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Making higher education work for Indigenous peoples in Mexico

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A major five-year study – drawing on research with over 300 individuals across six Mexican states – finds that Indigenous students in higher education in Mexico face important institutional barriers to inclusion, as well as discrimination with regard to Indigenous languages and knowledge systems.

Indigenous students' increasing access to universities is challenging the colonial and postcolonial legacies of higher education in Latin America. In particular, its monocultural and monolingual nature excludes the linguistic and cultural diversity that Indigenous students can contribute to campus life and academic learning.

These findings offer important insights for national policy and highlight crucial changes that higher education institutions in Mexico need to make. These institutions should take advantage of sources of diversity in order to rethink and restructure study programmes and curricula. They should also improve access to higher education in rural contexts and incorporate ways of learning from non-hegemonic and non-Western knowledge.

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Project overview

The research project *Indigeneity and Pathways through Higher Education in Mexico*[1], led by Professor Michael Donnelly (University of Bath), Dr Gunther Dietz (University of Veracruz) and Dr Judith Pérez-Castro (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, UNAM), analysed the role of higher education in supporting the social and economic development of Indigenous peoples between 2021 and 2024. Specifically, we examined how Indigenous youth fared within different types of higher education institutions, using six states in Mexico as case studies.

Prior to this comparative project, Indigenous students were rather unknown or 'invisible' actors, with universities paying little attention to the youth from Indigenous or rural origins within their student body. Nevertheless, the slow but steady expansion of high schools in Mexico's Indigenous regions is having a 'democratising' effect on access to higher education. Accordingly, in some regions, so-called intercultural universities – established to target rural, peasant and Indigenous youth – have been created in the last two decades. Indigenous students also migrate to urban and metropolitan regions to access to mainstream universities.

Although the 2021 Mexican General Law on Higher Education urges universities to interculturalise and to diversify their study programmes with regard to 'non-traditional students', both governmental and university policymakers lack basic information about Indigenous students, their specific problems and barriers, as well as the potential contributions they can make to academic life. Therefore, by building a strong evidence base, our project aims to inform the development of solutions for both policy and practice to make the higher education system more relevant for Indigenous people. To achieve this, we collaborated with 17 higher education institutions (HEIs) of distinct types.

The sample of HEIs is representative of the landscape of Mexican higher education. We included large federal universities, such as the National Autonomous University of Mexico in Mexico City, but also public regional universities, such as those in the states of Oaxaca, Puebla and Veracruz. Further, we included the above mentioned rural intercultural universities and community universities run by non-governmental organisations, technological universities, a teacher training college, the national agrarian university (Universidad Autónoma Chaping) and, finally, some private elite universities, such as the Jesuit-run Universidad Iberoamericana.

As part of the study, we conducted a total of 362 interviews: 181 with Indigenous students, 99 with Indigenous graduates and 82 with faculty members and tutors. The data obtained from these interviews underwent

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1   Cf. https://www.bath.ac.uk/projects/indigeneity-and-pathways-through-higher-education-in-latin-america/ and https://sendas.alheli-rivera.com/es/inicio/

preliminary analysis and were subsequently shared with the participants through '*inter-knowledge* workshops' (spaces of collaborative knowledge-sharing and common analysis of research findings). Within the participating HEIs, we conducted a total of ten workshops with 260 students and graduates and 14 workshops with 268 faculty members and administrators. In these regional workshops and in the final inter-knowledge workshop – attended by 21 students, 28 graduates and 15 faculty members from the HEIs that had participated in the previous interview and workshop phases – we collectively identified a series of challenges that Indigenous youth face in higher education in Mexico. In addition, we formulated a set of policy recommendations for higher education, as well as for particular kinds of universities.

Key findings

We identify six key problems (A-F) that are not exclusive to Indigenous youth, but that are particularly detrimental to them during their transition through Mexican higher education.

A. Financial and economic problems

1. Distances and geographical barriers between universities and Indigenous peoples' homes constitute the first major challenge contributing to exclusion. These are accentuated by the lack of adequate roads and/or the insecurity on some roads required to reach the universities.

2. Many Indigenous students face economic difficulties due to low household incomes and financial dependence on their parents. These financial constraints are often linked to the need to cover expenses such as rent, utilities, daily transportation, internet access, books and materials – in a context where there are limited opportunities to work and where other financial support is scarce.

3. Grants and scholarships, whether provided by the government for public institutions or offered by private universities, play a crucial role but remain insufficient. Due to difficult family financial situations, some students are forced to use their grants to support their households rather than to invest these resources in their studies.

4. This is particularly evident when students have to migrate to state capitals, as grants do not cover these costs. The expenses of rent, food, transport and utilities in urban areas are often significantly higher than in their home communities. Private universities have larger support programmes, but their tuition costs are also higher.

5. In addition, the academic requirements for maintaining and renewing grants – especially maintaining a high grade average – become an added barrier and stress for Indigenous students. This is particularly the case as the system itself can introduce barriers that make it hard to reach these grades (see recommendations below on curricular and intercultural education).

6. Students from small community universities, which are legally treated as equivalent to private HEIs, are excluded from access to public sector grants.

7. The lack of grants and resulting economic problems can force students to devote more hours to working (often in very precarious jobs) instead of being dedicated to their studies fulltime. This sets them further back, accentuating academic challenges.

8. With regard to the need to combine working with studying, there is a gender gap that particularly affects female Indigenous students. This is due to the types of work they do, and the unpaid care that is often required in their family contexts.

B. Barriers to access to higher education

9. In the transition from upper secondary education to higher education, inequalities persist in income and retention due to the educational quality of schools in Indigenous communities, technological gaps and students' socio-economic conditions.

10. Some students are unable to access HEIs because they are required to register on online platforms and the lack of internet connection in their communities makes it difficult for them to complete these formalities or to digitise their documents.

11. Although several HEIs already have proactive policies of inclusion, these need to be transformed into concrete actions that facilitate diversified access to higher education for Indigenous students. For instance, the current de-contextualised standardised entrance tests do not consider their specific needs.

12. Indigenous students often face structural (migration, economic barriers, speaking an Indigenous first language, food, climate, provision of services, neighbourhood treatment, university bureaucracy, etc.) and emotional adaptation problems (culture shock, discrimination, loneliness, doubts about their ability to finish the course, need to repay the effort of their families, etc.). Adapting to these changes has been a challenge mostly faced alone.

13. The 'culture shock' reported by Indigenous students adds to the difficulties of adapting to the 'university culture'. This includes knowledge gaps, academic languages and difficulties with the Spanish language, work rhythms and workloads, but also cultural consumption and everyday

practices. We identify a kind of ethnic and cultural segregation, especially in relation to the urban and metropolitan environment.

14. In several HEIs, we identify a lack of accessibility and clarity of information regarding university admissions and access to grants. Information does not reach potential applicants and/or students in a timely manner.

15. Generally, administrative procedures in HEIs have little empathy towards Indigenous youth who have language difficulties. This is highlighted by requests for detailed information on entry requirements for a bachelor's degree and the prevalence of Spanish for the dissemination of university admission notices.

C. Barriers for study career continuity and successful completion

16. Many of the bureaucratic and administrative procedures required by HEIs are identified as obstacles. These challenges are intensified when administrative and teaching staff are apathetic and indifferent to students' diversity.

17. Female students, especially those who are mothers, face a significant disadvantage compared with male students. They are forced to work doubly, with both academic commitments and responsibilities at home.

18. In the newly established HEIs, there are problems and shortcomings in the university infrastructure (internet, libraries, school canteens, etc.). These have a particularly negative impact on Indigenous students, who nearly always lack access to internet and libraries in their communities and regions of origin.

D. Appropriateness and relevance of curricula

19. The curriculum often does not match life in communities, excluding the cultural diversity of Indigenous students and their backgrounds. This decontextualisation generates educational and epistemic inequalities and injustices.

20. The vocational, didactic and methodological training of many teachers is not sufficient to handle diversity, which becomes more acute when teachers are not aware of or committed to real-world problems.

21. There are also gaps in the training of teachers in intercultural and community-based HEIs in terms of intercultural approaches – shortcomings that are deepened by frequent staff fluctuations. In this type of HEI, there are discrepancies between the expectations of students and the contents and methodologies of the students' training, a situation that is made more complex by the challenge of positioning and defending the unconventional, and still rather unknown, 'intercultural' study programmes that their universities offer in local labour markets.

22. In conventional HEIs, especially in disciplinary-type courses, there are huge differences between academic and community knowledge, both at theoretical and methodological levels. Several monocultural curricula indirectly promote the loss of Indigenous students' ethnic identity, languages, values and knowledge. There is a cultural and linguistic 'clash' through which Western knowledge and literacy, as well as the Spanish language, end up being imposed on the students' Indigenous culture.

E. The students' linguistic capital as missed opportunities

23. The majority of participating HEIs either lack awareness or fail to take advantage of the linguistic diversity provided by Indigenous students. Although some universities and courses value the ability to speak a native language and sometimes offer courses to learn basic notions, these are not used in everyday classes.

24. There is a lack of teachers who identify as Indigenous and/or who speak an Indigenous language, so there is no bilingual or multilingual teacher 'role model' that Indigenous students can identify with and follow.

25. Intercultural universities have some strategies for harnessing native languages both in research and community service, as well as in university teaching. However, many of their students find it complex, problematic or contradictory to recognise and assert their own identity in higher education, when their previous educational trajectories (bilingual primary, monolingual (in Spanish) secondary and upper secondary) initially led them to disconnect from and deny their roots, but now face the challenge of recognising themselves again as Indigenous people.

26. The neglect and non-inclusion of native languages contrasts in many HEIs, particularly private ones, with the value attributed to English as a prerequisite for graduating. This situation is experienced by Indigenous students as discrimination since English is often not their second but third language.

F. Experiences of discrimination, exclusion and racism

27. Many Indigenous students admit that they hide their identity and/or avoid speaking their mother tongue out of fear of discrimination.

28. Experiences of discrimination for being seen as 'different' or belonging to another culture (ethnic discrimination) are reported, often intersecting with discrimination on the basis of race, gender and social class, as well as around Spanish language proficiency, learning gaps and/or physical appearance.

29. In different HEIs, the organisation of certain events folklorises the Indigenous students' culture and/or the use of the native languages. These

situations are uncomfortable for students as they feel that their traditions and identities are reduced to superficial and stereotypical representations that do not reflect nor recognise their depth and meaning. Students often feel depersonalised by being 'used' as mere figures to meet inclusion goals, without this having a real impact on their learning experience.

30. In private HEIs, students often feel excluded from institutional life because of the intersections of racism and classism, as they do not having the same (economic, cultural and human) capital as their non-Indigenous peers.

31. Discrimination is not only experienced within universities, but also when looking for rental accommodation, internships, professional practices or employment after graduation. The transition to the labour market is particularly problematic when potential employers are suspicious about unknown careers or newly created universities, identifying them as of 'lower quality'.

32. In extreme cases, specifically at one of the participating technological institutes, students reported that full-time academic staff use Indigenous students as low-paid or unpaid agricultural and/or domestic workers in their own homes on weekends.

Recommendations

In order to meet these challenges faced by Indigenous students in different kinds of higher eduction institutions, change is needed both within federal and state governmental policymaking and within the universities themselves. Although the 2021 Mexican General Law on Higher Education obliges universities to introduce 'interculturality in the development of higher education institutions' functions and the respect for the nations' linguistic plurality and the linguistic and cultural rights of the Indigenous and Afromexican peoples and communities', we identify a huge gap between these criteria and institutional responses to implement them.

This section presents recommendations to close these gaps, distinguishing between the institutions to which the recommendations are addressed. We begin with recommendations for the federal and state governmental institutions responsible for higher education policies, then include recommendations for universities in general, before adding specific recommendations for private HEIs and intercultural and community HEIs.

1. Recommendations for higher education policy in Mexico

We have seven recommendations for HE policy:

i.   Formulate an inclusive and transversal policy for intercultural higher education, in accordance with Mexico's 2021 General Law on Higher Education. This implies the increase and redistribution of federal and state public investment in higher education for all young people who have graduated from upper secondary education, particularly recognising and promoting those young people who are at a disadvantage.

ii. Review and reformulate both the number of government grants and scholarships and the amounts given to low-income students to ensure that they are appropriate to allow Indigenous students to study effectively.

iii. Consolidate newly created HEIs, including intercultural and community universities, recognising their educational models and providing them with university autonomy.

iv. Appreciate and value the communal character of community-based HEIs by recognising their particular forms of financing, rather than forcing them to identify as private HEIs.

v.   Encourage the expansion of higher education by opening new decentralised campuses, particularly in rural regions and municipalities with high socio-economic marginalisation rates.

vi. Generate incentives and support for graduates to encourage the creation of their own productive projects that benefit their families, communities and regions of origin.

vii. Design training and awareness programmes on diversity and inclusion for teachers and administrators in the different types of HEIs and particularly within the mainstream universities to enable them to provide adequate support to their students.

2. Recommendations for HEIs in general

The following comprehensive set of recommendations for all HEIs have been organised across six key thematic areas, based on previously identified problems.

Support Indigenous students with their economic and financial problems

i.   Conduct real and properly contextualised socio-economic studies to understand the students' situation. This will enable better targeting of university support and guidance programmes, considering key factors such as place of origin and residence (rural or urban), family size and other conditions that aggravate their disadvantages, such as belonging to an Indigenous people and/or having a disability status.

ii. Manage the increase of grants, scholarships and financial support according to the different educational contexts (for example Indigenous students or students who are parents).

iii. Systematise and communicate in an efficient and transparent manner all the information necessary for the award processes of grants, both from government agencies and non-governmental organisations and foundations.

iv. Create, in each HEI, specific departments for job opportunities and career support for both students and graduates, and encourage new forms of self-employment, such as student or graduate co-operative enterprises. Such career services should provide economic and social support and information for new entrants and low-income students.

v. Develop infrastructure that supports student retention, such as accommodation facilities, cafeterias, day care programmes, nurseries, playrooms, libraries and school transportation.

Remove barriers to higher education

i. Develop dissemination strategies to raise awareness of the context in which each university is situated and its specific educational project (meetings, exchanges of knowledge and ways of life, production of podcasts/newsletters/letters, vocational orientation campaigns with institutions of upper secondary education, among others).

ii. Consider the introduction of contextualised admissions for entrants from Indigenous backgrounds – incorporating the different starting points that young people have had in life – and offer lower entry requirements for Indigenous students. These would take into account the fact that Indigenous students tend to perform worse at secondary level because they are taught in Spanish and often have poorer quality secondary education.

iii. Make admission requirements and processes more flexible and appropriate, complementing standardised entrance examinations with interviews and application and recommendation letters from community authorities.

iv. Conduct vocational orientation workshops and induction courses for applicants from underrepresented communities.

v. Generate statistics and diagnoses on the cultural, linguistic and gender identities of student populations to better understand their conditions of entry, permanence and graduation, without homogenising their origins or generalising them under the all too broad category of 'Indigenous'.

Promote study career continuity and successful completion

i. Adapt and make flexible the requirements and processes of retention, including leaves and permits for family and/or community activities and adjustments to the school calendar.

ii. Make the requirements for degree completion more flexible and propose types of final exams other than conventional undergraduate theses. These alternatives could include general knowledge examinations,

performance by grades, integrative projects or portfolios of evidence. In addition, strengthen other already existing qualification options, such as specific degree courses, teaching support activities and internships.

iii. Create academic support and levelling programmes to address and bridge educational gaps and to strengthen students' key skills, such as reading and writing, searching, analysing and synthesising information, among others.

iv. Create spaces for psycho-emotional support to address culture shocks and difficulties with adaptation to university life. As well as formal support, encourage the development of structured mentoring delivered by successful Indigenous students and graduates.

v. Encourage the self-organisation and participation of Indigenous students within each HEI, to allow self-reflection and cultural encounters of Indigenous students, as well as networking and exchanges of experiences and knowledge.

vi. Review staff recruitment protocols to assess knowledge and sensitivities about diversity and intercultural communication skills.

vii. Consolidate training processes for teaching and administrative staff on issues of cultural, linguistic and gender diversity to achieve greater sensitivity and better awareness of the particular situations that students may face.

viii. Strengthen the individual tutoring programme, understood as a space of integral educational accompaniment (not only academic, but also in physical and psychological health), and promote group tutoring that encourages the creation of support networks among students and between students and teachers.

ix. Implement a continuous and formative graduate monitoring system that goes beyond the collection of statistical information or the verification of specific indicators.

Review the appropriateness and relevance of curricula

i. Interculturalise the curriculum, i.e. integrate an 'intercultural curricular line' into each education programme to incorporate transversal and explicit knowledge of Indigenous peoples, themes on cultural diversity, linguistics and gender, as well as methodologies of knowledge dialogues.

ii. Promote the entry and participation of Indigenous students into all programmes that the institutions offer, avoiding their concentration in certain degree programmes.

iii. Adapt curricula to the contexts and realities of Indigenous students through contextualised teaching and learning strategies, curricular flexibility and diversified forms of graduation requirements.

iv. Include community learning experiences for all students and not just for Indigenous students, giving curricular value to community service processes.

v. Promote research that prioritises attention to local and regional contexts as seen from their perspective, incorporating community actors and/or graduates in these processes.

vi. Generate research protocols for projects carried out in Indigenous communities or territories in dialogue with their inhabitants and/or representatives.

vii. Strengthen semi-presential bachelor programmes, as well as continuing education programmes and professional, occupational and/or linguistic certifications relevant for each context.

viii. Use existing alumni follow-up programmes to continuously review the appropriateness and relevance of plans and curricula. Conduct regular consultations with graduates, their families and communities, in accordance with the legal right to free, prior and informed consultation, so that their needs, worries and concerns are clearly and efficiently incorporated when updating and restructuring curricula and study programmes.

ix. Open permanent channels for community participation to strengthen cultural, community, territorial and linguistic links to the university, promoting the sense of belonging among Indigenous students both with their communities and with the HEIs.

Take advantage of linguistic diversity

i. Reform institutional norms to comply with the Mexican General Law on the Linguistic Rights of Indigenous Peoples, making official the use of native languages in teaching, certification, research, dissemination and community service in all HEIs.

ii. Equate the status of native languages with that of Spanish and foreign languages, recognising that for many Indigenous students the foreign language is their third language, not their second.

iii. Provide courses to encourage Indigenous language learning as part of training for teachers, administrators and students.

iv. Offer language proficiency certifications not only for foreign languages, but also for native languages.

v. Encourage research and the dissemination of knowledge of Indigenous people, including their own languages by writing theses on the subject and/or in the language, by strengthening research groups and projects on or in Indigenous languages and by organising dissemination activities such as exchanges, podcasts, radio programmes, audiovisuals and blogs, among others.

Prevent all forms of discrimination, exclusion and racism

i. Design and implement a regulatory protocol that protects Indigenous peoples (based on their values and knowledge) and that promotes intercultural coexistence in HEIs.

ii. Introduce regulations for dealing with cases of racist harassment, discrimination and/or violence, in accordance with existing regulations and protocols for cases of sexual harassment and gender-based violence, as well as the Mexican Federal Act to Prevent and Eliminate Discrimination.

iii. Provide ongoing anti-racism training for students, teachers and administrators.

iv. Create a body or unit in each HEI that focuses on the integral care of the Indigenous university community, which:

   a. provides mentoring and tutoring to guarantee a good process of entry and adaptation, as well as to ensure retention and graduation of Indigenous students;
   b. monitors its Indigenous graduates' performance and professional development;
   c. maintains links with government institutions, businesses and communities for the realisation of practices and internships;
   d. provides training for teachers in related subjects.

Further, with regard to the study programmes:

   e. includes cultural diversity themes in the curriculum;
   f. receives complaints and allegations related to acts of discrimination, racism, etc.

3. Specific recommendations for private HEIs

i. Increase grant and scholarship programmes for Indigenous students and other underrepresented groups in private universities, based on real and contextual socio-economic necessity studies.
ii. Increase flexibility and adapt the requirements for maintaining grants throughout students' university trajectory.
iii. Avoid the segregation of students and the isolation of grant-receiving students.
iv. Increase community experiences and social projects carried out by grant-receiving students to all students and give them curricular value.

4. Specific recommendations for intercultural and community HEIs

i. Promote the autonomy and self-organisation in the operation of intercultural and community HEIs.
ii. Manage measures to promote the stability of teachers' employment.
iii. Establish inter-institutional links with other public and private HEIs, as well as with institutions and foundations, to diversify sources of funding, support through services and donations, as well as expanding the spaces for students to carry out their professional practices and internships.
iv. Improve the technological infrastructure, such as internet coverage and information and communication equipment.
v. Expand and deepen the use of Indigenous languages as languages of instruction.
vi. Recognise and disseminate community service projects, such as co-operatives and entrepreneurship incubated within these institutions.

In order to face the important institutional barriers to inclusion identified, and to address discrimination with regard to Indigenous languages and knowledge systems, both university and government policymakers need to expand and deepen their support programmes and revise their access procedures for Indigenous students. What's more, these institutions need to reform their study programmes and curricula, to reverse their practices of excluding Indigenous languages, cultures and ways of knowing. Finally, they should prioritise establishing closer community service activities with their students' regions of origin.

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