Institution: University of Sheffield
Unit of Assessment: D-26 Modern Languages and Linguistics
Title of case study: Intervention in and mitigation of contemporary political problems in Mexico: human rights abuses, corruption, and the security crisis
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2014–2019
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:

Name(s):	**Role(s) (e.g. job title):**	**Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:**
Peter Watt	Lecturer in Hispanic Studies	2007–present

Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014–2020
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N

1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)

Watt has built upon impact demonstrated in REF2014 to achieve greater complexity and formalised engagement with contemporary political problems in Mexico. His role as a legal expert witness has resulted in the granting of legal asylum (in the UK and the US) to several individuals escaping persecution by organised crime groups and in securing the release of undocumented migrants from incarceration. By holding democratic institutions to account through, for example, founding the Red Universitaria y Ciudadana por la Democracia (the University and Citizen Democracy Network), he has proactively put pressure on government processes, including the 2018 general election, to ensure fairness and transparency. His international media work has been key in raising awareness of Mexico's social and political problems and he is now frequently called upon by US and UK legal firms to provide expert witness testimony for Mexican nationals fleeing persecution.

2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)

Dr Watt is co-author of *Drug War Mexico* (R1), which is a leading publication in engaging specialists and lay readers alike on the topic of narcotrafficking in Mexico. The book's key insight is that the expansion of neoliberal economic policies in Mexico contributed directly to the growth of organised crime and strengthened the links between drug cartels and state actors and institutions. While this was a relatively controversial thesis at the time of publication, this perspective is now widely accepted in the scholarly literature. The volume is used on university curricula in the US, Canada, the UK, and Mexico itself. Watt's approach moves away from the commonplace reduction of Mexico's everyday violence to typical actors (drug lords, gangs, and cartels), and instead emphasises the socio-structural context, and interconnection, of: neoliberal domestic economic policies, land reforms, relations with the USA, and institutional corruption. As a result, *Drug War Mexico* was praised in the *Journal of Latin American Studies* for its "excellent regional analysis" (2013).

Deep geo-cultural knowledge has been the basis for both Watt's subsequent research and his impactful activities. As well as being a leading authority on the history of narcotrafficking over the past four decades, Watt writes on related cultural problems for Mexico that are of contemporary relevance: human rights abuses, restrictions on freedom of expression, and the security crisis. On these issues, he co-authored an article on Mexico for a volume on security and violence in the Americas (R2), and published both a peer-reviewed article and a co-edited volume (R3, R4).

These pieces expand on Watt's assertion that the growth of organised crime has been facilitated by official complicity and neoliberal reforms, which favour the wealthy, but which also contribute to widespread economic precarity and social instability. The latter brings together internationally renowned scholars with expertise on human rights in Mexico; Watt co-authored the introduction.

Watt is now researching the recent rise of the far right and what he interprets as neo-fascist politics, contextualising the phenomenon against the political history of countries which, in his view, are most clearly affected by austerity and neoliberal economic policies. This new body of scholarship draws on Watt's previous research on US foreign policy towards Mexico, particularly in light of President Trump's border wall initiative; and it expands beyond Latin America with a global perspective, complementing his previous concern with regional dynamics.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

R1.   Watt, P. and Zepeda, R. (2012). *Drug War Mexico: Neoliberalism, Narcotrafficking and Violence in the New Narco-Economy*, Zed Books: London. Available from HEI by request.

R2.   Jones, G.A. and Watt, P. (2014). 'Violence and Insecurity in Mexico' in: *South America, Central America and the Caribbean 2015*, West, J. (ed.) Routledge: London. Available from HEI by request.

R3.   Pansters, W.G., Smith, B.T., and Watt, P., eds. (2018). *Beyond the Drug War in Mexico. Human rights, the public sphere and justice.* Routledge: London. (Introduction by the editors, pp.1-31). REF2.

R4.   Watt, P. and Zepeda, R. (2014). 'Perspectives of Decriminalization and Legalization of Illicit Drugs' in Rosen, J.D. & Zepeda, R. (eds.) *Cooperation and Drug Policies in the Americas: Trends in the Twenty-First Century*. Lexington Books: Maryland, pp.223-232. Available from HEI by request.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

In 2014, an NGO providing legal aid to international exiles invited Watt to act as an expert on contemporary Mexico as a consequence of his 2012 co-authored book: *Drug War Mexico*. Watt is now listed on the webpage of IRRI Rights in Exile Programme (S1), and as a result has been asked to provide expert witness reports on the current political climate and breakdown in the rule of law in Mexico for legal cases involving Mexican nationals seeking asylum in the United States (US Citizen and Immigration Service) and the United Kingdom (UK Immigration and Asylum Court). Watt's reports have been used as evidence in US and UK immigration trials to assess the credibility of claims made by citizens fleeing persecution by organised crime syndicates and state actors. Watt has supported eight Mexican nationals in total, and has prepared twelve reports ranging from 4,000 to 6,600 words since 2015, along with oral testimony for some cases (S2). This entailed both a wide breadth of geo-cultural knowledge, and significant depth of time invested, with life-changing effects on individuals.

In one instance during 2015-16, Watt provided three reports and in-court oral testimony over the course of the case and its two appeals in London, for Wilsons Solicitors, to significant effect. The case involved a Mexican national who had been the victim of repeated violent assaults and threats and then subsequently tracked down when she attempted to escape the clutches of one of Mexico's most violent crime organisations. Asylum in the UK was granted to the claimant as a result of Watt's testimony. [Text removed for publication].

The claimant's life was probably saved, for they were at risk of being tortured and murdered had they been deported to Mexico. Similarly, The Capitol Area Immigrants' Rights Coalition (CAIR) in Washington DC, which in 2015 commissioned a pro-bono report by Watt for a client fleeing persecution by an organised crime group, noted that, "*[t]he report was incredibly thorough and well-researched, and was frequently cited throughout the attorneys' briefs. The case resulted in a successful grant of deferral of removal under the Convention Against Torture for our client.*" Watt was called on again by the same organisation in 2020 on behalf of a client, who, having fled Mexico after severe threats of intimidation and the murder of family members by a drug cartel, was living undocumented in the US. A letter from CAIR asserted that, *"the judge decided in favor of our client and directly quoted Dr. Watt's declaration in her oral decision, a testament to just how valuable Dr. Watt's contributions were for this case"* (S4).

Watt's research has also prompted activism outside the courtroom, in an effort to safeguard democracy. Together with his then-PhD student Rupert Knox, Watt co-founded the Red Universitaria y Ciudadana por la Democracia (RUCD, or the University and Citizen Democracy Network), an international pro-democracy network that raises the concerns of corruption and electoral fraud in Mexico and abroad. Their first initiative was the training of a UK observatory team in Mexico to offer solidarity to citizens, deter election malpractice, and report foul play in Mexico during the July 2018 presidential elections. In the run-up to the vote, more than 130 candidates had been murdered and journalists attacked. Watt led a 26-strong UK delegation for the RUCD who, in collaboration with 200 Mexican and 100 international visitors, monitored the country on election day. A collective report presented to a press conference in Mexico City on 3 July concluded that the team had encountered minimal tampering and irregularities (S5). The document was submitted to the database of the National Electoral Institute, the Electoral Tribunal, and the *Fiscalía Especializada para la Atención de Delitos Electorales* (FEPADE) - the office which considers cases of electoral fraud. Watt's assessment was cited in the day's news (e.g. *20 minutos*, 2 July 2018). Despite fears of widespread intimidation of voters and electoral fraud, the election was regarded as one of the freest and cleanest in recent decades, with the successful candidate winning through an unprecedented landslide, which saw the ruling party defeated in nearly every state and in all three branches of government. Father Alejandro Solalinde, perhaps Mexico's most respected and internationally recognised human rights defender, and who collaborated with the UK delegation, told *The Morning Star* that the international observers had "helped save Mexico" from fears that the election would feature widespread fraud and corruption (S6). Watt's deep knowledge of contemporary Mexico, derived from his research, was key to the planning of the monitoring exercise (S7).

Watt's expertise ensures his status as the go-to external voice on Mexico's present-day social problems - he is frequently asked for comment and shapes international debate. Between 2016 and 2018, Watt was interviewed by Sky News four times on violence and drugs cartels in Mexico (S8). Watt's appearances were prompted by his article on the capture of the leader of the Sinaloa cartel for *The Conversation* in 2016, which was read almost 23,000 times. In February 2018, Watt featured as the sole guest on TeleSUR's *Interviews From Mexico* English-language broadcast (30 minutes), a programme that examines current issues with "those who know them best". The episode explicitly discussed Watt's academic research into the war on drugs, the narco industry, the corruption and its consequences in Mexico — and was broadcast all around the world (S9). Following the broadcast, the Mexican broadsheet *La Jornada* based a news article on Watt's academic opinion the following day (16 Feb 2018) because he had become known to the media as an expert on the country with an outside perspective. Watt's voice and its amplification in the media thereby importantly supports public scrutiny within Mexico itself.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

S1. Watt's NGO web profile (http://www.refugeelegalaidinformation.org/mexico-coi).

S2. Confidential report and addendums prepared by Watt used immigration trials between 2015 and 2020.

S3. [Text removed for publication].

S4. Letter from litigation director, Capital Area Immigrants' Rights (CAIR) Coalition.

S5. Press Statement from the British Electoral Observation Delegation. 2 July 2018.

S6. Comments from renowned human rights defender on the contribution of RUCD to election (https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/international-election-observers-helped-save-mexico).

S7. Confirmation from Political Analyst and Director of the Americas Program of the Center for international Policy, Mexico City.

S8. SkyNews interview (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cbiz0GkryJQ).

S9. TeleSUR interview (https://videos.telesurenglish.net/video/705732/interviews-from-mexico-705732/).