

# How Intercultural is an “Intercultural University”? Some lessons from Veracruz, Mexico

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**Abstract:**

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Since the beginning of the 21st century, a new institutional figure starts to appear in the arena of Mexican higher education: the so-called “intercultural university”. What was first presented and conceived just as another link in the chain of preschool, primary and increasingly also post-primary schools “with an intercultural and bilingual approach”, created in and for the indigenous and multilingual regions of Mexico, now starts to have characteristics of a new university subsystem destined to provide an academic training which is supposed to be culturally relevant to students who are defined as diverse and different in ethnic, linguistic and/or cultural terms. In practice, this new educational offer is focused on students from indigenous regions who have been excluded from formal higher education and have had access only recently to complete basic education and also gradual access to upper secondary education. In this contribution, we briefly sketch the general tendencies that characterize this emerging educational subsystem, before illustrating a case study which stems from a collaborative ethnography that we are conducting with one of the intercultural universities, the Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural (UVI), in order to finally draw some conclusions on the allegedly “intercultural” character of this new educational institution.

**Key words:**

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intercultural education; intercultural university; collaborative ethnography; Veracruz.

## Quão Intercultural é uma “Universidade Intercultural”? Algumas lições de Veracruz, México

**Resumo:** Desde o princípio do século que começou a aparecer uma nova figura institucional no cenário do ensino superior no México: a chamada “universidade intercultural”. Aquilo que foi, de início, apresentado e concebido apenas como um novo elo na cadeia composta pelo pré-escolar, primário e adicionalmente também pós-primário “com uma abordagem intercultural e bilingue”, criada nas e para as regiões indígenas e multilíngues do México, começa agora a mostrar características de um subsistema universitário destinado a oferecer uma formação acadêmica que seja culturalmente relevante para os estudantes que se apresentam como diversos e diferentes em termos étnicos, lingüísticos e culturais.

Na prática, esta nova oferta educativa procura responder a estudantes de regiões indígenas que tenham sido excluídos da educação superior formal e que, só recentemente, têm tido acesso à educação básica completa e também acesso gradual à educação secundária superior. Com este contributo, faremos um breve resumo das tendências gerais que caracterizam este subsistema educativo emergente, antes de dar, como exemplo, um estudo de caso que resulta de uma etnografia colaborativa que estamos a realizar com uma das universidades interculturais, a Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural (UVI), de modo a poder por fim tirar algumas conclusões sobre o alegado carácter “intercultural” desta nova instituição de educação.

**Palavras-chave:** educação intercultural; universidade intercultural; etnografia colaborativa; Veracruz.

## Combien d’interculturelle est une “université interculturelle”? Quelques leçons de Veracruz, Mexique

**Résumé:** Depuis le début du XXIème siècle, une nouvelle figure institutionnelle apparaît dans le domaine de l’éducation supérieure mexicaine sous le nom d’« universités interculturelles ». Ce qu’on concevait initialement plutôt comme un maillon quelconque de la chaîne institutionnelle des écoles maternelles, primaires et secondaires dotées d’une « approche interculturelle » aussi bien au sein que pour les régions autochtones et multilingues du Mexique, commence maintenant à s’établir en tant que sous-système universitaire particulier, avec l’objectif d’offrir une formation académique prétendument adéquate pour les étudiants définis par la diversité ou la différence en termes ethniques, linguistiques et/ou culturels. Dans la pratique, cette nouvelle offre éducative se focalise sur des étudiants des régions autochtones qui ont demeuré exclus de l’éducation supérieure formelle et qui n’ont pu que récemment accéder au cycle complet de l’éducation de base et au secondaire dans leurs régions respectives. Dans cette contribution, nous retraçons brièvement les tendances générales qui caractérisent ce sous-système universitaire émergent, avant d’analyser une étude de cas provenant d’une ethnographie réalisée en association avec une de ces nouvelles universités interculturelles, en l’occurrence l’Université interculturelle de Veracruz. Finalement, nous concluons avec une brève description des caractéristiques prétendument « interculturelles » de cette nouvelle institution éducative.

**Mots-clés:** éducation interculturelle; université interculturelle; ethnographie collaborative; Veracruz.

## ¿Cuán intercultural es una “universidad intercultural”? Algunas lecciones de Veracruz, México

**Resumen:** Desde el inicio del siglo XXI, una nueva figura institucional aparece en el ámbito de la educación superior Mexicana: las así denominadas “universidades interculturales”. Lo que inicialmente se concebía más bien como un mero eslabón más en la cadena institucional de escuelas preescolares, primarias y medias superiores “con enfoque intercultural y bilingüe”, mantenidas en y para las regiones indígenas y multilingües de México, ahora comienza a establecerse como un subsistema universitario propio que tiene el objetivo de ofrecer una formación académica pretendidamente pertinente para los estudiantes definidos como diversos o diferentes en términos étnicos, lingüísticos y/o culturales. En la práctica, esta nueva oferta educativa se centra en estudiantes de regiones indígenas que han permanecido excluidos de la educación superior formal y que solo recientemente han podido acceder al ciclo completo de educación básica y media superior en sus respectivas regiones. En la presente contribución, esbozamos brevemente las tendencias generales que caracterizan este emergente subsistema universitario, antes de analizar un estudio de caso proveniente de una etnografía colaborativa que realizamos junto con una de las nuevas universidades interculturales, la Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural (UVI). Finalmente concluimos con una breve discusión acerca de las características pretendidamente “interculturales” de esta nueva institución educativa.

**Palabras-clave:** educación intercultural; universidad intercultural; etnografía colaborativa; Veracruz.

Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a new institutional figure starts to appear in the arena of Mexican higher education: the so-called "intercultural university" (Casillas Muñoz & Santini Villar, 2006). What was first presented and conceived just as another link in the chain of preschool, primary and increasingly also post-primary schools "with an intercultural and bilingual approach", created in and for the indigenous and multilingual regions of Mexico, now starts to have characteristics of a new university subsystem destined to provide an academic training which is supposed to be culturally relevant to students who are defined as diverse and different in ethnic, linguistic and/or cultural terms. In practice, this new educational offer is focused on students from indigenous regions who have been excluded from formal higher education and have had access only recently to complete basic education and also gradual access to upper secondary education <sup>1</sup>.

In this contribution <sup>2</sup>, we briefly sketch the general tendencies that characterize this emerging educational subsystem, for which we summarize the results of a recently concluded state of the art (cf. Mateos Cortés & Dietz, 2013), before illustrating a case study which stems from a collaborative ethnography that we are conducting with one of the intercultural universities, the *Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural* (UVI), in order to finally draw some conclusions on the allegedly "intercultural" character of this new educational institution.

### **Towards a new higher educational subsystem in Mexico**

While in the Anglo-Saxon countries the debate about multiculturalism focuses early on universities, generating "affirmative action" policies and triggering new studies and programs such as "Ethnic Studies" (Dietz, 2012b), Mexican higher education is belatedly incorporated to the concrete and practical experimentation with the intercultural approach in the core of its own institutions. Thus, there are few empirical studies of the expansion of the "intercultural and bilingual approach" towards higher education. The programmatic and propositional documents of the institutions, some internal self-evaluative reports, records of teachers' own research experiences and an increasing set of post-graduate theses on intercultural higher education predominate. Moreover, few collective and more longitudinal research projects are added (Mateos Cortés & Dietz, 2013).

The General Coordination for Intercultural and Bilingual Education (CGEIB in its Spanish acronym) of the Mexican Federal Ministry of Education promotes since its establishment in 2001 the project of creating intercultural universities, after indigenous organizations and communities demanded a university

geographically and culturally near to their regions and towns. This is an aspect that the traditionally western and urban-centric university model did not accomplish. To achieve the mentioned demand, the intercultural approach is introduced seeking to overcome assimilationist strategies adopted by the educational policies created previously (Casillas Muñoz & Santini Villar, 2006).

According to the governmental vision, the intercultural approach enables to redirect the labor of universities, work with local knowledge, and recover traditions and values, besides offer alternative educational areas" (Casillas Muñoz & Santini Villar, 2006). Through the creation of these new institutions the professional development of young people from indigenous or marginalized areas, but also the recognition and development of their own towns are possible. From an official point of view these institutions turn into spaces aiming to provide quality and culturally relevant education.

From its beginning in 2002, any intercultural university recognized by the SEP has established some basic requirements: a) it has as its main objective the training of professionals and intellectuals committed with their regions, b) it establishes research as central axis, c) its educational offer is developed based on needs and potentialities of the region, promoting a flexible curriculum, d) the students are not selected by academic criteria, and e) it establishes a close outreach relation with communities and/or regions (Casillas Muñoz & Santini Villar, 2006, Schmelkes, 2009). Through such universities, the Mexican national educational system aims to eradicate the exclusion that young indigenous face in conventional universities<sup>3</sup>.

Since the creation of the first intercultural university in the State of Mexico in 2003, academics discuss the relevance of generating new higher education institutions in indigenous regions instead of "opening" conventional universities for students who come from these regions. Schmelkes (2009) promotes the creation of these new universities and their recognition by the Mexican higher education system; her emphasis is on the struggle against the persistent exclusion of indigenous youth from higher education and, at the same time, on the need of responding to the indigenous groups' demands of access to a culturally pertinent education not only at primary school level. In this sense, the new universities are conceived not as an alternative, but as complement of the development of affirmative actions and inclusion in the conventional universities<sup>4</sup>. It is argued that the offered new B.A. programs should differ from the classic university programs and that they must reflect local and regional needs, be culturally and linguistically "pertinent" and should have a close and continuous connection with the host communities of these new types of universities. The official emphasis on cultural diversity and intercultural relations as defining

feature of these new educational institutions is critically discussed by some authors (Llanes Ortiz, 2008; Dimas Huacuz, 2006), who question how through these institutions intercultural relations may be constructed in contexts of colonially rooted and currently increasing inequalities between rural and urban, indigenous and non-indigenous communities.

### **Ethnographing the *Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural***

Whilst in the majority of the above mentioned institutions these are newly created and have limited university autonomy with regard to their respective state governments and to the CGEIB, the program named *Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural* (UVI) emerges as a pioneering initiative for institutionalization of cultural diversity from a pre-existing university, which is autonomous and recognized for its university innovation activities. Hence, it implies the combination of a curricular diversification initiative, on the one hand, with a university decentralization effort, on the other hand – through a decentralized system of academic campus located in the main indigenous regions of Veracruz: the Huasteca, the Totonacapan, the Sierra de Zongolica and the southern Selvas of the State. This double effort obliges the participating academics to redefine and restructure the teaching, research and university outreach activities; as a result, a unique and rather innovative B.A. program in "Intercultural Management for Development" is offered (cf. [www.uv.mx/uvi](http://www.uv.mx/uvi)).

Since 2007, a multidisciplinary team has been accompanying this intercultural program, ethnographing and contrasting the diverse kinds of knowledge which converge both inside classroom teaching and out-of-class teaching practices. The knowledge exchanged through this program is both academic and community-related, it stems from both urban and rural contexts and is used by actors identified as indigenous people as well as (non-indigenous) *mestizos*. At present, this *InterSaberes* project is analyzing and evaluating critically, ethnographically and collaboratively how the regional insertion of the UVI in the four indigenous contexts has affected the exchange these kinds of knowledge, how diverse sources of knowledge are constructed, managed, linked and interchanged between academic actors – teachers and students – and community actors – local authorities, productive groups, community leaders and "wise men or women" as well as non-governmental agencies (Dietz, 2012a). We thus focus on the resulting "ecology of knowledge" (Santos, 2006), in which teachers, researchers, students and neighbors from the UVI host communities and regions participate.

In *InterSaberes*, the teamwork is carried out by indigenous and non-indigenous teachers, students and members of the communities where the UVI is created and where the mentioned B.A. program is offered. The B.A. is an official university program that is subdivided into eight semesters; the students do not choose classic subjects, but "educational experiences", i.e. subjects which are grouped in training areas (basic-propaedeutic, disciplinary, final and free election areas) and in different modality (face-to-face, blended and virtual learning); this academic program functions through "core subjects", which professionalize knowledge exchanges through five so-called management "orientations" or application areas: sustainability, communication, languages, rights and health.

Whatever the chosen orientation is, the courses that the UVI students take are characterized by an early and continuous immersion in community service and outreach activities related to project management and action-research schemes. Starting from a methodological axis offered through modules, which include community and regional diagnosis methodologies, knowledge and project management methodologies as well as planning and participatory evaluation methodologies, since the first semester the students start management and/or research activities in their home community, making use of their mother tongues as well as of the Spanish language <sup>5</sup>.

In the summer of 2009 the first 223 students graduated as Intercultural Managers for Development in order to perform – depending on the orientation chosen – as managers, mediators, translators and/or technicians of governmental and non-governmental projects as well as through local self-employing measures. Through their classroom activities and fieldwork practices, the students early compare, contrast and translate diverse kinds of knowledge – formal and informal knowledge, academic and communitarian, professional and experiential knowledge. The continuous interchange of knowledge and academic methodologies versus community methods is what generates new subjects which are hybrid in their knowledge and in their daily activities.

Throughout this project, we have ethnographically accompanied students and teachers as well as alumni from the two first generation of the UVI. We rapidly established close and fruitful relationships with professionals and indigenous activists, for whom interculturality is an ethnic empowerment strategy in contexts of inequality where racist discrimination persists. Finally, the interchange of these two types of actors – urban-academic and indigenous-activist – is deepened through a close collaboration with NGOs and social and/or environmental movements who are present in these indigenous regions (Mateos Cortés, 2009, 2011). The different actors with whom we collaborate agree in the need of establishing relations which should be more sustainable to the environment

and of regaining local, rural and/or indigenous knowledge about the use of natural resources, but also cultural knowledge to face the power discrepancies between expansive capitalism and the indigenous ecosystems.

Under the impact of the *zapatismo* and the process of re-negotiating power relations between the neoliberal Mexican nation-state and the indigenous regions (Dietz & Mateos Cortés, 2011b), these different types of actors start to mutually fertilize their intercultural educational discourses and proposals as they are captured in the UVI programs. As a result, we emphasize the negotiation, intermediation and transfer of heterogeneous knowledge and strategies between the diverse groups – teachers, professionals, development agents and "local experts" who participate in the UVI. At present, in our project we are contrasting the *emic* visions of the participating actors through cyclic workshops of mutual "inter-learning" which feedback the results of the more ethnographic, data constructing phases. Therefore, we pursue "empowering" objectives towards (future) indigenous professionals and their trainers.

### **Inside the UVI: assessing "intercultural" achievements and challenges**

Our ethnographic accompaniment, which oscillates between data construction, analysis, systematization, feedbacking and "devolution" phases (through the mentioned workshops), create a set of worries and claims that the participating university actors experience about the underlying intercultural model and its application in the daily practice inside the UVI. We will in the following analyze these challenges, in order to propose curriculum changes which we consider necessary to transit to a more dialogic and intercultural university.

#### *To empower or to compensate?*

Two of the permanent axis of the debate in the inter-learning workshops with diverse participating actors in our project relate to the type of education and the intercultural model on which the UVI is based – a model which responds to the claims of "third generation rights", i.e. to the collective and cultural rights of the indigenous peoples, highlighting the right to their own education. In order to enforce this right, the UVI requires a strategy of "recognition of difference", which is based on collective and group empowerment. However, since its origins, but especially during the conclusion of the B.A. theses written by the first graduating students, the fact that the UVI has to respond simultaneously to needs related to the "first generation rights" became evident, i.e. to the individual right of access to a quality public education. At the same time, these

rights do not respond to the logic of recognizing differences and collective or group identities, but they respond to the necessity of compensating and solving individual academic problems generated by the inequity of the educational system, by the low quality of post-secondary schools in indigenous regions. These compensations or remedies with regard to basic academic writing and learning skills respond to a strategy of individual empowerment of the student, in order to reinforce and accompany his educational trajectory.

This confluence of tasks stemming from different collective and individual rights create a curriculum which is necessarily, although only implicitly "hybrid": the curriculum contents reflect the students' cultures in order to create a sense of relevance and belonging with empowering effects, and at the same time shows the need of correcting the lack of education that the incoming students inherit due to their prior social and economic marginalization as well as their exclusion from a quality basic level educational system. Apart from "propaedeutic" subjects at the beginning of the B.A. program, retrospectively, students claim a kind of continuous "compensatory itinerary" along their B.A., which would offer written expression, management of bibliography and citation, mathematics and statistics subjects, courses which should be related to the type of product (project proposal, evaluation report, thesis etc.) the students should generate in every semester.

#### *The place of classroom teaching*

From the very beginning, the first UVI documents point out the importance of research as an axis in which the other academic functions of teaching and community service are somehow neglected. This importance of research is combined with an emphasis on research priorities which should be inductively developed by students and teachers starting from local and regional problems has allowed to formulate (and re-formulate constantly) research initiatives which are relevant to the regions and closely linked to the local actors. However, our interviews, observations and workshop debates conducted in the framework of the *InterSaberes* project show that problems and challenges remain about how to integrate the research processes with the teaching dynamics. Teachers as well as students confess that there are integration and coordination problems in both activities, hence some teachers *de facto* end up focusing on in-class teaching, whilst other teachers are focused almost exclusively on their own and their students' research and outreach activities. This situation contradicts the ideal type of intercultural teacher-researcher-service provider model which is promoted by the CGEIB.



The lack of integrating these functions is perceived even more between classroom teaching and community service: there are very few experiences with the necessary hybridization between both situations, taking the teaching processes out of the classroom as well as integrating local community wise men and women into in-class teaching. Again, a gap is created between the teacher role, which is completely focused on the classroom, and the external "community expert", who is frequently reduced to become an out-of-class "information source" for students.

There is a further "structural" problem which seems to limit the linking and integrating of the substantial functions of an intercultural university: we see that this emphasis on research issues sets aside an important aspect of the B.A. program: the core role that should be played by management, in its different dimensions and nuances. In this sense, the classic scheme of the substantial functions of teaching, researching and outreach needs to be modified in order to including management as the central point inside the research, teaching and outreach triangle. Graphic 1 illustrates our proposal of reviewing the "substantial functions" of an intercultural university; it has been elaborated from a set of analysis and discussions carried out through the workshops with teachers, students and alumni.

**Graphic 1: The central role of intercultural management (elaborated by the authors)**



### *Research for community service?*

The more successful, distinctive and prominent area of the B.A. program is the so-called *investigación vinculada*, the research conducted by the students to provide specific community service activities. As the students' projects and theses illustrate, the preference for a learner-centered, inductive research process, which is closely related with local and regional problems, has been able to generate results which were not expected in other B.A. programs. However, it is useful to critically analyze what has been achieved on these issues. The students' B.A. theses again reflect integration problems between teaching and research; the contents of the academic and community sources of knowledge often appear disintegrated in the works and projects of several students. This shows not only problems with integrating empirical data and conceptual issues, but also a lack of experience in consultancy and community service as provided by tutors and teachers. In some UVI regions, there is a shift towards a more collective work, conducted in student teams, student-teacher teams or mixed teacher committees (composed by teachers from different orientations); such trends will contribute to solve this problem.

Another challenge consists of the consciously inductive character of the research priorities of both students and teachers of the intercultural university. What was an important and distinctive feature at the beginning of the UVI now is increasingly perceived as an obstacle for the development and consolidation of research and community service programs. According to expressions by several interviewed actors, the UVI research areas should be redesigned inductively and deductively, integrating coherently students' and teachers' interests, specially avoiding mono-disciplinary areas along the "orientations", in order to privilege "multi-orientation" areas which focus entirely on intercultural management for development. This is the only way to counteract the – rather frequent – misunderstanding that the B.A. students are "taught" in sustainability, health, rights, communication or languages; instead, what is supposed to be researched, taught and outreached are intercultural management processes that impact on local and regional problems which are identified under the names of the so-called orientations, but that in future may vary in function of the changing needs, requirements and local and regional employment opportunities.

For the UVI teachers who conduct community related research, their areas of expertise still privilege their original training profiles (hence, the abundance of anthropological, agronomical, psychological and linguistic projects, for instance), but in the future they will also have to reflect the collective needs of applied community research. Often, interviewed alumni mention as possible topics of such research which is relevant for the future of the intercultural

university (1) the professional profile of the intercultural manager for development; (2) the interdisciplinary contribution of every orientation to this profile; (3) the training and professional competences which are needed for the students to work as intercultural managers; and (4) the development of qualitative indicators for such competences and their capacities as linguistic and cultural translators, mediators and project managers.

In this sense, the UVI will need to distinguish between classical research projects (e.g. ethnographic research) for management, research-*cum*-management projects (simultaneous intervention as in the case of action research schemes) and management research projects (for instance, participative administration).

### *The centrality of the methodological training*

These challenges are related to the way of methodological subjects are taught in the intercultural university. So far, such subjects, which are fundamental for an intercultural manager, are distributed between the teachers of the five orientations, reflecting diverse and incoherent criteria that often do not exploit sufficiently the individual teacher's expertise and/or experience in such varied methods as diagnostics, evaluation, ethnography, action-research, statistics etc. The distribution of the subjects needs to be modified in order to be taught by colleagues who actually have experience in the application of the method in question. Moreover, these subjects should be re-focused towards intercultural management, the core training area of the B.A. program. We perceive two important methodological shortcomings:

1. It is important to strengthen core methodological subjects related to methods and techniques of intercultural management, with regard to both their administrative, countable, controller and technological sense as well as to their intercultural, mediating and translating-interpreting sense.
2. A kind of "action-research rhetorics" is often announced in several theses and projects, but is not actually thoroughly; it should therefore be substituted by truly participative research methodologies in places where they are needed, but should also be complemented by more exploratory, ethnographical, reflexive and dialogical methodologies, as required in many diagnostic phases of community service projects.

In the same sense of focusing all the training process towards intercultural management, the alumni, as already graduated managers, admit that it is necessary to re-form the same concept and definition of "the thesis" as a dissertation work. As in other technical or artistic B.A. programs that strongly emphasize application and practice, the qualification process may consist in

two works, represented by two phases of the management-research and the assessment process: on the one hand, the future manager must show her/his professional skills by conducting and/or proposing a specific and localized initiative of intercultural management, which will be presented and defended in a culturally appropriated format before a committee of (current or future) users or partners. An "intercultural management for development committee" (composed by assessors, professionals and governmental, non-governmental, regional and local partners) will evaluate the work presented by the students or group of students. Only afterwards will this experience be written down in a classic B.A. "thesis" format, in which the students-managers will reflect about the conducted or proposed management and its applicability in different local and regional contexts. The second part of the qualification process will be assessed by an "academic committee" of teachers from different orientations who will assess the academic and professional competences demonstrated by the future managers.

### **Outside the UVI: professional and community practices of graduated intercultural managers**

These curricular changes proposed are being analyzed, debated and included in the process of curricular reforms that the UVI teachers have already started. Meanwhile, the *InterSaberes* project is currently accompanying the Intercultural Managers for Development. After researching and systematizing the practices generated inside and by the UVI, we are now analyzing, again through collaborative ethnography by interviews, observations and actor workshops, how the UVI alumni, now as intercultural managers, are constructing, managing and interchanging academic and community knowledge to solve regional problems together with local authorities, NGOs and other community initiatives. We will in the following sketch some of these initiatives.

#### *The intercultural management of legal pluralism*

In the northern Veracruz region of the Huasteca, and in close collaboration with the rights orientation of the intercultural university, we are analyzing the dialogues that occur between the UVI actors and their local counterparts in the field of legal pluralism. We study how in the communities of Puyecaco (*nahuatl*), San Pedro Tziltzacuapan (*tepehua*) and El Zapote (*ñahñü*) students and teachers of the UVI along with local authorities and judges link local customary laws with the official, national law enforcement as well as with the international human rights discourse.

The former students have been particularly successful as mediators in two areas. On the one hand, diverse workshops and seminars about human rights issues have been offered to local authorities and judges, who are usually chosen by the community members; through these courses, the participants learn about complementary and compatible nature between the external human rights legislation and their own customary legal practices. A bilingual local judge and teacher explained to us at the end of one of these courses:

We have realized that we have rights, we have our own rights and the same rights of the people who live in the city. For them, we are third class citizens - first there are the citizens of Xalapa [the state capital], second class citizens are those of Ixhuatlán [the municipality], and, finally, we are third class citizens, the Tepehua peasants in our community. But now we also know our rights as Mexican citizens and as indigenous communities (judge of the Agencia Municipal San Pedro Tziltzacuapan, 2012).

On the other hand, the same students and former students have been revitalizing and restoring the traditional authorities of the community, such as the *huehuetlacatl*, the local *nahuatl* healer-consultant, whose traditionally important range of conflict management abilities has been increasingly limited by external, non-indigenous forces such as health institutions and/or political authorities. Recently, several communities have recreated these functions as an attempt to gradually and slowly re-conquer the local autonomy from these external regional institutions.

#### *Intercultural mediations in the health system*

In the Totonacapan region, along with the health orientation of the intercultural university, we have analyzed the medicinal, herbal and healing knowledge that is practiced among the *tutunaku* as well as *meztizo* communities of Filomeno Mata, Macedonio Alonso and Morgadal, focusing on kind of community service provided by the intercultural managers of health trained in the UVI and their role as mediators between the public health system and their local clients.

The regional hospital of Totonacapan has maintained a hesitant and ambiguous attitude towards the – officially recognized but seldomly applied - intercultural approach in public health. It has been integrating interpreters of the *tutunaku* language, and UVI teachers and alumni students have been invited to offer courses on traditional medicine for doctors and nurses. Despite these early attempts to "open" the health institution, the staff of the hospital, which has been trained only in western medicine, still does not fully recognize the health specialists of the indigenous communities and particularly the local midwives as legitimate counterparts in their daily health care activities. An intercultural

manager who graduated from the intercultural university, and who is now working at the hospital as an interpreter and community midwife, jokes about the ambiguous strategy that the hospital staff sometimes shows towards her:

After having presented a lot of paperwork on behalf of our project *InterSaberes*, the director of the hospital finally allowed me to work inside the hospital, he lets me help in examinations of pregnant women and in birth moments. But occasionally, when the supervisor visits our hospital, I have to hide because I am not a doctor nor a nurse! They ask me not to go to the hospital that day, or either to dress in white, as if I were a doctor, dressing me up... It's really funny, isn't it? (former UVI student working in Entabladero health care center, 2012).

Therefore, the participating UVI teachers and students focus their activities in two directions: towards the communities themselves, contributing to sensitize neighbors to preserve and restore the traditional knowledge about health, and towards the public health institutions, insisting in the need of recognizing the importance of the local traditions and its contribution to health in the *tutunaku* and *mestizo* communities.

#### *Cultural promotion in emigration and return contexts*

In the Grandes Montañas region, working in collaboration with the communication orientation of the UVI, our ethnography focuses on the dialogue that students, teachers and alumni of the intercultural university are keeping with community actors as well as with organizations of migrants and/or returnees in the *nahuatl* community of Tehuipango in relation to the management of projects for promoting cultural heritage and collective activities of empowerment. The cultural promotion activities carried out jointly by students and alumni of the UVI often emphasize conflicting relations between school institutions, community authorities, parents associations and networks of migrants and returnees.

It is illustrative that remittances are used primarily for individual strategies for household economic diversification, whilst on an extra-domestic level, community investments and capitalization strategies are almost non-existent. Therefore, the local neighbors and community authorities requested our team to explore possibilities for linking and creating synergies between the family and community, on the one hand, and the school environment, on the other hand, in order to boost economic, cultural and educational promotion strategies.

#### *Management of environmental knowledge*

Finally, in the southern Veracruz Selvas region, the analysis has been based on our close cooperation with the sustainability orientation of the intercultural university and has been centered in the exchange of agro-ecological and

environmental knowledge that the UVI staff is carrying out along with producer organizations, municipal councils of sustainable regional development and units of environmental management of the *nahuatl* communities of Huazuntlán, Pajapan, Tatahuicapan and in the *popoluca* community of Soteapan.

In these externally created units of environmental management, which are promoted by a recent scheme of public politics for biodiversity management, the UVI students, alumni and teachers have identified the *emic* taxonomies that exist in the local flora and fauna of the region as a relevant starting point to translate these taxonomies and incorporate them into the official language of the "environmental service provision". Thereby, local producers can demonstrate their decisive contribution to preserving and sustainably exploiting endangered species of birds, reptiles, fruits and variants of corn. As a local UVI teacher and project participant explains,

There is a wide knowledge about the environment, deer, birds, crocodile and fish. Inside the communities... Parents teach their children, grandparents teach their grandsons how to exploit these sources without destroying them. So, these peasants, fishermen, haunters, craftsman are contributing to the perseveration of the environment. But nobody recognizes them, bureaucrats of the city come to tell them what is banned and what is allowed. Now, with the new councils this is the first step to participate, but external agents still dominate the decision making about local sources. Hence, we support the local producer networks, we try to make visible their contribution, what development agencies call environmental services (UVI Selvas teacher, 2011).

These four types of spaces of dialogues between different kinds of knowledge have been chosen because they are regionally relevant areas in which the intercultural managers begin to perform professionally. These are intersectional spaces because they did not subsume ethno-cultural and ethno-scientific knowledge under the monologic tradition of the western university, but they institutionalize diversity. That is why the co-management practices of academic and extra-academic knowledge are studied as particular areas of future UVI alumni expertise.

### **Concluding remarks**

Our ethnographically based analysis of teaching, research and community service experiences in a so-called intercultural university reveals that intercultural higher education is still a very recent field, which is trying to take advantage of synergies which come from a more consolidated study of the primary intercultural and bilingual education level as well as from recent trends in general higher education. Despite the "youth" of the analyzed field, we can already

notice that the treatment of diversity in the higher education is facing the huge challenge of how to integrate diverse learner cultures, on the one hand, and the inequalities and deficiencies in the access and quality of the education that indigenous students receive, on the other hand (Schmelkes, 2009, Dietz & Mateos Cortés, 2011b). This is the context in which intercultural universities emerge in Mexico.

Far from actually offering competitive alternatives to conventional, monolingual, monocultural and often Eurocentric study programs, intercultural programs still keep aside from the hegemonic institutions and are venturing in experiences of effective and sustained interculturalization of the university curriculum throughout a new institutional coverage directed towards the inside of rural, indigenous regions. As our research on the case of Veracruz has shown, even these new universities face similar problems of theory-praxis relations, of lack of outreach activities, of problems in prioritizing research interests and areas and of successfully reacting to a changing regional labor market.

The curricular developments in the intercultural university are innovative and highly relevant, but they still lack mechanisms of continuous evaluation and of permanent adaptation to the local and regional employment circumstances. Nominally intercultural institutions as the one analyzed here are step-by-step interculturalizing their teaching practices by opening their curriculum to non-academic knowledge and by diversifying learning strategies. Research and community service activities are much more inductively defined and regionally grounded than in conventional higher education institutions. However, the integration of teaching, research and community service is still a pending task, which will require further innovations with regard to thesis formats, theory-praxis-teaching transitions, profiles of desired intercultural university teachers and institutional channels of community participation in academic decisions by these new universities.

A contemporary and reflexive educational policy, designed for the 21<sup>st</sup> century university tendencies (Santos, 2005), will have to recognize first and foremost the historic debt which the entire Mexican educational, scientific and technological system has with regard to the country's indigenous peoples, whose knowledge has been expropriated and silenced first by colonial *creole* and then by *mestizo* society; this debt persists until the present and is manifest through inequalities in access, equity and educational pertinence, by excluding the indigenous languages, cultures and knowledge from higher education and by ignoring the richness and resources offered by cultural and biological diversity. Such a recognition will have to lead to new coalitions and alliances between so-called intercultural and so-called conventional universities, whose



rural vs. urban, indigenous vs. non-indigenous, Western vs. Mesoamerican dividing lines may in future evolve from being frontiers to becoming bridges of exchange and mutual learning among diverse ways of knowing, of teaching and of learning in ever more diverse societies.

#### Notas

- <sup>1</sup> Cf. some general literature on the phenomenon, such as Mato (ed., 2008, 2009a, 2009b), Bertely Busquets (2011) and Dietz (2009).
- <sup>2</sup> Translated from Spanish by Ivette Utrera Domínguez.
- <sup>3</sup> So far, the CGEIB has created seven new intercultural universities, located in the states of Mexico, Chiapas, Tabasco, Puebla, Quintana Roo, Michoacán and Guerrero (Schmelkes, 2009). Furthermore, there are similar universities which had been previously created – the Universidad Autónoma Indígena de México in Sinaloa and the Universidad Comunitaria de San Luis Potosí -, which have a posteriori been recognized as "intercultural" ones by the CGEIB. Finally, the Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural (UVI) is created as a program of the pre-existing Universidad Veracruzana in 2005 (Schmelkes, 2008, 2011, Dietz, 2012b). Nowadays, there are new initiatives to create new institutions in the states of Oaxaca, Hidalgo and Nayarit. Apart from these universities, which are recognized by the federal government as intercultural universities, there are independent higher education institutions which have been created without governmental support, such as the Universidad de los Pueblos del Sur (UNISUR, in Guerrero), the Universidad Campesina e Indígena en Red (UCI-Red, in several Mexican states), and the Universidad de la Tierra (in Chiapas and Oaxaca).
- <sup>4</sup> For more details on these programs cf. Didou Aupetit & Remedi Allione (2009) and Mateos Cortés, Mendoza Zuany & Dietz (2013).
- <sup>5</sup> The main indigenous languages spoken by the students are *nahuatl*, *tutunaku*, *popoluca*, *ñahñü*, *teenek* and *tepehua*. In the UVI, classes are taught mainly in Spanish, but in certain courses activities are also carried out in some of the mentioned indigenous languages.

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