

# 'Indigenising' or 'interculturalising' universities in Mexico?

Towards an ethnography of diversity discourses and practices inside the *Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural*

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## ABSTRACT

Multicultural discourse has reached Latin American higher education in the form of a set of policies targeting indigenous peoples. These policies are strongly influenced by the transfer of European notions of 'interculturality', which, in the Mexican context are understood as positive interactions between members of minority and majority cultures. In Mexico, innovative and often polemical 'intercultural universities or colleges' are being created by governments, by NGOs or by pre-existing universities. This trend towards 'diversifying' the ethno-cultural profiles of students 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 recently established 'intercultural universities' are often criticised as being part of a common policy of 'privatisation' and 'neoliberalisation' and of developing curricula particular to specific groups which weakens the universalist and comprehensive nature of Latin American public universities. Indigenous leaders, on the contrary, frequently claim and celebrate the appearance of these new higher education opportunities as part of a strategy of empowering actors of indigenous origin or African descent.

Going beyond this polemic, this paper presents the first findings of an activist anthropological and ethnographically-based case study of the actors participating in the configuration of one of these new institutions of higher education, the *Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural* (UVI), located on the Mexican gulf coast. This article examines the way UVI has appropriated the discourse of interculturality on the basis of fieldwork conducted in the four indigenous regions where the UVI offers a B.A. in Intercultural Management for Development. The study focuses on the actors' teaching and learning practices, which are strongly shaped by an innovative and hybrid mixture of conventional university teaching, community-oriented research and 'employability'-driven development projects.



KEYWORDS

higher education, indigenous people, interculturality, Mexico, trans-disciplinarity.

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## Introduction

The anthropological notion of cultural diversity has in recent decades gone through a series of modifications. Initially ethnic minorities were stigmatised as a 'problem' and scarcely integrated or were specified according to an essentialist and functionalist notion of culture. Then recognition of diversity was 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). More recently, cultural diversity is being 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 in programmes dedicated to the 'interculturalisation' of institutions that provide educational, socio-cultural and social services (Dietz 2009). In Latin America, such anthropological-pedagogical programmes illustrate the end of classical *indigenismo*: that is, programmes specifically designed by non-indigenous social scientist to integrate indigenous communities into their respective nation-states. Such programmes have highlighted the necessity of combining existing and long-standing national traditions of basic level 'indigenous education' with this multicultural focus and of expanding them into high-school and higher education. In this way, through a close collaboration between applied anthropology and post-*indigenismo* educational projects, novel higher education institutions have been created. In some instances these institutions are explicitly focussed on indigenous populations and known as 'indigenous universities'. In other contexts they are called 'intercultural universities' (Casillas Muñoz and Santini Villar 2006) and they target society in general by following an 'intercultural education for all' focus (Schmelkes 2008).

Inspired by the principles of 'activist anthropology' developed by Hale (2006, 2008), we are currently carrying out a dialogical-ethnographic case

study inside one of these new, culturally diversified institutions, the *Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural* (UVI) in Mexico. Our project aims at analysing how participation in such a programme by indigenous and non-indigenous people and the teaching by anthropologists and other social scientists shape the still recent move towards the social, political and even legal recognition of diversity within public universities. Through academic programmes that principally target indigenous and non-indigenous students living in marginalised, rural and indigenous communities, the UVI is trying to diversify supposedly universalist academic ‘knowledge’. The aim is to relate academic knowledge to local, subaltern, ‘ethno-scientific’ and alternative knowledge, all of which mutually hybridise each other and thus create new, diversified, ‘entangled’ and ‘globalized’ canons of knowledge (Mignolo 2000, Escobar 2004). As will be illustrated below, 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.

### **From pilot programme to university structure? The creation of the UVI**

In order to generate education systems that are more pertinent to the cultural realities and needs of the target population, the present decentralisation efforts of higher education institutions have been accompanied by programmes to diversify curricular content and teaching/learning methods. In this way, in 2005 the Universidad Veracruzana (UV), an autonomous, public higher education institution based in Xalapa, the state capital of Veracruz located at the Mexican Gulf coast, decided to open its own Intercultural Programme. This programme focuses preferentially on the claims to higher education in and for indigenous regions of the state. As one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse states of Mexico, Veracruz is shaped by diverse ethnic and linguistic groups that are mostly of indigenous origin and are nowadays inhabiting the most economically marginalised and infrastructurally isolated regions of the country (UVI 2005).

In order to attend to these populations and in sharp contrast to other ‘inter-cultural universities’ promoted by the Mexican federal government (Schmelkes 2008), the so-called ‘Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural’ programme



(<http://www.uv.mx/uvi>) was not created as a 'new university'. Instead, the UVI emerged from within an established public university. It originated from a 'Multicultural Education Seminar in the State of Veracruz' (SEMV), run by a team consisting mainly of local anthropologists coordinated by Sergio Téllez Galván at the Institute of Research in Education of the UV. They offered continuous learning courses as well as postgraduate courses for professionals in the field of intercultural education and intercultural studies (Téllez, Sandoval and González 2006).

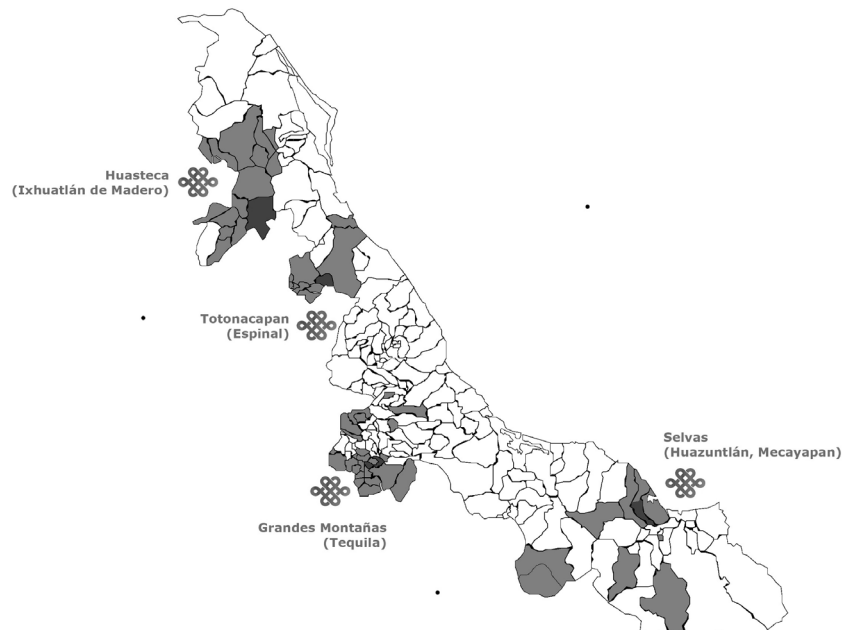
An academic interest in developing culturally pertinent educational programmes was combined with the demands of indigenous organisations and movements for broader and better adapted higher education options in indigenous regions and communities. An agreement was established in November 2004 between the UV and the General Coordination for Intercultural and Bilingual Education (CGEIB) of the federal government's Ministry of Education (SEP) to start such an intercultural programme from within the university. Since then, the resources for this venture have been provided principally by the general budgets of the Veracruz state government, through federal government funding from CGEIB and from the UV's own budget. In August 2005, this intercultural programme started by offering two B.A. degrees in four regional centres: one in Sustainable Regional Development and the other in Intercultural Management and Education. The first two generations of UVI students entered the university through one of these two degree programmes. However, both the community's demands for a greater range of academic courses and the impossibility of generating 'conventional' degree courses in indigenous regions led the UVI staff, composed mainly of anthropologists, educators, agronomists and linguists, to redesign the studies on offer. They opted for just one degree course with a multimodal structure and diverse orientations (More detail below). Hence, since August 2007 the students who had already started their degree courses were integrated into the new B.A. degree in Intercultural Management for Development, which is able to offer a wider range of educational options without reducing the number of regional campus locations where this degree is taught.

### **Decentralising or devolving? The 'intercultural regions' of the UVI**

Even though Veracruz University already had a decentralised system of five campuses distributed throughout the state, these academic centres were con-

centrated in urban areas, where conventional degree courses based on western university models were taught. From the very beginning the new programme decided to establish centres in less privileged and in the most marginalised areas of the state. As a colonial or postcolonial legacy, these regions are where a mostly indigenous population lives (Lomnitz Adler 1995). After carrying out a regional diagnosis that applied a combination of ethnolinguistic and socioeconomic criteria, along with marginalisation, social and human development factors (UVI 2005), four ‘intercultural regions’ were chosen.<sup>1</sup> Within these indigenous communities the new centres of the UVI were established: the Huasteca intercultural region based in Ixhuatlán de Madero; the Totonacapan intercultural region based in Espinal; the Grandes Montañas intercultural region based in Tequila; and the Selvas intercultural region based in Huazuntlán (see Figure 1). In each of the four regional centres, the UVI hired a regional coordinator, an academic support facilitator, five full-time lecturers and several part-time lecturers.

The central office in Xalapa administers the programmes of study and offers continuous training courses for both UVI staff and the wider university community. Apart from rather conventional academic decision making



**Figure 1: The four UVI regional centres inside the state of Veracruz**  
(Ávila Pardo and Mateos Cortés 2008)

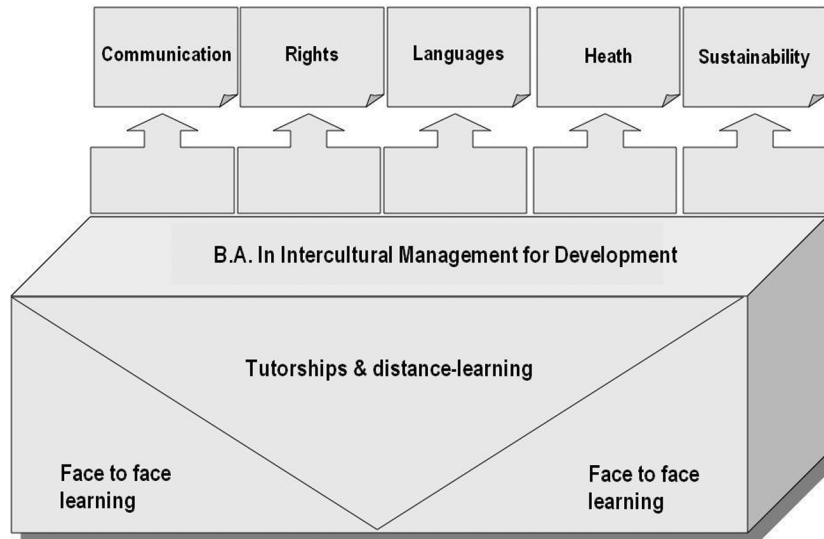


structures, the UVI maintains a close relationship to the communities' local mayors, civil, agrarian and/or religious authorities as well as to representatives of NGOs and civil associations active in the respective region. They jointly consult the UVI with regard to its teaching activities and research projects carried out by students and academic staff together with local communities in the regions. Nevertheless, academic decision-making still is strictly centralised in Xalapa, which implies that a real devolution has not taken place, mostly due to the university's insistence in holding control of curricular as well as staff hiring processes.

### **Trans-disciplinary teaching methods? Towards an intercultural management for development**

As previously mentioned, the B.A. degree in Intercultural Management for Development is presently offered in the four regional centres. It comprises an official and formally recognised degree programme in eight semesters that responds to an inter- or trans-disciplinary, multimodal, flexible curriculum. The programme requires student autonomy and that has been adopted inside the UV as a whole. Students choose 'educational experiences' instead of classical subject courses, which are grouped by area (basic instruction, disciplinary, terminal and free choice courses) and per module (conventional face-to-face classes, virtual or e-learning classes and/or a combination of both types of teaching styles). Face-to-face classes with the local teaching staff make up the vast majority of teaching sessions at the beginning of the B.A. programme, but these traditional classes are then gradually complemented by more specific courses, which are either taught by 'itinerant' teaching staff from other UVI regions or are offered through virtual teaching and other e-learning modes. Similarly, face-to-face tutoring by the local staff is supplemented by distance-learning tutors, who circulate among the four regions for specific thesis supervision processes.

The 'educational experiences' generate a range of educational itineraries called 'orientations'. These are not disciplinarily specialised curricula, but are interdisciplinary fields of knowledge that are needed for a professional future as 'intercultural managers', knowledge brokers and intercultural translators (see Figure 2). Starting from a shared study programme, the individual student chooses her or his own itinerary leading her/him to a particular field of knowledge (see the arrows in Figure 2) in which these mediating and translating skills are then applied.



**Figure 2: Structure of the Degree in Intercultural Management for Development**  
(UVI 2007)

Since 2007, the following orientations have been offered in the four UVI regional centres:

- **Communication:** according to its programme of studies, this orientation ‘prepares professionals in the field of cultural promotion, based on the diversified use of media and communication and a critical view of their role in the construction of identities within a framework of globalization.... The training focuses on participative methodologies that enable a contextualized appropriation of tangible and intangible heritage’ (UVI 2007).
- **Rights:** this orientation ‘strives to prepare human resources to improve the areas of justice and legal issues in order to promote effective access of vulnerable sectors of society to the legal system, as well as to secure human rights as a guarantee for broader legal security’ (UVI 2007).
- **Languages:** this orientation ‘fosters an academic re-valuing, management and mediation of inter-lingual communication processes within an intercultural focus’ (UVI 2007).
- **Health:** this orientation ‘seeks to improve the health situation in the indigenous regions of Veracruz, through the training of professionals

who can act as intermediaries between traditional medicine and state-run health services for communities' (UVI 2007).

- Sustainability: finally, this orientation 'establishes spaces for the intercultural construction of knowledge for training professionals capable of contributing to the improvement of the quality of life in the regions and the construction of options for sustainable development, thanks to the generation of knowledge, skills and attitudes targeting the re-appraisal, development and promotion of ancestral knowledge associated with dialogical society-nature relations' (UVI 2007).

Independently of the orientation the students choose, this B.A. programme is shaped by an early and continuous immersion of students and lecturers in activities carried out inside the host community. The programme is based on a cross-cutting methodological axis, so that courses and modules include methodologies of community and regional diagnosis, ethnographic tools, participatory project management and evaluation. From the first semester onwards students begin to carry out their own research and knowledge transfer activities inside their home communities.

### Creating new hybrid subjects? The UVI students

Taken together, the three generations of UVI students currently involved in the B.A. programme (2005 to 2009, 2006 to 2010 and 2007 to 2011) in the five different orientations and in the four regional study centres, total 562 students, of whom 336 are women and 226 are men. Of this student body, 335 are native speakers of an indigenous language and 227 only speak Spanish. The main indigenous languages spoken by students are Náhuatl, Tachiwn tutunaku (Totonaco); Nún̄tah + 'yi (Zoque-popoluca); Diidzaj (Zapoteco); Ñahñü (Otomí); Teenek (Huasteco); Hamasipijni (Tepehua); and Tsa jujmí (Chinanteco). Classes are normally taught in Spanish, but certain kinds of teaching and project activities are also carried out in the main indigenous language in the region: in Náhuatl (in the Huasteca, Grandes Montañas and Selvas centres), in Totonaco (in the Totonacapan centre), in Zoque-popoluca (in the Selvas centre) and in Otomí (in the Huasteca centre).

The indigenous regions of Veracruz are still marked by a striking lack of educational options at high-school level so that students have often been obliged to pursue precarious modes of distant education such as *telesecun-*



*darias* and *telebachilleratos*, which are post-primary schools that lack the complete range of teachers and are therefore run through satellite-TV educational programmes. For this reason the 'normal' process of choosing students through multiple choice entrance exams is not applied in the UVI regional centres. Instead, students must go through a qualitative selection interview and present a personal letter of their motives for pursuing studies at the UVI, as well as a letter of recommendation by a traditional, civil or religious authority of their local community. Given the recent nature of this new kind of university, the first UVI Intercultural Managers for Development will graduate 2010 and will start working as project managers, mediators, translators, liaison officers and/or technical assistants in governmental or non-governmental projects. Others will work through self-employment in local and regional development initiatives or consultancies.

To achieve a smooth transit from UVI studies to employment, the majority of students have started rather early to carry out intermediary and advisory activities and to design projects while still studying. Almost all of the UVI students are from indigenous regions and would not otherwise have been able to access higher education in urban centres. However, recently an increase in student mobility between regions is perceivable due to the fact that more students from other regions, including urban centres, have decided to apply to study at the UVI.

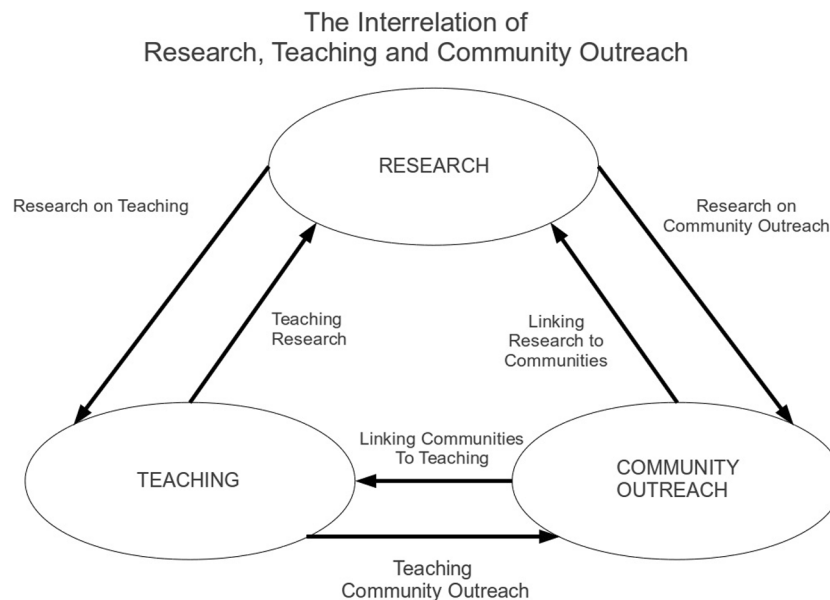
As mentioned above, the B.A. in Intercultural Management for Development is taught through a mixed format that combines conventional face-to-face classes in small groups with newer kinds of workshop-based classes and intensive community outreach work, which students carry out under the supervision of a lecturer-tutor and in close collaboration with communal authorities, NGOs and civil associations present in the regions. For this reason, the UVI has signed a series of agreements with local actors and regional networks, who get involved as counterparts in the extra-curricular teaching and learning process. Through such early work experiences the students have to compare, contrast and translate diverse types of knowledge: formal and informal, academic and community-based, professional and experiential, generated in both rural and urban contexts by both indigenous and non-indigenous actors. This continuous exchange of knowledge and methodologies, of academic versus community-rooted kinds of knowledge, is generating new, rather hybrid subjects who are able to oscillate, not only between different kinds of knowledge but also between rather diverse ways of putting knowledge into daily practice, inside and outside their communities of origin.



### New intermediaries? The role of the teaching staff

The UVI lecturers cover a wide range of humanities, social sciences and engineering disciplines and include many young, recently graduated teachers who are just starting postgraduate or Ph.D. studies. These lecturers and tutors are not employed with regard to their ethnic origin, but following criteria of professional experience and considering above all their intimate knowledge of and their rootedness inside the region in which their UVI centre is located. Accordingly, most UVI lecturers and tutors come from the region in which they work and thus provide their students not only with academic, but also with local and regional knowledge. Other non-academic professionals and/or local experts also participate in the teaching of certain modules or of specific courses that are directly related to their own professional practices. In total, the UVI has a teaching body of approximately 60, including full time and part time staff, as well as those in charge of designing and coordinating the B.A. orientations from the central office in Xalapa.

A substantial change that is currently underway within the UVI is associated with the relationship between teaching, research and community outreach services. Until recently, research and project implementation ac-



**Figure 3: The UVI loop of research, teaching and outreach**  
(Dietz and Mateos Cortés 2007)

tivities were mainly carried out by students, while lecturers concentrated on teaching and on tutoring projects carried out by their respective students. A university-wide process of 'departmentalisation' started inside the UV in recent years in an effort to bridge the traditional gap between university teaching, organised in faculties and research, channelled through research institutes.<sup>2</sup> In this way, the UVI is in the process of transforming its orientations, offered as part of the B.A. programme in Intercultural Management for Development, into the future departments of Communication, Sustainability, Languages, Law and Health. Each department is made up of the lecturers in charge of their respective orientation in each of the four regional centres and in the central office in Xalapa, thus forming small units that combine tasks of teaching, research and community outreach. Hence, the lecturers' outreach research activities are closely linked to community demands and to ongoing student projects. The result is a mutually enforcing and complementary 'loop' of circular teaching, research and community outreach activities, as illustrated in Figure 3.

### **Diversity as a resource? The anthropological contribution**

The recognition of cultural diversity, the development of culturally pertinent educational programmes and interculturality as a new form of initiating relations between diverse cultural, linguistic and ethnic groups: these are the anthropological principles that shaped this new kind of university from its very beginnings. Furthermore, the team of mainly anthropologists and educators that designed this programme had the explicit general purpose of favouring democratic coexistence in Veracruz society, as well as the processes of generating knowledge in the localities of the Intercultural Regions, through the training of professionals and intellectuals committed to the economic and cultural development of community, regional and national territories, whose activities contribute to promoting a process of revaluing and revitalising the native cultures and languages. These aims will be attained by privileging cultural diversity and the participation of communities under the principles of sustainability of the regions of interest, a sense of belonging in the communities to avoid out-migration and protection of the environment (UVI 2008).

These objectives and their underlying proposals have developed since the programme was created in 2005. Originally, the UVI was principally promoted from an anthropological-academic field, when lecturers and researchers from a predominantly European school of Intercultural Studies (Abdallah-



Pretceille 2001; Gundara 2001; Aguado Odina 2003) generated new spaces for research and teaching within the UV (Ávila Pardo and Mateos Cortés 2008). Strongly influenced by the contemporary anthropologies of ethnicity and of education, the team that promoted this pilot project opted for a mainstreaming, not minority-centred focus on interculturality (Téllez 2000; Dietz 2009). A special emphasis was placed on the development of new 'intercultural competences', understood as the students' future key competences for mediating and translating between different linguistic and cultural traditions (such as interpreters in the Mexican justice system, mediators between traditional healers and the public health system, translators between peasant maize cultivators and agronomical engineers), thus equipping them for future interaction in an ever more diverse and complex society.

However, this western-trained team of promoters quickly established close and fruitful relationships with indigenous activists and intellectuals for whom interculturality must be understood as a strategy of ethnic empowerment in contexts of cultural and ethnic differences and as a key tool for reacting against racist discrimination, which persists in the indigenous regions of Mexico and Veracruz. This encounter between urban academics and indigenous activists has deepened and transformed their exchange of knowledge and their intercultural discourses, as has their close collaboration with NGOs stemming from social and/or environmental movements that are rather strong inside these regions (Mateos Cortés 2009). The protagonists of these NGOs emphasise the need to initiate more sustainable relationships with the environment. They promote a recovery of local, rural and/or indigenous knowledge that is traditionally related to the management of natural as well as cultural resources that may support indigenous ecosystems facing the inequalities of global power structures. Under the political impact of the Zapatista movement and the claimed re-definition of the relationship between the neoliberal nation-state and the country's indigenous peoples (Dietz 2005), these three types of actors – the academics involved in the teaching programme, the indigenous activists participating in the consultative bodies and the NGOs in which the students carry out their projects – start to mutually fertilise their intercultural discourses and their respective educational proposals, such as those specified in the UVI programmes: teachers and students share community development experiences through their NGO participation, indigenous organisations learn from continuous education courses and NGOs enter the university through 'expert' teaching and student supervision activities. As a result, more emphasis is placed on pro-

cesses of negotiation, intermediation and translation of heterogeneous kinds of knowledge between these diverse groups participating in the UVI: the aforementioned academics, professionals, development agents and 'local experts'. Thus, three dimensions through which interculturality is conceived emerge from this encounter of different perspectives:

- an 'inter-cultural' dimension, centred on complex expressions and links of cultural and educational practices such as intangible cultural heritage, community-rooted socialisation and learning practices as well as locally developed organisational cultures of community self-management and inter-community relations, which respond to different cultural logics, such as the community culture of common Mesoamerican roots, threatened by many waves of colonisation and globalisation, but still in use in the indigenous regions; the organisational culture of the social movements that struggle to defend the regions' cultural and/or biological diversity; and the western academic culture: presently in transition from a rigid, mono-logical, 'industrial' and 'Fordist' paradigm of higher education to a more flexible, dialogic, 'postindustrial' or 'post-Fordist' one, as illustrated in the above mentioned flexible and modularised UV educational model
- an 'inter-actor' dimension that values and profits from the negotiations and mutual transference between diverse forms of knowledge between UV academics participating in the different orientations, providing anthropological, educational, sociological, linguistic, historical and agrobiological knowledge, generated in the western epistemic canons; indigenous organisation activists and NGO representatives present in the regions, who contribute with professional, contextual and strategic knowledge; and local experts and knowledgeable *sabios* who provide collective memoirs and local and contextual knowledge on cultural and biological diversity of the immediate environment
- an 'inter-lingual' dimension that, reflecting the great ethno-linguistic diversity that characterises the indigenous regions of Veracruz, overcomes the conventional bilingual focus of classic *indigenismo* and profits from non-essentialised, but relational and contextual interlingual competences that make the translation between such diverse linguistic and cultural horizons possible; this inter-lingual focus does not aim to provide the complete set of UVI educational programmes in various languages, but centres on the development of key communicative and



translation skills provided by the student and teacher bodies in each of the regions.

Relating these different dimensions of interculturality and their different academic-anthropological as well as ethno-regional and activist sources, the UVI presently pursues both 'empowerment' objectives of the (future) indigenous professionals on the one hand and cross-cutting key competences required for professional and organisational performance on the other hand.

## **Conclusions**

As an innovative pilot project, the UVI has encountered a range of bureaucratic, financial, academic and political problems since it started only three years ago. The heterogeneity of the participating academic, political and organisational actors has proved quite a challenge when institutional stances must be taken that are both efficient and legitimate for all the parties involved. After a long process of diagnosis and political negotiation on the choice of regions and communities in which to establish the UVI regional centres, the main political representatives have continued to support the UVI project strongly. Nevertheless, the great cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity in the indigenous regions of Veracruz still poses an important challenge for curricular development and diversification as well as for the implementation of programmes relevant to the regional population.

While the UVI is widely supported by the regional societies it serves, within the public university that gave birth to the project, resistance and misunderstanding persist. Due to the heterodox notion of 'university', of 'degrees' and of 'curriculum' employed by the UVI staff, some more traditional and 'disciplinary' sectors of academia aim to confine and limit this initiative to old fashioned paternalist, top-down 'outreach' activities rather than open their own teaching and research activities to such experiences: in their view, indigenous regions should be 'helped' by particular outreach activities, but these should not impact on conventional higher education content or teaching methods. Therefore, the inclusion of a diversity of actors and a broad range of regional knowledge in the very nucleus of academic degree programmes challenges the universalist, rather 'mono-logical' and 'mono-epistemic' character of the classical western university. In this field, for a public anthropologist and his or her corresponding engaged, 'activist' methodology (Hale 2008), one of the main challenges consists in linking the characteristics of an 'in-

tercultural university', orientated towards and rooted in the indigenous regions, with the dynamics and criteria of a 'normal' public university. The idea of the public university through its curricular traditions, studies and degrees, its autonomy and its Humboldtian 'freedom of teaching and research', provides a decisive institutional 'shelter' for the UVI, but also often imposes all too rigid and orthodox academic practices that are insensitive to the rural and indigenous medium in which it operates. 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 recognising the viability and promoting the visibility of the UVI as a culturally diversified and relevant higher education alternative, in the indigenous regions novel learning processes with mutual transfers of knowledge are emerging.

The official recognition of the right to a culturally pertinent and sensitive higher education sparks an intense debate, not only on 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. The conventional and disciplinary profiles of professionals educated in western universities have failed to offer opportunities in 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 pilot projects such as the UVI, must meet a two-fold challenge that higher education institutes have not yet faced: the challenge of developing flexible, interdisciplinary and professional degree programmes of a good academic standard 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 UVI students 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 training and community credentials, 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 'translators' who

manage, apply and generate knowledge from diverse worlds, worlds that are often asymmetrical and antagonistically shaped but which are necessarily ever more closely related.

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## Notes

1. This term was employed to reflect the plural ethnic nature and internal diversity that characterises each of the indigenous regions in the state of Veracruz.
2. In general terms, these university 'departmentalisation' efforts are detailed in Universidad Amazónica de Pando (2005) and Zambrano Leal (2006).

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