024).

METHODOLOGY

Approach and Study Design

This study used a quantitative approach, which makes it possible to collect empirical data through a standardized instrument for statistical analysis, ensuring the objectivity and replicability of the diagnosis. The scope is descriptive and explanatory: descriptive because it identifies the frequency of the economic, personal, and academic difficulties reported by students; explanatory because it analyzes how these obstacles influence the decision to opt for the CENEVAL examination instead of the thesis. The design is non-experimental and cross-sectional, observing the variables in their natural setting within UAN during a single data-collection period.

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Population and Sample

The study population was delimited to students enrolled in the eighth semester of Communication and Media, who represent the terminal universe of the program (97 students) and have already completed the full methodological track. Simple random probability sampling was carried out using the program's official rosters. With a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, a sample of 78 subjects was determined, generating conditions of statistical representativeness.

Instrument and Variables

To measure the variables, the Scale of Obstacles to University Graduation (EOTU) was designed, divided into three empirical dimensions:

Socioeconomic and personal dimension: assesses the student's employment situation (schedules, income), time availability, and the family dynamics that influence study.

Pedagogical and institutional dimension (Teaching Praxis): measures teaching practice, advisors' time availability, didactic clarity, and the linkage of theoretical content with local reality.

Normative dimension and cognitive self-concept: analyzes perceptions of the Graduation Regulations, the student's confidence in their writing skills, and the reasons for their choice.

A pilot test was conducted with 15 students from previous semesters to validate comprehension of the questions. Internal consistency was measured with Cronbach's alpha, yielding a global value of 0.81, which confirms the reliability of the instrument. The instrument was administered in person in the classrooms, under informed consent and guaranteeing anonymity.

RESULTS

Data processing was consolidated using a probability sample of 78 students from the eighth period of the Bachelor's program in Communication and Media at the Universidad Autónoma de Nayarit. The findings have been grouped into three broad analytical dimensions to directly answer the research questions and specific objectives.

Dimension 1: Socioeconomic Factors and Family Context

The feasibility of developing a professional thesis is strongly conditioned by the material realities of the student body. In assessing labor-market participation, a critical factor was identified: 91% of respondents carry out some work activity alongside their university studies. This condition reduces the effective time available for bibliographic research and academic writing, forcing them to prioritize more immediate graduation routes such as the CENEVAL General Examination of Knowledge (which accounts for 71.7% of the program's historical degree-completion efficiency).

This marked preference for alternative graduation routes becomes evident when observing the historical distribution of graduates by their chosen modality, where the thesis plays a secondary role compared with immediate-certification options, as detailed below:

Table 1

Graduation Modality	Number of Students (N)	Percentage (%)
General Examination of Knowledge (CENEVAL)	330	71.7%
Professional Thesis	81	17.6%
Academic Excellence (Grade-Point Average)	43	9.4%
Other Modalities	6	1.3%

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

As shown in Table 1, the disparity between those who graduate through CENEVAL and those who opt for a professional thesis is a quantitative reflection of the material barriers described above. The fact that nearly three-quarters of students choose the general examination confirms that the lack of effective time—derived from the 91% labor-market participation—forces them to prioritize a quick graduation.

Likewise, when delving into the students' micro-social sphere, the family situation (demands from parents, children, or spouses) emerges as an invisible yet highly significant determinant. Eighty-six percent of students state that family dynamics have a negative influence and openly describe them as a substantial obstacle to concentrating on producing the degree-qualifying document.

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Dimension 2: Performance and Constraints in Thesis Advising (Institutional Perspective)

The second axis of the research analyzes the role of the teaching staff responsible for guiding research projects. The quantitative data reveal a clear lack of coordination in tutorial and institutional support.

Advisor's time availability: When asked whether faculty members allocate their time optimally and are accessible to provide personalized advising, an overwhelming 73.1% (equivalent to 57 students) reported that they attend to these needs only "sometimes." Only a small minority perceive complete consistency in follow-up.

Lack of practical application: Sixty-eight percent of students argue that professors only "sometimes" put knowledge into practice through exercises useful for solving real research problems, compared with a scant 25.6% who believe this always happens. This creates a methodological void, translating into 52.6% of the sample rating the learning as "of little relevance."

Motivational deficit: Finally, the lack of emotional and academic incentives permeates the classroom: 56% of students flatly declared that they do not feel motivated by their professors to undertake a thesis project.

Dimension 3: Self-Perception of Communicative and Methodological Skills (Thesis Production)

The problem of low degree-completion efficiency via the thesis is also associated with factors of the students themselves. The analysis detected a crisis of technical self-confidence at the close of the curriculum:

Insufficiency of key skills: Sixty-one percent of students consider that they do not possess adequate communicative skills (speaking, listening, writing, and reading appropriately at the academic level) for the formal structuring of a scientific investigation.

Participation and project progress: When inquiring about the submission of progress drafts, a group of 55 students stated that they actively meet the deadlines, but the motivation behind this is purely pragmatic: 22 students admitted doing so exclusively to pass the regular course, and 17 to correct superficial errors.

Apathy and technical unfamiliarity: By contrast, a group of 23 students admitted not participating or progressing responsibly for three structural reasons: 9 students because of the time absorbed by work, 6 students because of complete unfamiliarity with how to formally structure a scientific investigation, and 3 students because of apathy or manifest disinterest.

DISCUSSION

The results call into question explanations that hold students solely responsible for low thesis-graduation rates. The observed consequences (Reyes, Leyva & Durán, 2024) point to an institutional process of learned helplessness. Students do not enter with a rejection of science; however, as they advance through the semesters, they encounter theoretical loads that create difficulties (68%), advisors with limited time availability (73.1%), and work contexts that consume their days (91%). Faced with this situation, the graduate comes to regard research as an incomprehensible territory. Choosing the CENEVAL examination thus functions as an adaptive response to a training system centered on abstract theory and on the diversification of graduation processes.

CONCLUSION

Conclusions of the Diagnosis

Focus of the methodological track: Maintaining five research courses yields few results if teaching remains focused on abstract theory, disconnected from the real development of writing skills in a hands-on workshop format.

Impact of the employment situation: The participation of 91% of students in the labor market limits the development of research under traditional mentoring schemes, which calls for didactic alternatives adapted to the schedules of working students.

Effects on graduate quality: The use of standardized tests solves the administrative degree-completion-efficiency indicator, but it places graduates in the market with areas for improvement in written-argumentation skills and the design of autonomous projects—capacities tied to the experience of writing a thesis.

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IJCSRR @ 2026
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Cite this Article: Arámbula, R.E., Martínez, G.Z., Jiménez, A.R., Miranda Topete, A.G. (2026). Research Skills and Degree Completion Efficiency: A Diagnosis of the Obstacles to Graduation by Thesis. International Journal of Current Science Research and Review, 9(7), pp. 4139-4146. DOI: https://doi.org/10.47191/ijcsrr/V9-i7-57