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Towards a Higher Education System for Indigenous Students? Intercultural universities in Mexico

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ABSTRACT – Towards a Higher Education System for Indigenous Students? Intercultural universities in Mexico. In Mexico, since 2003 an alternative university subsystem explicitly directed towards indigenous students has been emerging. In this article, we critically analyze these so-called "intercultural universities" as a new kind of higher education institution, through empirical research from different states of the art, from our own collaborative-ethnographic research project carried out in Veracruz and from annually organized, inter-institutional seminars on intercultural universities. Our analysis pinpoints shared tensions and contradictions, but also identifies different types of intercultural universities. We conclude with some recommendations for intercultural higher education policies in Mexico and Latin America.
Keywords: **Multiculturalism. Intercultural Education. Intercultural Higher Education. Indigenous Students. Mexico.**

RESUMO – Rumo a um Sistema de Ensino Superior para Estudantes Indígenas? Universidades interculturais no México. No México surgiu, a partir de 2003, um subsistema universitário alternativo explicitamente voltado para estudantes indígenas. Neste artigo examinamos criticamente as assim-chamadas universidades interculturais como um novo tipo de instituição de ensino superior. A análise foi feita por meio de pesquisa empírica oriunda de diferentes estados da arte, de nosso próprio projeto de pesquisa colaborativa-etnográfica realizado em Veracruz e de seminários interinstitucionais organizados anualmente sobre universidades interculturais. Nossa análise aponta tensões e contradições compartilhadas, mas também identifica diferentes tipos de universidades interculturais. Concluímos com algumas recomendações para políticas de ensino superior intercultural no México e na América Latina.
Palavras-chave: **Multiculturalismo. Educação Intercultural. Ensino Superior Intercultural. Estudantes Indígenas. México.**

Introduction

The relationships between indigenous groups and the institutions of Latin-American nation-states have been tense and contradictory for centuries. These tensions and contradictions can be traced back to the beginning of the European colonial expansion, but they have been successively transformed under the changing paradigms that governed the self-image and identity of the colonizers and their descendants in each historical era. The resulting national policies, that are grouped together under the polysemic concept of *indigenism*, have found in the educational field one of their main political-cultural intervention spheres and one of their most efficient government tools (López; Sichra, 2016).

However, at the same time, the educational field has also provided the indigenous actors, organizations and movements means of identification, of mobilization and of articulation with other actors of their respective national societies. In this way, from the first colonial experiments of forced resettlements in congregations until reaching the "selective acculturation" (Aguirre Beltrán, 1957) measures of twentieth-century indigenism and their first projects of using transitory bilingual education to enforce hispanicization, the monolingual use of Spanish as only language of instruction, the educational policies designed from above and from the outside, specifically targeted at indigenous peoples, have turned out to be "double edge swords": they constitute discriminatory impositions and, simultaneously, create political opportunities for indigenous claims making and mobilizations (Dietz, 2004; Cortina, 2014).

This intrinsic ambiguity of educational programs for indigenous peoples becomes explicit at the beginning of the twenty-first century, when in different Latin-American countries an alternative, the so-called intercultural higher education, was established. It is an emerging subsystem of strong indigenist reminiscences that arises in the interface between the nation-state, indigenous organizations, academic institutions and the governmental as well as non-governmental actors that in each context shape the respective national educational system. These higher education initiatives resonate with earlier experiences in basic, primary and secondary education offered by the nation-state for indigenous communities, experiences which evolved towards diverse national and regional subsystems of what was subsequently called indigenous education, bilingual-bicultural education and, currently, intercultural bilingual or multilingual education (Hornberger, 2009; Cortina, 2014; López, 2020). Accordingly, intercultural higher education again reflects tensions and contradictions that transcend the educational sphere and that affect the identity politics of the actors involved.

In this paper, these intercultural universities (IU) in Mexico are presented and analysed in their specific features as an emerging system or subsystem of higher education; they constitute one of the main and more innovative institutional responses that the Mexican nation-state has displayed from the beginning of the millennium in response to the

claims of higher education coverage and pertinence that indigenous peoples and their organizations have claimed since the 1980s and 1990s [1]. After distinguishing three types of intercultural higher education initiatives, our analysis identifies some key features of higher education in which IU are starting to transform relations between universities, indigenous youth and their communities: new kinds of transdisciplinary degree programs, the central importance given by IU to community service, the potentially decolonizing role played by indigenous languages in higher education and finally the new profiles and roles of IU lecturers, students and graduates. Our paper thus contributes to exploring the common features, but also the tensions and contradictions a new system of universities shares through its process of governmental institutionalization "from above" and its struggle for community recognition "from below".

An IU is officially defined by the Mexican federal government as a higher education institution (HEI) that focuses its educational programs on young people from indigenous communities and regions and that is established within or nearby indigenous communities (Casillas Muñoz; Santini Villar, 2006). These IU, created since 2003 in different predominantly indigenous regions in Mexico, constitute an institutional novelty within the national educational system that shares its characteristics with other Latin-American initiatives of higher education for indigenous peoples, but that also reflects the specific characteristics of Mexican educational policies.

Unlike other Latin American contexts, in which often indigenous organizations and/or non-governmental organizations establish and manage new "indigenous universities" designed often by indigenous actors themselves, in Mexico these newly created universities arise from agreements between federal and state governments. Accordingly, they are public HEIs, subject to the regulations, to the academic principles as well as to the administrative and financial channels established for the previously existing mainstream universities. Although in some cases non-governmental actors are also involved, the majority of these universities co-sponsored by federal and state government are subject to the guidelines of the Ministry of Public Education (*Secretaría de Educación Pública*, SEP) and specifically of its General Co-ordination of Intercultural and Bilingual Education (*Coordinación General de Educación Intercultural y Bilingüe,* CGEIB).

The empirical information on which this paper is based stems from the diverse states of the art, literature reviews and empirical studies recently carried out – Schmelkes, 2008; Mateos Cortés; Dietz, 2013; 2016; Mateos Cortés; Mendoza Zuany; Dietz, 2013; Guerra García, 2016; Navarrete-Cazales; Alcántara-Santuario, 2016; Rojas Cortés; González Apodaca, 2016; Tapia Guerrer, 2016; Bermúdez Urbina, 2017; 2020; Didou Aupetit, 2018; Hernández Loeza, 2018; Dietz; Mateos Cortés, 2019; e Perales Franco; McCowan, 2021 –, from postgraduate theses completed in the last decade – Mateos Cortés, 2011a; Barquín Cendejas, 2012; Meseguer Galván, 2013; Olivera Rodríguez, 2013; 2019; Navarro Martínez, 2016;

Hernández Loeza, 2017; Huerta Morales, 2018; Lebrato, 2018; and Vargas Moreno, 2020 – as well as from presentations of ongoing research being conducted on different IU and which we discussed collectively in inter-institutional annual seminars – Research Unit of Intercultural Studies (Cuerpo…, 2016a, 2016b), Research Unit of Intercultural Studies and Direction of the Intercultural University of Veracruz (Cuerpo…, 2017) and Ramos Calderón (2018). Throughout these seminars we have identified a wide range of research currently carried out by different actors – students, lecturers and researchers both of intercultural universities and of other HEIs, development agencies and evaluation bodies. The present synthesis on the tensions and contradictions that Mexican IUs face is grounded on the analyses and critical evaluations formulated at these annual seminars and has been complemented and contrasted with our own ethnographic-collaborative research, developed within the project "Dialogues of knowledge, action and power between academic and community actors: a reflexive ethnography of intercultural higher education in Veracruz" (*InterSaberes*)[2], which we have been carrying out between 2007 and 2017 with a team of professors, students and graduates from the *Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural* (UVI)[3].

Mexican public intercultural universities: the "official model"

New and alternative HEIs, often conceived in Latin America as indigenous universities, have been described, analysed and defined by Mato (2009; 2018) as "intercultural institutions of higher education": HEIs that are born with a strong regional and rural vocation and that are created inside regions which had been historically marginalized from Western higher education (Dietz, 2017). In contrast to conventional educational institutions, IUs emerged with a double mission: on the one hand, a quantitative mission to increase the coverage of public higher education towards rural regions and, on the other hand, a qualitative mission to offer alternative, non-conventional and non-urban-centric academic degrees through courses that are "culturally and linguistically relevant" in their respective contexts.

This double objective of coverage and relevance generates tensions in the political and academic management inside each IU – they often end up oscillating between a quantitative policy of "increasing coverage" – student enrolment numbers –, and a qualitative policy of relevance – to offer courses that generate professional alternatives at local and regional level beyond the common expectation of the young people to emigrate from their communities once they finish their education. The objectives of coverage and relevance at the same time reveal the hybrid origin of these new Mexican universities: they appear as part of the neoliberal cycle of education policies, strongly conditioned by the New Public Management paradigm and by what Shore and Wright (2015) have coined "governing by numbers", and simultaneously constitute a historical moment of transition from the classical, integrationist

indigenism of the nation-state towards a neoliberal multiculturalism (Hale, 2006) of recognition and diversity management, which responds to indigenous mobilization and claims for an education that overcomes assimilation and that develops indigenous languages, knowledge and worldviews inside public education from pre-primary to higher education (Hernández Loeza, 2018).

In the context of these struggles, the public appearance of the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (EZLN, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation) in Chiapas in 1994, and the associated demands for a new post-indigenist relation between the Mexican nation-state and the indigenous peoples facilitated and accelerated the proposal of creating new, culturally and linguistically relevant educational institutions for Mexico's more than sixty language groups and indigenous peoples (Dietz, 2012a; 2012b; 2017). Finally, after the presidential elections of 2000 a new federal government officially recognized "intercultural and bilingual education" as a political priority, even though it did not recognize the claims for indigenous autonomy. As a result, since 2003 new HEIs were quickly created in Mexico's main indigenous regions, thus constituting a new university subsystem, articulated in its own university network, the National Association of Intercultural Universities, all of which emerged from bilateral agreements between the federal government – through CGEIB – and their respective state governments. Accordingly, these IU were founded in 2004 in the Mazahua region of the Valley of Mexico (*Universidad Intercultural del Estado de México*), in 2005 in the Chol region of Tabasco (*Universidad Intercultural del Estado de Tabasco*) and in the multiethnic city of San Cristobal de las Casas in Chiapas (*Universidad Intercultural de Chiapas*), in 2006 in the Nahua and Totonaca region of the Sierra Norte de Puebla (*Universidad Intercultural del Estado de Puebla*), in 2007 in the Maya region of the Yucatán peninsula (*Universidad Intercultural Maya de Quintana Roo*), in the Nahua mountain of Guerrero (*Universidad Intercultural del Estado de Guerrero*) and in the Purhépecha region of Michoacán (*Universidad Intercultural Indígena de Michoacán*), in 2011 in different communities and regions of San Luis Potosí (*Universidad Intercultural de San Luis Potosí*) and finally in 2012 in the Hñähñu (Otomí) region of Hidalgo (*Universidad Intercultural del Estado de Hidalgo*)[4]. According to a database generated by Ramos Calderón (2018), by 2016, a total of 102,076 students had been enrolled in these universities.

In addition to these newly created universities, there are previously existing HEIs that have joined the federal program, such as in the case of the oldest indigenous higher education initiative in the country, the *Universidad Autónoma Indígena de México*, located in the Yaqui and Mayo region in Sinaloa, which was founded in 1982, joins in 2005 the network sponsored by CGEIB, a network currently comprising eleven public IUs.

The IU subsystem is regulated through the SEP and channelled through the CGEIB (Casillas Muñoz; Santini Villar, 2006). From their foundational documents, these HEIs do not identify themselves as in-

digenous universities, but as institutions open to all interested students of indigenous, Afro-descendant, or rural origin who have been excluded from urban and mainstream higher education. It is not the indigenous ethnicity, but interculturality and diversity which according to official discourse forms the basis of their educational activities (Schmelkes, 2011). Even when these universities tend to have over 50% of indigenous students enrolled, students often change their self-identification in the course of their academic trajectories: while in non-intercultural secondary education these students often ended up denying their indigenous origin or hiding their indigenous language, when they enter the IU they transit towards positive ethnic self-identification not as indigenous – a term often perceived as derogatory, discriminatory and/or racist – but as Maya, Purhépecha, Náhuatl etc.; in many cases students who had completely "lost" their mother tongue and their ethnic origins through urban migration or in general through *mestizaje* – becoming a non-indigenous, Spanish speaking *mestizo* – rediscover their heritage inside the intercultural university (Mateos Cortés; Mendoza Zuany; Dietz, 2013; Dietz, 2017).

Since the creation of the first IU, a debate emerged on the notion of interculturality officially employed in their founding documents. Even though the CGEIB promotes a non-indigenous and non-essentialist concept that – in official discourse – respects and includes all kinds of diversity (Casillas; Santini, 2006), other academics as well as activists highlight the strongly harmonizing and non-conflictive character of the official CGEIB notion of interculturality. In comparison with a much more critical and active concept of interculturality, Erdösová (2011) emphasizes that the "functionalist" notion of interculturality that the CGEIB promotes ends up blurring the colonial legacy of the asymmetries between the Western and the indigenous worlds, thus generating a "minoritized" view of education:

> The concept of interculturality used in the educational model of the CGEIB covers up an unequal relationship between the Western and indigenous civilizations, a fact that reduces the intercultural universities to a minority educational modality of low impact within Mexican society (Erdösová, 2011, p. 78).

This harmonizing and ahistorical bias of the official notion of interculturality, a product of the neoliberal multiculturalism that rigidly circumscribes the *indio permitido*, that which is officially allowed to be indigenous (Hale, 2006), is reflected in the decrees of creation of official IUs, as Hernández Loeza argues in his critical analysis of these founding documents:

> The simple legal recognition of interculturality as a principle of the public policies is not a guarantee that the domination and oppression relationships will change, because they mirror a heavy colonial legacy of racism and imposition of the modern Western logic. In this sense, norms such as the decrees of the IU creation are present-

> ed as another limitation for the intercultural way of life: instead of providing a place for the exercise of the rights of self-determination and autonomy for the indigenous people and the construction of a pluralist society, they are presented as strategies of political domination and as an instrument of ethnophagous [ethnocidal] neoindigenism that characterizes the neoliberal times that we are living (2016, p. 114).

Apart from their official "intercultural signature", universities promoted by the CGEIB are characterized by their exogenous origin in the regions that they serve. Even though they initially answer to claims made by indigenous organizations, municipal authorities or local educational actors, the new universities are created "from above and from the outside", based on the federal-state agreements, which define them in legal terms as "state decentralized public institutions", whose board of directors suffer from a strong interference by their respective state governments (Hernández Loeza, 2016; Navarrete-Cazales; Alcántara-Santuario, 2016; Dietz, 2017; Salmerón Castro, 2017; Didou Aupetit, 2018).

Due to their novel characteristics and their recent nature, the IUs of the CGEIB face a wide range of administrative, financial, academic, and political problems. During their large processes of decision making, political negotiations and consultation about the choice of regions and communities in which new campuses are created, political obstacles, rivalries and tensions have emerged among groups of interest and factions (Hernández Loeza, 2016; Dietz, 2017).

The authorities of official IUs are exposed to the political will of their respective state governments, which limits the continuity of their academic projects and the autonomy of their decision making. As previous rectors recall (González González; Rosado-May; Dietz, 2017), their directive teams most of the time act as a complex hinge between the national and the local, mediating between the interests of the state government in turn and the federal policy as well as between student, educational, administrative and community actors (Dietz, 2017).

The political intromissions alien to intercultural higher education, the lack of continuity and the constant fluctuation among directors that several IUs suffer, the lack of transparency in the processes of appointing directors, as well as inadequate profiles for the great challenges that these academic institutions have, are factors that have an impact on daily processes of university management, a management that until today lacks both academic and financial autonomy that other HEIs usually have (Seminario IU, 2016).

In search of alternatives to the "official IU model"

Besides the newly created, governmental IU, in Mexico two other kinds of intercultural university have emerged in the last years. In the first place, since a decade ago, there are new institutions of higher in-

tercultural education that are promoted by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The *Instituto Superior Intercultural Ayuuk* (ISIA) is an indigenous university created in 2005 in the community of Jaltepec de Candayoc by the Ayuuk/Mixe population of Oaxaca, the NGO *Servicios del Pueblo Mixe* and the Mexican Jesuit University System; ISIA offers university courses firstly targeting young Ayuuk students, but recently it has been admitting indigenous students from other regions of Oaxaca and Mexico, as well. A similar initiative originated in San Idelfonso Tultepec, an Otomí/Ñöñho community in the state of Queretaro, where in 2009 the confluence of a cooperative movement, local community leaders and the mentioned Jesuit University System succeeded in founding the *Instituto Intercultural Ñöñho* (IIÑ).

Another non-governmental initiative, in this case supported by social movements, alternative educational projects and international development agencies in the Sierra Norte de Puebla, is the *Universidad Campesina e Indígena en Red* (UCI-Red), created in 1998 in San Andrés Tepexoxuca, Puebla, building upon a successful previous experience, the *Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo Rural* (CESDER). Since then, other IU projects have been created similarly as alliances which often comprise internal actors and municipal authorities, but also external NGOs, such as in the case of the *Universidad Intercultural de los Pueblos del Sur* (UNISUR) in the state of Guerrero and the *Universidad Comunal Intercultural Cempoaltépetl* (UNICEM) in the Oaxacan municipality of Tlahuitoltepec Mixe.

All these intercultural institutions of higher education are independent from the SEP and the CGEIB as well as from their respective state governments. They obtain their resources from NGOs, from regional cooperatives, from contributions in kind that the academic staff obtain directly from the respective host community, and occasionally from international cooperation agencies. They mostly sustain themselves with mechanisms of communal *tequio* (local reciprocity activities) as well as with "academic *tequio*", as the voluntary work by external, periodically visiting academic staff is called in the case of ISIA.

Besides these independent and non-governmental initiatives, with the establishment in 2005 of the *Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural* (UVI) an alternative model emerges that diverges from the official CGEIB model as well as from the independent initiatives. In this case, *Universidad Veracruzana*, an already existing, autonomous and public state university, starts its own intercultural program, that operates in four main campuses located each inside an indigenous community within the Veracruz regions of Huasteca, Totonacapan, Sierra de Zongolica and Selvas and today constitutes an IU housed within a mainstream university. With this design, the UVI does not depend on the federal nor on the state government but enjoys the same autonomy as any other public HEI in Mexico. Recently, other established mainstream universities both in Mexico City and in states with indigenous regions are interested in applying this third, alternative model in order to create intercultural programs within their own institutions.

The educational programs offered in IUs

While both the non-governmental IUs and the public, autonomous IUs lack restrictions regarding the design and development of their study programs and courses, the official IUs need to co-ordinate closely with CGEIB to generate their educational offer. Since the beginning of their activities, the CGEIB restrictions have prevented the new governmental HEIs from offering educational programs that "compete" with those from already existing mainstream universities. Regardless of the type of university, from their foundation on all three types of IU face the challenge of designing completely new academic programs which claim to be adapted to the local context in linguistic and cultural terms and which also reflect the economic situation and regional labour market.

To achieve this purpose, an effort was made to avoid the indigenist bias that previously limited and channelled the promotion of young indigenous professionals towards only pedagogic or agricultural professions, a situation which persists in many indigenous regions, and which stems from the nation-state's indigenism priority to train their own cultural brokers inside indigenous regions as counterparts for state-led, top-down integrationist development projects. These professions are nowadays in crisis, as the neoliberal withdrawal of the state agencies from the indigenous regions has cancelled such employments, which have been nearly completely substituted by flexible, precariously subcontracted and project-based "technicians" of sporadic assistance measures of poverty relief.

On the other hand, the courses some mainstream technical, pedagogical or agricultural HEI have been offering in rural Mexico are not explicitly focused on local or regional needs nor on their students' cultural and linguistic particularities; in this sense, they tend to be biased towards urban, (agro-) industrial or service jobs, a study profile which is not adapted to local employability, thus only increasing the migratory pressure the students face to find employment outside their region of origin. With the aim of countering this historical rural-urban brain drain, and in close relation and with the explicit support of the CGEIB, in all regions the official IU always started with two bachelor degrees, one called "Language and Culture" in most of these institutions, strongly influenced by the Mexican academic tradition of applied anthropology and linguistics, focused on language revival and cultural initiatives, and the other one called "Sustainable Development", devoted to rural production, ecology and conservation.

However, from the beginning both bachelor degrees suffered from a rather vague profile with regard to employability in specific professional fields: the Language and Culture degree has strong thematical and methodological reminiscences with the mainstream study programs for elementary school bilingual teachers, but their graduates cannot compete in equal terms for teaching profession vacancies with

alumni of *escuelas normales*, the traditional Mexican teacher training institutions, which in the current federal administration are recovering their historical privilege of being able to "guarantee" their own graduates preferential employment by Mexican public schools. Meanwhile the Sustainable Development degree reflects the long tradition of rural development and agronomy extension programmes prevailing in Mexico until the neoliberal shift, but it does not endow their graduates a professional status as agricultural engineers.

Apart from their rather diffuse graduate profile, another weakness of the IU study courses consists in the way these programs are designed. None of the governmental IU has carried out any public "prior, free and informed" consultation process, as the international indigenous human rights standards demand (Mato, 2018). In several IU internal and preliminary diagnostics of local and regional educational needs have been implemented, but the participation of the community actors and their indigenous organizations has been very scarce.

The unwillingness to openly consult the educational needs and aspirations of the indigenous youngsters and their families somehow again reflects the mentioned tensions between access and coverage, on the one hand, and cultural and linguistic relevance, on the other hand. These tensions are deepened by the fact that in many indigenous regions of Mexico the local demands for higher education do not include "intercultural courses", but rather mainstream degrees in Law, Medicine, Nursing, Pedagogy etc. – demands which contrast with the CGEIB perception of priorities for intercultural bachelor's degrees. These degrees were designed with anthropological and linguistic expertise considering cultural pertinence and regional language criteria, but without the participation of local indigenous stakeholders. The resulting courses and particularly their unconventional designations were barely comprehensible to local level actors and as a result turned out to be unattractive for young people from the supposed beneficiary communities.

Not only public, CGEIB-dominated IU, but also non-governmental university initiatives face this same challenge: academics and policy makers in one case as well as NGO co-ordinators and indigenous intellectuals in the other case have difficulties in communicating to their possible beneficiaries the advantages of study programs whose names, key concepts and professional profiles feel strange and external to the life worlds of indigenous peasant families struggling for economic survival and upward social mobility, which in their communities is closely related to conventional, not intercultural study programs.

As an intermediary solution, most IUs, both those that belong to the CGEIB as well as the other types of IU, have been developing and experiencing with a wider range of bachelor degrees and study programs, which comprise intercultural degrees such as Language and Culture, Intercultural Communication, Intercultural Management for Development and Sustainable Development, but which increasingly also include more conventional bachelor degrees such as Business Administration,

Local Government, Computing, Rural Tourism, etc. And lately there has been a rise in new hybrid bachelor's degrees that combine an intercultural approach with a specific professional domain, such as in the case of Intercultural Health and Intercultural Law (Schmelkes, 2008; Dietz, 2017; González; González; Rosado-May; Dietz, 2017).

Community service as IU identity politics

Unlike many traditional bachelor's degrees, the courses offered and developed at IUs have a common feature, a shared identity marker: from the very beginning in the first semester of each of these courses, a narrow relation is established between teaching-learning processes inside the classroom, on the one hand, and community service activities outside the classroom, preferentially carried out in the student´s community of origin, on the other hand. Although inside the classroom often rather mainstream teaching methods are deployed, several IU academics innovate their teaching methods by combining cooperative learning through projects that overcome the traditional limitations of subjects or disciplines with practical "field" activities in the IU host community or in other villages nearby the local campus.

As these student projects are not limited to one-semester activities, but constitute the core of a larger research and intervention process which eventually culminates in the bachelor thesis, these field activities nourish so-called "integrating projects" or community linking "portfolios" that in many IUs train the students in an itinerary of different, complementary methods particularly of action research which enable them to develop a thesis writing process that is not limited to the last one or two semesters, as happens in most mainstream universities. Through methods of local and regional diagnosis, of project design, implementation and evaluation, etc., students carry out their own research during the whole study program, thus experiencing in practice a wide range of methods, techniques and processes related to community development and action research while at the same time nourishing their projects with academic subjects that are flexibly and "inductively" designed to complement the methodological cross-semester itinerary.

The local actors the IU frequently deal with in community service initially stem from the students' own families and neighbours in their communities, but these networks are then expanded and diversified throughout the course to other local or regional stakeholders, such as local, agrarian, or religious authorities, NGOs active in the respective region, governmental institutions and agencies and in some cases private sector initiatives.

The main problem of this kind of student-centred community service, which per se is an innovative and important feature of the IU, we have identified in several of the above-mentioned research projects and seminars is the lack of continuity and the IU dependence on its students own networks. Many IU rely solely on these student networks, which are always limited in time and scope, thus preventing the university from

stable long-term collaborations with their surrounding communities and organizations.

Accordingly, IUs need to develop their own specific policies and strategies of collaboration with local and regional stakeholders beyond the individual projects of their students. Often the academic staff and the emerging IU research units turn out to be very relevant to design and maintain a network of collaborating bodies both of governmental and non-governmental actors in order to have an impact in their host community and in the region the IU is supposed to serve. Since the foundation of the first IU, the CGEIB documents and the official discourse always emphasize community service as the main feature of an intercultural institution's identity. Frequently, this official "identity politics" in practice contrasts with rather weak and low-impact activities. As field work data provided by Hernández Loeza (2017), Huerta Morales (2018) and Vargas Moreno (2020) for the case of the UIEP and Navarro Martínez (2016) for the case of the UNICH illustrates, community actors accordingly tend to criticize these service activities as sporadic, short-term oriented and without a sustained impact which would be able to transform the power asymmetries, inequalities and conflicts that shape many indigenous regions in Mexico.

Nevertheless, there are also very positive experiences with community service accomplishments. In some universities – such as the four campuses of the UVI – regional consultative councils have been created to ensure a continuous flow of information and decision-making between academic and community actors. Students' and lecturers' service projects have triggered in several cases a local interest in formulating their own, longer term development or *buen vivir* ("good life") priorities and to negotiate them with the IU and their research units and projects. Thus, activities which originally were conceived and designed as "one-way service" projects from the university towards the community are now being redesigned in order to include a "two-way" perspective of collaboration between the IU and a given local community. Many indigenous families understand this bilateral relation as a continuous one, which includes trusting the education of several generations of their sons and daughters to the IU. And the university, on its part, maintains longer-term research and intervention activities together with local stakeholders, which in some IU have enabled the creation of university-run project "incubators" – in agriculture, ecology, arts and handcrafts, language planning and recovery etc. – that later are applied and transferred to local stakeholders such as family businesses, community authorities, NGOs, and other counterparts. In these experiences, therefore, the intercultural university might at best be slowly turning into a regional stakeholder of its own kind, which would help to spark off transformative activities and initiatives far beyond the traditional campus limits.

The role of the indigenous languages

Since the founding documents, all IU acknowledge the central role the indigenous languages spoken in their respective region must acquire on campus in order to definitely abandon the nominally bilingual educational models of indigenism which have in practice excluded linguistic diversity from schools through indirect hispanicization processes. Language revival and the preferential use of indigenous languages on campus are officially included in all the study programs offered by the IU.

Nevertheless, the daily routine on most IU campuses is far behind this explicit objective of decolonizing the monolingual Spanish university. Frequently, the scarce use of indigenous languages inside IUs is excused by the lack of teaching staff with appropriate linguistic academic backgrounds and profiles and with the required oral and written communicative competences. Furthermore, most IUs lack the necessary teaching material in their indigenous languages, especially for disciplinary subjects that require a specialized and/or technical academic language which – right now – does not exist in most of the indigenous languages. The coexistence of a wide regional variety of mother tongues and dialects as well as the internalization of discriminatory attitudes and linguistic prejudices, acquired and reinforced especially through their entire secondary and higher education, are also mentioned as reasons for the scarce use of indigenous languages. As a result, most courses are only available as monolingual programs in Spanish, which prevents the indigenous languages from becoming means of daily communication channels within the IU.

Most of the IU continue to use indigenous languages just for four limited objectives, which we were able to identify by comparing experiences shared by indigenous IU lecturers throughout the mentioned inter-annual seminars: firstly, IU identify and classify the students in ethno-linguistic terms, which reflects a colonial and postcolonial continuity of classifying diversity through the demographical and statistical use of the indigenous language as an identifier of diversity; secondly, IU offer one of the predominant indigenous languages of the region as an academic subject, thus turning the language into an object of study instead of a means of academic communication; thirdly, IU develop some kind of "linguistic-performative activism" (Figueroa Saavedra et al., 2014) by using the indigenous language in particular key moments such as the defence of a thesis, the organization of a community service event or the inauguration of a particular academic ceremony; and fourthly IU use the indigenous language instrumentally as a supplementary means of communication in the "field" or in off-campus community activity contexts.

To our knowledge, there are very few experiences of turning an indigenous language into a "normal" channel of academic communication. Until now, it seems that only the UVI succeeded in implementing a "linguistic normalization" strategy by transforming one of their

campuses, the Grandes Montañas campus located in Tequila, inside the Sierra de Zongolica Náhuatl region, into one where not only all students, but also all academic and administrative staff are gradually and consciously moving toward using only Náhuatl as the daily "standard" language of the whole IU. As a first result of this indigenous language normalization process, UVI in Tequila has just been able to start a pioneer indigenous monolingual study programme, the *Maestriah ipan Totlahtol iwan Tonemilis,* a master programme completely offered and studied in Náhuatl.

As this experience, among others, illustrates, indigenous languages are key elements for the decolonization of the IUs and of higher education in general. Such an endeavour means moving forward from the partial and often instrumental uses to genuine communication and knowledge-building channels. In several IU innovative strategies are being developed by both lecturers and students to create, develop and strengthen academic variants of indigenous languages, which imply locally and regionally negotiated processes of language standardization, literalization and diversification. In some IU – such as the UVI campus Totonacapan (for the Tutunaku language), the UVI campus Las Selvas (for the Nuntaj+yi' language), the UIEP (for the Ngigua language), the UNICH (for the Zoque language) and the ISIA (for the Ayuuk language) – writing courses of indigenous languages are being started for those languages which have been completely oral until recently, in others there are standardization attempts to increase the inter-dialectal comprehension among speakers of regional dialect variants of the same indigenous language, and in other IU there are pilot initiatives to update the indigenous language's lexicon introducing semantic innovations that allow speakers to express academic contents in their mother tongue.

These efforts are important and path-breaking, but they will not be successful if they are achieved only by a certain IU in isolation of other key actors. Apart from explicit support by local and regional indigenous intellectuals, writers, teachers and their associations, the IU need a close collaboration with mainstream universities and their schools of languages: without linguistic research and sociolinguistic diagnosis, a "reinvention" and updating of the indigenous languages will not be encouraged by a single, isolated effort. The challenge is even greater considering that many young people from indigenous regions who graduate from monolingual, hispanicizing secondary education have been losing key capacities in their mother tongue's oral and written communicative skills but have not acquired academically satisfactory communicative skills in Spanish, either. Thus, the acquisition and training of oral and written comprehension competences as well as academic writing in both languages represents one of the main challenges that IU students are continuously facing throughout their academic trajectory.

Lecturers, students and graduates as the IU key actors

According to the guidelines established by the CGEIB, the lecturer is characterized to be a tutor–researcher that promotes the accomplishment of roles that enunciate three substantial ideas: teaching, research, and community service. Lecturers are "culture facilitators between students and knowledge" (Casillas Muñoz; Santini Villar, 2006, p. 156), as their task consists in triggering processes in which students reflect, systematize, and capitalize community experiences that relate their previous local knowledge with "scientific" knowledge. In our analysis we have identified that, in addition to recognizing this responsibility, it is important that lecturers know and speak the languages of their students, something which is not always the case.

In general terms the academic staff of IUs have not been trained explicitly to work in contexts of linguistic and cultural diversity and mostly have not applied intercultural teaching strategies until they were hired at their IU. This means that most of them rather build their didactic strategies from their own prior professional experiences and are now trying to articulate community knowledge and practices with the academic knowledge of their disciplines of origin (Mateos Cortés, 2011b). Until now, there are very few intercultural continuous education programmes specifically targeting IU academics.

There is still little research on the role of the IU lecturers, their academic trajectories, their professional experiences, or training needs. What is often emphasized in the exchanges we have had is the need to hire IU teaching staff according to different criteria than in other HEI: their community work experiences are more important than their degrees and postgraduate studies [5]. One of the main staff-related issues these institutions face is the constant fluctuation of the teaching staff. Tenure programmes are scarce, so many academics end up leaving the IU for established mainstream universities which offer better salaries, health insurance and other services. This fluctuation is also due to the overwhelming tasks academics working in IU face daily, as they are supposed to complement their rather heavy teaching load with complementary research and outreach or community service activities; non-teaching loads such as research or community service are not being equally valued by the IU authorities. Finally, staff fluctuation also hinders the necessary internal processes of consolidating research units and collective academic life inside each IU.

Apart from the lecturers, a second key actor of any IU are, of course, their students. According to the few available statistics on IU enrolment, during the cycle 2016-2017 these universities served approximately a total of 14,784 students, which 55% were women and 45% were men (Ramos Calderón, 2018), thus reflecting the general trend in Mexican higher Education towards a feminization of the student population. Nearly all students of IU are first-generation students not only at the university level, but often even at the secondary educational level. They mostly have gone through a rural, precarious, underfunded and

often low-quality circle of public education composed first by transitory bilingual preschool and primary education and then by a secondary education limited to so-called *telesecundarias* and *telebachilleratos* (incomplete middle schools that due to the lack of teachers offer partly TV-based distance education). A large part of them remembers, understands or speaks an indigenous language, although according to the SEP figures only 5,284 self-identify as indigenous language speakers (Ramos Calderón, 2018).

To achieve the enrolment and to be able to finish their university degree studies, due to their parents' very low-income situations most students have access to some kind of state or federal scholarship funding, a scholarship which is very small, and which supports them basically in travel costs between their community and the campus and with some study materials. Studying in a IU is not always the first choice, as many students end up enrolling in a IU due to their lack of economic resources and access to other, mainstream HEI, because they failed those universities' entrance tests or because of their linguistic and/or cultural distance with regard to Spanish mestizo institutions. Besides, the choice of studying at the university sometimes is not individual, but a family or community decision. In such cases, the choice of an IU means reducing the family's expenses for higher education, as compared to far away urban HIE.

Once immersed in the IU's academic life, students experience intense and strongly felt transitions in their identities, as they are suddenly invited to relate to their family's and community's culture, language and heritage, something they have had to hide previously. Furthermore, campus life means also being exposed to and being able to enjoy other sources of diversity, such as gender relations, sexual diversity and religious and worldview orientations. Awareness of racism, sexism and other sources of discrimination is explicitly taught in several IU, which often triggers deep processes of personal re-definition, of rethinking family and inter-generational relations – several students stem from families whose parents, reacting to societal discrimination against them, have prevented them from learning their mother tongue, which has prevented them from communicating with their grandparents – as well as of self-esteem with regard to their own future personal, community and professional projects.

Research undertaken on IU students emphasises their internal diversity. Ethnically, identity transformations and re-ethnization phenomena are highlighted, which make it impossible to use labels such as "indigenous" or *mestizo* / "non-indigenous" as fixed categories (Bermúdez Urbina, 2017). Socioeconomically, most students come from rural and marginalized contexts; their experiences with urban, "middle class" and academic environments is nearly non-existent.

Once they finish their respective bachelor's degrees, many IU graduates face a very difficult process of labour market integration. Although they have acquired the necessary skills to work in community

development initiatives, in language revival projects, in bilingual education, in rural primary health care, in sustainable agroecological projects and/or in human rights struggles in favour of their communities and territories, the huge majority of graduates will not find long-term and stable employment in one of these professional domains. Many opt for self-employment, for working in cooperative or non-governmental organizations, but some will prefer staying in the community, returning to their families' peasant activities and support them by diversifying crops, marketing alternatives and/or funding options.

Some IU graduates succeed in being employed by governmental institutions and particularly by local town halls. In our project *InterSaberes*, for the case of the UVI, the graduates' training in inter- or transdisciplinary project work, their intimate knowledge of community decision making and organizational structures as well as their multilingual communicative skills which allow them to interact in both written and oral Spanish and indigenous languages are the key features highlighted by interviewed employers and institutional counterparts (Dietz; Mateos Cortés; Budar, 2020).

Nevertheless, many interviewed graduates also mention several weaknesses of their IU training. In comparison with similar study programs offered in mainstream universities, in their own opinion and compared with other professions with whom they compete, they often feel they lack knowledge in mathematics, statistics and other quantitative methods. Similarly, the emphasis on anthropological and linguistic topics inside many IU courses leads to an underrepresentation of economic and entrepreneurial issues and to a bias towards humanities in contrast to technical, science and engineering programmes. Finally, several graduates mention the need for specifically intercultural postgraduate programs as well as for continuous education and in general for more flexible, shorter and part-time courses and diplomas, which would also be attractive to professionals already in service and not only for "full time" young university students, but for community actors such as in-service teachers, nurses, healers, judges and peasants interested in diversifying their professional and community knowledge.

Conclusions and perspectives

Within Mexican intercultural universities, an academically professionalized indigenous intellectuality is emerging as a new kind of hybrid actor, as this actor also has a strong and salient community profile – a type of indigenous student and graduate who throughout her university career has not been completely separated from her rural indigenous origin and who in the best scenarios is able to trigger processes of exchange of knowledge, of new roles and functions that will subsequently allow her to manage, mediate and translate between worlds, between actors and between professions (Mateos Cortés; Dietz; Mendoza Zuany, 2016; Mateos Cortés, 2017). In the future we will require both monographic and comparative empirical research to accompany, analyse

and contrast these processes of academization, professionalization and communalization that the IU graduates are experiencing (Dietz; Mateos Cortés; Budar, 2020).

The analysis summarized here of several research projects and states of the art on IUs illustrates that these new HEIs are managing to train young people in their respective rural contexts of origin and in new career patterns, but that simultaneously represent great challenges for the consolidation of this kind of university. We have distinguished three types of IU that are quickly being institutionalized by a diverse range of actors: the governmental IU created as an "official model", a CGEIB mentored model that strongly depends on their respective state governments; the non-governmental IUs that respond to the "Jesuit model" and that therefore resemble a logic of NGOs or of private and denominational foundations; and, finally, those that start from a previously established autonomous public university such as what we call the "UVI model". Therefore, comparative research is now required to contrast and evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of each of these types of IU.

Similarly, it will be necessary to contextualize the Mexican subsystem of intercultural higher education in the broader Latin American continental panorama, in which – as we mentioned at the beginning – there are similar experiences, but where other stakeholders seem to be more influential than the nation-states (Mato, 2011). It is rather striking that both the achievements and the challenges faced by these new HEI in other Latin American countries are very similar to those we have observed here in the case of the Mexican IU.

We have pinpointed throughout this paper how Mexican intercultural higher education is born "from above", but in response to the exclusionary biases of the hegemonic university system and the claims of indigenous peoples "from below". Reflecting these tensions between governmental and indigenous actors, in this paper we have first distinguished three types of IU: a public university type, which is created as a governmental initiative "from above" with strong ties to both the federal Ministry of Education and the state governors; a non-governmental, "private" IU, which is independent from governmental actors, but which relies on either religious orders or international development cooperation as funding agencies; and an IU sponsored and run as an "intercultural branch" from within an autonomous public university. We have emphasized that – despite these diverse origins and constraints – the three types of IU face similar challenges – as an alternative and rather recent subsystem of HEIs struggling for recognition at the margins of large and well-established mainstream universities.

However, we have also been able to identify at least four common features of Mexican IUs, all of which illustrate a huge potential for innovation and transformation. Firstly, the novel study programs offered on B.A. and postgraduate levels for indigenous youth inside their rural and highly marginalized regions of origin do not "export" or replicate

conventional courses and degrees, whose disciplinary nature, their curricular orientation towards encyclopaedic and rote learning as well as their bias towards urban employment options; instead, inter and transdisciplinary courses which combine theoretical on-campus learning and practical, applied off-campus and community learning phases contribute to educate indigenous youth as mediators and translators among diverse knowledge traditions and sources.

Secondly, the IUs identify explicitly with community service as a central function of HEIs: students, lecturers and the institution as such promote a vocation for community-university relations through a culture which does not conceive this relation as unidirectional; the IU actors do not only "deliver" services to their surrounding communities, but these tend to become two-way learning opportunities for both students and lecturers, on the one hand, and local authorities and wise men and women, on the other hand. Community service thus forms part of the teaching curriculum and of the research activities, instead of being marginalized as an isolated, supplementary university activity.

Thirdly, indigenous languages are slowly, but irreversibly being incorporated into the IU teaching, learning and community service activities. Despite their recent creation, IUs are becoming leaders in alternative language policies, in community language planning and in developing multilingual study programs. As shown above, this process of "linguistic normalization" has an important decolonizing effect: turning an indigenous language into a "normal" channel of academic communication reverses the colonial and postcolonial attempts at imposing monolingual Spanish educational institutions. Although the challenge is huge and the resources needed are limited, IUs are developing multilingual practices which in the long run will also have a strong and challenging impact on the Mexican and Latin American non-intercultural mainstream HEIs.

Fourthly and finally, the decolonizing role of IUs is not limited to the inclusion of the indigenous language in higher education, but also comprises the inclusion of new profiles for key university actors such as lecturers and students. Through the IU emphasis on community-university relations, on indigenous languages and on experience-driven, practical learning outcomes, a new kind of teacher-mediator-translator arises. Situated and relevant knowledge of the community or the region, of its indigenous language(s) and of local customs of education, health, justice, environment, production and indigenous cosmology, in general, become much more decisive for teaching than representing a single given discipline, an outstanding Ph.D. degree or an impressive record of publications in highly ranked international journals. These new "bottom up" and praxis-driven teaching profiles are complemented by new student profiles. In all IUs throughout Mexico indigenous youth entering higher education are first-generation pioneers not only in their families or communities, but in their whole region. The fact that now in each of these regions there are university graduates educated through a broad and critical view of intercultural relations empowers not only

the former students themselves and their families, but it also impacts on their localities and municipalities, the non-governmental initiatives arising from within the region and finally also on the power relations between indigenous peoples and national society.

In order to be able to deepen these local and regional impacts, IUs need autonomy, full recognition and equal treatment with regard to mainstream HEIs. We hope that in the current Mexican context, in which the federal government is prioritizing an expansion of higher education coverage towards non-conventional and particular rural students, these rather young IUs succeed in obtaining the autonomy and academic presence to consolidate their main features: regionally and contextually designed, *inductive* intercultural and multilingual study programs that provide indigenous youth with professional and community knowledge tools to positively impact their local life worlds and thus to gradually decolonize the unequal relations their communities still suffer with regard to the hegemonic non-indigenous, *mestizo* and urban worlds[6].

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Notes

1 In the following we are summing up some of our previous research findings, presented in Dietz (2012a; 2012b; 2017); Mateos Cortés e Dietz (2013; 2016); and Dietz e Mateos Cortés (2019; 2020).

2 The project had a first initial piloting phase (2007-2009), which was sponsored by the UV's General Directorate of Investigations and by SEP, and later (2010-2014) benefited from the National Council for Science and Technology. (CONACYT, Basic Science call 2009) and by the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID, call for aid for inter-university cooperation programs and scientific research); in its continuation, currently (2015-2018) is part of a broader project called, "Emerging processes and common agencies: praxis of collaborative social research and new forms of political subjectivation" (Call 2014, R&D projects, the Spanish state program for promoting excellent scientific and technical research; reference: CSO2014-56960-P).

3 Dietz (2008; 2012a), Mateos Cortés (2015; 2017), Mateos Cortés and Dietz (2016); Mateos Cortés, Dietz and Mendoza Zuany (2016) and Dietz and Mateos Cortés (2020).

4 For more details, see Dietz (2017) and González González, Rosado-May and Dietz (2017).

5 All IU stress the importance of integrating "local wise men and women" and/or indigenous intellectuals as teaching staff to reinforce the community knowledge; however, until now such "informal" wisdom is not considered as an academic qualification, so they cannot be hired by the IU but can only collaborate as volunteers.

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