

Trajectory of the Intercultural University of the State of Puebla (UIEP in Spanish), Mexico

Trayectoria de la Universidad Intercultural del Estado de Puebla (UIEP), México

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Abstract

This paper refers to the work carried out to provide a higher education option to the population that inhabits one of the representative cultural regions of Mexico: the Totonacapan. In this cultural area the Totonacs, Nahuas and the denominated non-indigenous coexist. The Intercultural University of the State of Puebla (UIEP in Spanish) has been established for all of them, which has ten years of road traveled. The purpose of this written communication is to explain the operation of the UIEP to start an analysis of how much the intercultural universities (UI) have managed to fulfill the purpose for which they were created in Mexico. The approach of the present study is made from the reflection and analysis of those who belong to the institution as full-time professors and researchers, which has been derived from the collegial work in which they have collaborated within this institution. The main findings are closely related to the

three substantive or primordial functions of IUs: teaching, research and community engagement. It is concluded that the advances, contradictions, conflicts, as well as the prospects for the immediate future contribute to the growth and development of the institution as long as its educational function is not lost.

Keywords: Education, superior, intercultural, indigenous peoples, community engagement, Mexico.

Resumen

Este escrito refiere al trabajo impulsado para brindar una opción de educación superior a la población que habita una de las regiones culturales representativas de México: el Totonacapan. En esa área cultural coexisten totonacos, nahuas y los denominados no indígenas y se ha establecido para todos ellos la Universidad Intercultural del Estado de Puebla (UIEP), la cual lleva diez años de camino andado. El objetivo de la presente comunicación

es dar cuenta del funcionamiento de la UIEP para iniciar un análisis sobre qué tanto esta universidad ha logrado cumplir con el propósito para el cual fueron creadas las Universidades Interculturales (UI) en México. El abordaje del presente estudio se hace desde la reflexión y análisis de quienes pertenecen a la institución como profesores e investigadores de tiempo completo lo cual se ha derivado del trabajo colegiado en el que han colaborado en dicha institución. Los principales hallazgos que se presentan

tienen estrecha relación con las tres funciones sustantivas o primordiales de las UI's: La docencia, la investigación y la vinculación con la comunidad. Se concluye que tanto los avances, las contradicciones, los conflictos, así como las perspectivas del futuro inmediato abonan al crecimiento y desarrollo de la institución siempre y cuando no se pierda de vista su función educativa.

Descriptor: Educación, superior; intercultural, pueblos originarios, vinculación con la comunidad, México.

1. Introduction. The foundation of the UIEP in Huehuetla

Since the beginning of the year 2000, the Totonac population and several organizations demanded an institution that would provide an education considering the linguistic and cultural specificity of said population.¹ However, the requirement of an institution of higher education for the indigenous peoples in the northeastern highlands was conjunctural with the impulse 'from above' of the politics of intercultural education (Mateos and Dietz, 2013), with the creation of the General Coordination of Intercultural and Bilingual Education (CGEIB) in the year 2001. This instance promoted the creation of intercultural universities in several states of the Mexican Republic with the purpose of favoring the inclusion of the indigenous population (sic) in the generation of knowledge (Casillas and Santini, 2009, p.39). In the state of Puebla, at the beginning of the 2000s, there was a dilemma about where the institution would be set up. The issue was resolved more because of political party issues, because the group in power in those years in the municipality of Huehuetla proposed their town of Lipuntahuaca to build the UIEP (Mena, 2012, pp. 56-58).

The operation of the UIEP began in 2006. During its first six years it had results that can be considered less encouraging, for example it had low terminal efficiency of its graduates (64% and 69% in the degrees in Sustainable Development and Language and Culture, respectively). In this way, in 2013 there was a crisis in the university. This was due to certain tensions in which the

institution was immersed. There are different versions of the beginning of this conflict, where political, academic and student reasons converged.²

Derived from the conflict, in 2013 there were changes in the direction of the university. From that moment the representative of the rectory and the management areas began a restructuring and redefinition of the direction of the institution. As a result of this, different actions have been carried out, such as the opening in August 2015 of two new degrees, which has meant increasing school enrollment. New facilities were built: two buildings for university residences and two buildings for the health area. The creation of an educational master's program for 2018 is foreseen and it has been possible to raise the positive recognition of the institution at the regional, state and national levels.

This paper presents the state of the art that refers to research in higher education with/for indigenous peoples in Latin America; then the methodological support of the work is described. Subsequently, the operation of the UIEP is addressed in the areas of teaching, research and links with the community to raise the discussion and conclusions about the challenges and difficulties of a higher education institution with the characteristics of the UIEP.

1.1. Higher education for indigenous peoples

Higher education for indigenous people, a relatively recent topic, is a field in which there has been an advance in research interest. In



Latin America, the most relevant studies are those that have been under the coordination of Daniel Mato and promoted by the International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC-UNESCO). The materials generated and the different collaborators give an account of the perspectives that have been addressed, although it is placed at the center of the discussion of higher education and indigenous peoples, they also intersect with other aspects. In these materials, they are addressed from the experiences of higher education existing at that time (Mato, 2008); of intercultural collaboration and sustainable development (Mato, 2009a) that refers not only intercultural education but the training of different professionals; of the construction processes, achievements, innovations and challenges of higher level intercultural institutions (Mato, 2009b); about constitutions, laws, public policies and institutional practices and experiences of both indigenous and Afro-descendants (Mato, 2012); and more recently of the experiences (Mato, 2015) and the challenges of such types of institutions (Mato, 2016) that can be identified in Latin American countries.

In Mexico, Intercultural Universities (UI) are the product of several social processes as well as specific national and international educational policies (Jablonska, 2010, Bastida, 2012). A decade after the existence of this model, it has been analyzed as a relatively new particular thematic field (Dietz and Mateos, 2011, Mateos and Dietz, 2016). Of the eleven existing UIs, each one has had a specific trajectory due to the contextual conditions of the region and the state where they are located. In terms of research the UI are very little studied. Of the reviewed works that refer to the experience of Mexico, only some institutions of higher education or instances that carry out actions in this area, we can mention those that we have identified: Intercultural University of Chiapas (Fábregas Puig, 2008, 2009); Indigenous Autonomous University of Mexico (UAIM) (Guerra García, 2008, Guerra

García and Meza Hernández, 2009); Veracruzana Intercultural University (Dietz, 2008, Meseguer, 2016); Maya Intercultural University of Quintana Roo (Hernández Silva, 2012) Community University of San Luis Potosí (Silva, 2009). It is identified that there are only 4 cases addressed from intercultural universities in Mexico. While experiences of other modalities that focus on the attention of native peoples or rural contexts are also addressed, such as the Ayuuk Studies Center-Ayuuk Intercultural Indigenous University (Estrada, 2008); public policies of the institutions and intercultural programs of higher education in Mexico (Bastida Muñoz, 2012); The Indigenous Peasant Network University (UCIRED) (Hernández and Manjarrez, 2016); as well as the University Program of Studies of Cultural Diversity and Interculturality (PUIC), of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) (Del Val Blanco, 2016).

In that sense, there are not many works that address them as an object of research or reflection. For what it seems relevant to present in this issue the case of the Intercultural University of the State of Puebla (UIEP). Of the works that focus on the UIEP we identify the one by Deance and Vázquez (2010) about the originary language. Mena's (2012) focused on the impact of the intercultural model on the ethnogenesis of student identity. This paper addresses the results of the collegiate work of teachers who participate predominantly in the Language and Culture degree at the UIEP, which in 2016 has been in operation for ten years.

2. Methodology

This work derives from a series of collegiate meetings held during 2015 and 2016 by the members of the Academy of Language and Culture degree which has been formed on average by nine full-time faculty-researchers and two professors per subject. The opinions and experiences of those directly involved in



the various academic and administrative activities of the institution are recovered. Some of these actors are working at the university since its inception, 2006 or 2007. Others are working since 2013 or 2015, including the authors of this work. Those who write this text have been participants in such activities. In addition, they recognize themselves as part of the original peoples Tutunakú and Mixteco, respectively.

The collective meetings from which this work has been derived have been carried out to perform, among other activities, the “Evaluation and Updating of the Educational Program in Language and Culture” and the creation of the “Educational Program of Master Level”. Firstly, the Evaluation of the Educational Program in Language and Culture was carried out with the participation of the teachers in 2015. Subsequently, the Update of the Educational Program in Language and Culture was carried out as of January 2017 with the participation of all the professors who teach classes predominantly in the mentioned bachelor’s degree. Likewise, the work meetings to promote the opening of a Master Level Program have also been an opportunity to reflect on the educational model based on intercultural bilingual education. These opportunities for collective work correspond to a qualitative methodology for analyzing the teaching, research and liaison practice itself.

3. Results

Below are some points that are the result of the reflection of the work in the three substantive areas of the UI’s: Teaching, research and Community Linkage. Firstly, it is considered how the teaching practice has developed and how it has influenced the academic formation of the students. Then, it is explained how the scientific research projects have been worked in the framework of the different institutional activities. Finally, a semblance of how the Linkage with the Community has been carried

out the advances, challenges and horizons of possibility.

3.1. Teaching activity and institutional requirements

The classroom has not become, totally, a space to promote a dialogue of knowledge where the knowledge of indigenous peoples and scientific knowledge converge. The reasons that have not allowed achieving that purpose are varied. One of them is the excessive hours/class load of teachers. To meet the gradual increase in student enrollment, teachers have sometimes taken charge of teaching up to six subjects in a semester. In addition, they have had to take responsibility for commissions other than teaching, assigned to them, which they must attend sometimes in the immediate or short term. This has meant that the workload of the teachers is too much and that such responsibilities have to be taken care of even after the established working hours. The argument of the university authority is that the state or federal agencies have authorized a larger budget to expand the hiring of more personnel not only for teaching but also to be part of the administrative staff.

Another process that has influenced the teaching practice and professional training of young people is the dissemination of the educational offer of the UIEP. From 2013 to the first semester of 2016, visits were organized to the different high schools located in the municipalities surrounding the university. One or two professors were designated and in the company of some students, from two to five, from different careers, they went to the schools to publicize the educational offer, show images of the facilities and explain the types of national or international scholarships with which the university students can benefit. According to the place where they went and according to the distance, the time spent went from half a day to two or three days in a week. This originated different con-



sequences: when the teachers were not interrupted the classes, which derived in the delay in the advance of the didactic planning of the semester. This dynamic caused disagreements in teachers and students. To remedy the above, another strategy was proposed. From the second semester of 2016, visits of the schools existing in the region to the UIEP are scheduled on specific days and times. At least one teacher from each professional career shares the necessary information of the career where he participates and the young people know the facilities, equipment and services of the institution. The new strategy has meant that the dissemination of the educational offer is not a cause for the absence of both teachers and students or the constant interruption of classes.

As for the collegiate work of teachers, for example the Academies, made up of professors who teach classes in the same career, it has not been possible to achieve a continuous and consistent work, because in very few occasions they can coincide in schedules to work together. The aforementioned has caused a lot of difficulty to provide timely follow-up to various institutional tasks and meet the academic needs of the students in the different careers.

In terms of employment contracts until 2013, it was carried out every six months. This involved a lot of rotation of teaching staff, which affected the administrative and academic processes were left unfinished or were constantly interrupted. From 2014 to the 2017 date, although the hiring is annual, the labor instability and the rotation of the teaching staff are still present.

3.1.1. *The teaching of the native languages*

The UIs promote the teaching of native languages as a central axis of their educational model. However, in the UIEP this proposal is

under construction. The pedagogical management of the teaching of the native language becomes a matter of great importance but it is also a complex aspect in its approach in terms of the degrees of mastery of the native language (Deance and Vázquez, 2010). This is because some speak it but do not write it or there are passive speakers; that is, those who speak little or those who understand it but do not speak it.

Approximately 40% of UIEP students speak the Tutunaku language. Likewise, monolinguals in Spanish also represent 40% and approximately 15% speak Nahuatl. The remaining 10% speak the other existing languages in the state of Puebla (N'guiva, Ha shuta enima, Hñähñü, Nuu savi) (Annual Report, 2016, page 5).

In 2015, work was carried out to establish a methodological criterion in the teaching of the original language at the university. Therefore, from that date and now school enrollment is divided into two types of populations: speakers of some native language to develop reading and writing and those who want to learn as a second language. It is in this second group that the monolinguals are included in Spanish. Thus, for the teaching of Nahuatl or Totonac, this classification is used to make a more appropriate pedagogical management of the teaching of these languages. The speakers of N'guiva (popoloca), Ha shuta enima (Mazateco), Hñähñü (otomí), Nuu savi (Mixteco) form a group which work with a methodology that recognizes their linguistic competence of speakers and reflect on the grammatical elements of their language to develop their writing.

A challenge for the teachers responsible for the classes of the native language is to establish the contents by semester to determine what would be the knowledge and linguistic skills that students must achieve to measure their mastery of the language at basic, intermediate and advanced level.



3.1.2. *The “dialogue of knowledge” in the teaching practice: reality or aspiration?*

The model of the intercultural university promotes the recognition of cultural and epistemic diversity, which is why the ‘dialogue of knowledge’ is set up between scientific knowledge in conjunction with the traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples to identify or resolve needs and problems more pressing than such peoples suffer.

In the debate about knowledge and native knowledge, different authors establish the need for dialogue of knowledge (Leff, 2006) or the recognition of other knowledge that has been regularly relegated and constituted as ‘non-existent’ (Santos, 2012) recognizing the existence of different epistemic systems that would allow the explanation of phenomena and problems from different angles and above all, to attend them from different perspectives, based on an epistemological pluralism.

Given the previous approach, it is identified that the majority of the teaching staff fails to perceive the specificity of the intercultural university model, so they continue to reproduce their conventional teaching and academic practices, in addition to the epistemological principles from which they have been trained in areas of knowledge according to their professional profiles.

Both in the training of students and in research work they continue to give a very strong weight to the scientific perspective, so it continues to reproduce a view where the knowledge that indigenous peoples generate, put into practice and reproduce are relegated in the formative process of the young and future professionals. This is due to different factors, from the professional training of the professors that come to collaborate to the UIEP, as well as the lack of information about the higher education model of the intercultural universities that can be shared with the teachers in their initial incorporation to the institution.

3.2. **Research: discontinuous processes**

The research in the UIEP lacks funding, so that instances such as the Program for Professional Development for Teachers of superior type (PRODEP) or the National Council of Science and Technology (CONACYT) assume that role. On the other hand, research activities are constantly interrupted by various factors, among them the excessive academic and administrative burden assigned to teachers, the rotation of personnel in the university, the criterion for hiring teaching staff, the non-recognition of collegial work by Academies and the little time allotted and the difficulties to coincide and carry out this research activity together in the Academic Bodies.

On the other hand, it was also decided to gradually replace the existing teaching profiles at that time. Since 2014, the teaching profiles with the doctorate degree have increased significantly. In the second semester of 2016 50% of the academic plant has a doctorate degree, while 16% is recognized in the National System of Researchers (SNI) (Annual report, 2016, pp. 6-8). Despite being hired as teacher-researchers, they are assigned many subjects and numerous administrative or management commissions that do not allow them to carry out their function, research for the generation of knowledge, as well as the link with the community. Only until the beginning of 2017 has it been possible to “discharge” the excessive teaching to the academics, but only to the teachers who have been recognized in the SNI. While the other teachers are still assigned an excessive teaching load.

In the UIEP there are only two recognized Academic Bodies (CA), both at the level of “Information”.³ The members of such groups, having to resolve the various matters of the institution, already mentioned, have not been able to achieve an impulse or consolidate the research activity as a whole. Although there are experiences of research projects financed by PRODEP, six in the year 2015-2016, and ten in 2016 of the entire teaching staff, made up of 32 teachers, a



collective work for the generation of knowledge in a continuous manner has not yet been consolidated. In particular, research projects for teachers with doctorates have been promoted and there is great difficulty for teachers with a master's degree to consolidate their intellectual interests through research projects, since PRODEP or CONACYT only grant financing to PhD holders. So the CAs become the ideal space to promote the research lines of academics with expertise.

3.3. The Linkage with the Community and its tromped road

Another of the substantive functions of the intercultural universities is the Linkage with the Community, which does not have financing from the university. According to the document to support the model of intercultural universities, it is established that the purpose of this educational action is "to promote actions of connection with the community that offer solutions to local and regional problems and needs, and to their management and innovation processes" (Casillas and Santini, 2009, p.146). This exercise is emphasized as "a set of activities that involves the planning, organization, operation and evaluation of actions in which teaching and research are internally related at the university level and externally with communities to address specific problems and needs" (Casillas and Santini, 2009, p 153). Due to different circumstances, there is not enough truthful data to reconstruct the way in which linkage with the Community was carried out between 2006 and 2013, so this document only refers to what has happened since 2013.

In 2013 there was a moment of transition, because a new administration took over the direction of the UIEP, who decided pause the program, where nobody was left to carry out the community liaison. The strategy was redesigned and the criterion that began to guide it was to consider the agreements that the UIEP had established or those that were agreed, as of that moment, with some municipal governments of

the region. These agreements strengthen a policy of inclusion in higher education for young people belonging to indigenous peoples. In addition, it was sought to ensure by the Municipal Council the support of accommodation and food for applicants interested in entering to study at the UIEP. In 2014, this was the institutional criterion to carry out the Linkage with the Community.

In terms of student participation, previously multidisciplinary brigades were formed, students from different careers went to a community, but as of 2014, the brigades were formed according to career. Thus, these were atomized, that is, they were only made up of members of the same degree or engineering of different semesters in order to meet a specific requirement in the field of knowledge of the degree or engineering made by the municipal authority.

Having an agreement with a municipality in some cases has allowed constant monitoring of the required project. Some teachers have taken advantage of this institutional strategy to innovate projects related to their respective line of research. In this way, they are the ones who propose or present a project to the City Council. Thus, in the second semester of 2015 several projects were carried out in accordance with the researches of the teachers that were even supported by PRODEP and/or CONACYT. Carried out in this way, the linkage with the community manages to have significant results in the attention of the problems felt by the social community, in turn it is possible to carry out serious research that can lead to the proposal of solutions in conjunction with the communities where this activity is carried out.

On the other hand, in several municipalities it is still not possible to consolidate the work of the university. Therefore "last minute" projects have been carried out, which had unleashed hastily prepared logistics. This has had as a consequence that the student brigades have not found any meaning in the linkage with the community, which has generated different problems within each career and the institution in general.



4. Discussion

The current administration of the UIEP (2013-2017) has achieved many changes. It has increased the student enrollment in which young people from other cultures have been integrated, the infrastructure has increased, the profile in the teaching staff has changed, which has allowed the increase of research possibilities. New horizons are being explored to consolidate the link with the community. However, it has not been possible to counteract the excessive turnover of academic staff, which has implications for the teaching-learning process, as it cannot provide continuity to the students' training or make it possible for teachers to glimpse long-term or far-reaching projects in academic performance. In addition to this, the reproduction of "conventional" vocational training of most teachers still predominates, a situation that does not help to develop the educational model of intercultural bilingual education.

The incipient implementation of a methodology for the teaching of native languages in the UI model has a long way to go. The potential of students as bicultural-bilingual subjects is not used. The school classroom is not being used as an ideal space to develop interaction between different cultures and languages; that is to say, the cultural and linguistic diversity present in the classroom to experience and develop interculturality is not fruitful.

For its part, scientific research in the UIEP lacks funding, in most cases, it remains "conventional". Therefore, the university does not yet have great results to expand and fertilize the discussion around the epistemology of indigenous peoples. In this sense, we still need to generate criteria that allow Intercultural Universities to be evaluated, considering their specificity.

In relation to the Linkage with the Community, although it has been modified to recognize and/or manage to solve some need or requirement that the municipal authority has identified, it is still far from fulfilling the purpose

of generating processes through participatory methodologies where the problems or real needs together with the community are analyzed. In addition, community involvement has meant an institutional exercise, in which once a semester for two weeks, both students and teachers "go out to link". This time lapse is insufficient to achieve adequate and acceptable results. Therefore, during two weeks in a semester, or for four weeks during a year, it is not possible to specify a model of connection with the community where the interests of the community, the interests for the student formation can be combined in an equitable way, the institutional objectives and the intellectual interests of the teachers.

5. Conclusions

In the review of the experience of the UIEP, it has been perceived that in the collegial teaching work, it is still pending to strengthen the work of the Academies, which would allow the development of a methodology for teaching native languages as a first or second language of school instruction. Another challenge is to strengthen the research of different groups of teachers, according to their intellectual interests, both those who are making efforts to be recognized as a collective within the Academic Bodies, as well as those that have already been recognized individually by national institutional bodies. (PRODEP, SNI). The processes of teacher strengthening have been partially achieved, since the rotation of personnel continues, a situation that could be solved by assigning a larger budget for the UIs.

In the "dialogue of knowledge" it is necessary that the teachers who join the labor force, including those who are already working, are provided with an introductory course about the intercultural higher education model approach. This is to understand and promote the relationship between scientific knowledge and knowledge systems of indigenous peoples, to seek this dialogue of knowledge that strengthens the efforts of teaching, research and the link with the



community to address the problems of society which they serve.

With regard to research projects they are still incipient, so one of the challenges in the short and medium term is that they can have financing and be consolidated at the individual and collective level. Closely related to the above, in terms of the issue of the linkage with the community, there is still a way to go to address the real needs and the broader and deeper participation of the communities of the indigenous peoples. On the other hand, if we look at the linkage with the Community as an academic theme, this responsibility has been delegated to each teacher, to the extent that it responds in part to their line of research. Although the link is prioritized to meet the agreements established with some municipalities. The challenge in this substantive function of the intercultural universities is to consolidate a way in which the formation of the students is gradually crystallized, on the one hand and on the other, to accompany the community to generate diagnoses of social needs and to manage resources to be attended by the same communities where the university aims to influence.

As for the achievements, from the perspective of the current education authorities, the hiring of academic staff with high profiles is praised. Candidates who have a doctorate or master's degree are given preference. In this way, this line of being a weakness has become a strength. The academic plant gradually consolidates and is generating a dynamic of initial efforts to finalize the processes of teaching, research, redefinition of management and Community Relations.

In this writing, the experience of the Intercultural University of the State of Puebla is recorded. An attempt was made to give an account of what has been put into practice during the last 10 years in the Northeast Region of the state of Puebla in Mexico, which serves to analyze that although there has been progress in directing a higher education that considers cultural and linguistic diversity. There is still a lot to be done in the region to reflect on how to promote the inclu-

sion of knowledge of indigenous peoples and to move towards epistemic pluralism.

Notes

1. Interview with members of the Independent Organization Totonaca (ILO), in Huehuetla, Puebla on April 20, 2015
2. The news was published in the newspaper La Jornada de Oriente, on February 13, 2013, which gives an account of the reasons for the conflict. Information retrieved from the newspaper La Jornada de Oriente newspaper, on May 5, 2016. www.lajornadadeoriente.com.mx/.../tras-protesta-destituyen-al-rector-y-a
3. The body that gives recognition to the Academic Bodies is PRODEP, a dependency of the Secretariat of Public Education (SEP) in Mexico.

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