

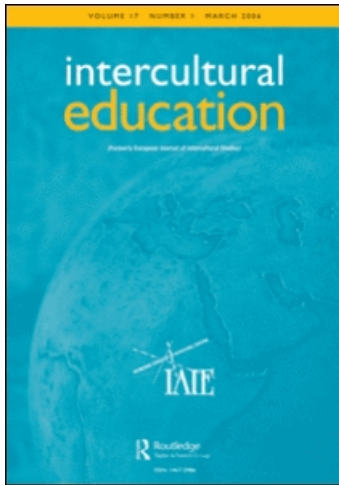
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Intercultural universities in Mexico: empowering indigenous peoples or mainstreaming multiculturalism?

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FOCUS EDITORIAL

Intercultural universities in Mexico: empowering indigenous peoples or mainstreaming multiculturalism?

Multicultural discourse has reached Latin American higher education as a set of policies targeting indigenous peoples, which are strongly influenced by the transfer of European notions of ‘interculturality’. In Mexico, innovative and often polemical ‘intercultural universities or colleges’ are being created by governments, by NGOs or by pre-existing universities. Paradoxically, this trend towards ‘diversifying’ both ethno-cultural profiles and curricular contents coincides with a broader tendency to force institutions of higher education to become more ‘efficient’, ‘corporate’ and ‘outcome-oriented’.

Accordingly, these still very recent ‘intercultural universities’ are often criticized as part of a common policy of ‘privatization’, ‘neoliberalization’ and ‘particularization’ which weakens the universalist and comprehensive nature of Latin American public macro-universities. Indigenous leaders, in contrast, frequently claim and celebrate the appearance of these new higher education opportunities as part of a strategy of empowering ethnic actors of indigenous or African descent origin (Mato 2008).

Going beyond this polemic, the present focus issue of *Intercultural Education* presents overviews and case studies from Mexico which elucidate the challenging nature of these emerging higher education institutions. As will be shown throughout case studies from Veracruz and Oaxaca, these efforts to ‘interculturalize’ universities and colleges challenge not only institutional designs of the nation-state and its educational system, but also anthropological and pedagogical notions of ‘indigenous education’, of ‘intercultural education’ and of ‘diversity management’.

The anthropological notion of cultural diversity has in recent decades been modified from being stigmatizingly perceived as a ‘problem’ (scarcely integrated and/or specified, according to an essentialist and functionalist notion of culture), passing through being demanded as a ‘right’ (by a given minority, by indigenous peoples or even for the sake of humanity as a whole, as in the case of the ‘Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity’ (UNESCO 2002)), to being anthropologically–pedagogically proclaimed as a key ‘resource’ (for intercultural education, for diversity management, and for the development of essential competences in knowledge-based societies (García Canclini 2004)).

This gradual modification reflects a critical, sometimes selective, reception and appropriation of the legacy of multiculturalism by social sciences in general and anthropology in particular. Anthropologists have contributed their professional practice to programmes dedicated to the ‘interculturalization’ of institutions that provide educational, sociocultural and social services. In Latin America, such

anthropological–pedagogical programmes illustrating the end of classical *indigenismo* – of those programmes specifically designed by non-indigenous social scientists in order to integrate indigenous communities into their respective nation-states (Dietz 2004) – have highlighted the necessity of combining the existing and long-standing national traditions of ‘indigenous education’ for basic education levels with this multi-cultural focus of the educational policies and their expansion into high-school and higher education levels.

In this way, through close collaboration between applied anthropology and post-*indigenismo* educational projects, novel higher education institutions have been created, on occasions explicitly focused on indigenous populations, known as ‘indigenous universities’, while in other contexts called ‘intercultural universities’ (Casillas Muñoz and Santini Villar 2006) in order to target society in general using an ‘intercultural education for all’ focus (Schmelkes this issue).

Inspired by the principles of ‘activist anthropology’, developed by Hale (2006, 2008) and discussed in this issue by Escárcega Zamarrón, we are currently carrying out a dialogical–ethnographical case study inside one of these new, culturally diversified institutions, the Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural (UVI) in Mexico, analysed in this issue in the contribution by Mateos Cortés. Our project aims to analyse how the participation of indigenous and non-indigenous anthropologists and other social scientists shapes in such a programme the still recent move towards the social, political and even legal recognition of diversity within public universities.

Through their academic programmes, which principally target indigenous and non-indigenous students living in marginalized, rural and indigenous communities, ‘intercultural universities’ such as UVI in Veracruz and colleges analysed by González Apodaca for Oaxaca (see her contribution in this issue) are trying to diversify supposedly universalist academic ‘knowledge’ in order to relate it to local knowledge, to subaltern, ‘ethno-scientific’ and alternative knowledge, all of which mutually hybridize each other and thus create new, diversified, ‘entangled’ and ‘globalized’ canons of knowledge (Mignolo 2000).

As will be illustrated throughout the case studies, this emerging *diálogo de saberes* or ‘dialogue among different kinds of knowledge’ (de Sousa Santos 2006; Mato 2007), which involves ‘inter-cultural’, ‘inter-lingual’ and ‘inter-actor’ dimensions, also forces academic anthropology to redefine its basic theoretical concepts as much as its methodological practices, which are still all too mono-logically and mono-lingually oriented (Dietz 2007).

Owing to their innovative characteristics and their relatively recent nature, intercultural universities are encountering a range of bureaucratic, financial, academic and political problems, as Schmelkes develops in her contribution. The heterogeneity of the participating academic, political and organizational actors has proved quite a challenge when efficient institutional stances must be taken that are also to be legitimate for all the involved sectors. After long processes of diagnosis and political negotiation on the choice of regions and communities in which to establish the new university programmes, the main political representatives continue to support projects such as UVI in Veracruz. Nevertheless, the great cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity in the indigenous regions of Mexico still poses an important challenge for curricular development and diversification as well as for the implementation of programmes relevant to the regional population.

While most intercultural universities in Mexico are widely celebrated and supported by the regional societies after centuries of educational marginalization,

resistance and misunderstanding persist within ‘conventional’ public universities. Owing to the heterodox notion of ‘university’, of ‘degrees’ and of ‘curriculum’ employed by the new intercultural academic institutions, some more traditional and ‘disciplinary’ sectors of academia aim to confine these new initiatives to old-fashioned, assistant-oriented ‘outreach’ activities rather than to open their own teaching and research activities to such experiences.

The fact that a diversity of actors and a broad range of regional knowledge have been included in the very nucleus of academic degree programmes, challenges the still present universalist, relatively mono-logical and ‘mono-epistemic’ character of the classical western university. In this field, for a critical and interculturally oriented higher education and its corresponding ‘activist’ methodology (Hale 2008), one of the main challenges consists in linking the characteristics of an intercultural university, oriented towards and rooted in the indigenous regions, with the dynamics and criteria of a ‘normal’ public university. The latter, through its curricular traditions, studies and degrees, its autonomy and its Humboldtian ‘freedom of teaching and research’, provides decisive institutional ‘shelter’ for the new institutions, as Mateos Cortés shows in the case of the UVI. However, academia also often imposes all too rigid and orthodox practices that are insensitive to the rural and indigenous medium in which it is supposed to operate.

This process of negotiating habits and aspirations among university actors, host communities, professionals and involved students has triggered authentically intercultural experiences: whereas more academic, urban and non-indigenous representatives start recognizing the viability and promoting the visibility of the intercultural university as a culturally diversified and relevant higher education alternative, novel learning processes of mutual transfers of knowledge are emerging in the indigenous regions.

In Mexico and in Latin America in general, the official recognition of the right to a culturally pertinent and sensitive higher education sparks an intense debate, not only regarding the need to create (or not) new ‘indigenous’ universities, but furthermore on the challenge of generating new professional profiles for the alumni of these institutions, who will focus on professional activities shaped by intercultural dialogue and negotiation (Mato 2008). The conventional and disciplinary profiles of professionals educated in western universities have failed to offer fields of employment related to the needs of indigenous youngsters, but have instead explicitly or implicitly promoted their out-migration and their assimilation to urban and non-indigenous environments and professions.

Hence, the new professional profiles which are just being created and tested through these intercultural pilot projects such as the ones analysed in this volume must meet a double challenge that higher education institutes have not yet faced: the challenge of developing flexible, interdisciplinary and professional degree programmes that are also locally and regionally relevant, useful and sustainable for both students and their wider communities. In this way, and thanks to their *in situ* implementation of work experiences and student research projects, the first generations of students and alumni have gradually become the promoters and shapers of their own future professional practices and profiles. Their emerging role as intermediaries in their communities is already outstanding. In this way, a new generation bearing both academic and community, both indigenous and western knowledge has emerged – a generation that will certainly in the near future assume a new role as inter-cultural, inter-lingual and inter-actor ‘translator’ who manages, applies and generates knowledge from diverse

worlds, worlds which are often asymmetrical and antagonistically shaped, but which are necessarily ever more closely related.

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