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**“Witch doctors” or Professionals? The Graduates of
Mexico’s First Intercultural University and the Struggle for
Legitimacy**

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Abstract: Since 2003, the Mexican government has opened 11 intercultural universities serving a total of 15,000 students, a majority of whom are members of Mexico’s Indigenous minority. While there is a growing body of work analyzing the intercultural model from public policy and theoretical perspectives, few studies focus on the experiences of the students and graduates of these institutions. In this article, I share the findings of one such study of the Intercultural University of Mexico State, the pioneer of the intercultural universities. Through interviews with graduates, students, and deans of three undergraduate intercultural programs, I seek to answer a central question, which is rooted in critical and decolonial theory: To what degree does the intercultural model achieve its stated mission of empowering Indigenous students and to what degree does it contribute to the reproduction of inequality? In general, the findings are mixed. While many students share experiences of discrimination in the workplace, and even being derided as “witch-doctors,” they argue that attending an institution with a critical mass of Indigenous students has empowered them personally and professionally, transformed their cultural identities, and given them a new appreciation for their Indigenous roots.

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¿“Brujos” o profesionistas? Los egresados de la primera universidad intercultural en México y la lucha por la legitimidad

Resumen: Desde 2003, el gobierno mexicano ha creado 11 universidades interculturales que atienden a un total de 15,000 estudiantes, la mayoría de ellos miembros de minorías indígenas del país. Aunque existe un creciente número de estudios que analizan el modelo intercultural desde perspectivas teóricas y de política pública, muy pocos se enfocan en las experiencias de los estudiantes y egresados de estas universidades. En este artículo, se comparten los resultados de una investigación en la Universidad Intercultural del Estado de México, la pionera de las universidades interculturales en el país. A través de entrevistas con egresados, estudiantes y directores de tres programas interculturales a nivel licenciatura, se busca problematizar una pregunta central, que parte de un enfoque crítico y decolonial: ¿En qué medida logra el modelo intercultural su misión de empoderar a los estudiantes indígenas y en qué grado contribuye a la reproducción de la desigualdad? En general, los hallazgos son mixtos. Mientras algunos estudiantes comparten experiencias de discriminación en el trabajo, inclusive siendo tachados de “brujos” o “chamanes”, otros afirman que la experiencia de asistir a una institución con una masa crítica de estudiantes indígenas les ha empoderado de forma personal y profesional, provocando transformaciones en sus identidades culturales y dotándoles de un nuevo aprecio por sus raíces indígenas.

Palabras-clave: México; universidades interculturales; estudiantes indígenas; estigma; decolonialidad; mercado laboral

“Feiticeiros” ou profissionais? Os graduados da primeira universidade intercultural do México e a luta pela legitimidade

Resumo: Desde 2003, o governo mexicano criou 11 universidades interculturais que atendem a um total de 15.000 alunos, a maioria deles membros da minoria indígena do país. Embora haja um número crescente de estudos que analisam o modelo intercultural do ponto de vista teórico e de políticas públicas, poucos enfocam as experiências de alunos e graduados dessas universidades. Neste artigo, são apresentados os resultados de uma investigação da Universidade Intercultural do Estado do México, pioneira em universidades interculturais no país. Por meio de entrevistas com graduados, alunos e diretores de três programas interculturais de graduação, busca problematizar uma questão central, que parte de uma abordagem crítica e descolonial: em que medida o modelo intercultural cumpre sua missão de empoderar estudantes indígenas e em que medida contribui para a reprodução da desigualdade? Em geral, os resultados são mistos. Enquanto alguns alunos compartilham experiências de discriminação no trabalho, alguns até sendo rotulados de “feiticeiros” ou “xamãs”, muitos argumentam que a experiência de frequentar uma instituição com uma massa crítica de alunos indígenas os empoderou pessoal e profissionalmente, causando transformações em suas identidades culturais e dando-lhes uma nova apreciação de suas raízes indígenas.

Palavras-chave: México; universidades interculturais; estudantes indígenas; descolonialidade; estigma; mercado de trabalho

“Witch Doctors” or Professionals? The Graduates of Mexico’s First Intercultural University and the Struggle for Legitimacy

We want to live in this globalized world and have equal access to education [...] We’ve waited more than 500 years and we’re not willing to wait any more.¹

The treatment was discriminatory. They told us: “you’re witches, you’re shamans, you’re medicine people,” [...] but I’m a university graduate, a professional.²

In 2004, the Intercultural University of Mexico State opened in the Mazahua Indian-majority town of San Felipe del Progreso, marking a landmark in the history of Mexican higher education. The institution was the first in a new network of universities serving the country’s 68 Indigenous groups, who have historically been grossly underrepresented in higher education. While Indigenous people comprise roughly 22% of the Mexican population (INEGI, 2015), at the beginning of this century, they accounted for a mere 1% of university students (Schmelkes, 2003).

Nearly two decades later, in 2020 there were 11 government-run intercultural universities (IUs) in as many states, serving 15,556 students (ANUIES, 2020). A majority of those are of Indigenous origin, but there are also Afro-descendants and members of other groups that have traditionally had little access to Mexican higher education. In addition to the government-run system, there are roughly a dozen Indigenous-serving institutions throughout Mexico that rely on private or community support.

In creating a public system of intercultural universities, the government was responding to demands from Indigenous communities for culturally relevant education at all levels to revindicate Indigenous identities and combat endemic poverty. Mexico’s Indigenous minority ranks last among the country’s ethnic groups in virtually all human development indicators. This is particularly true of Indigenous language-speakers, who represent 7.3 million of the 25 million Mexicans who self-identified as Indigenous in the 2015 government population survey (INEGI, 2015). Among the former group, 78% lived in poverty and a staggering 35% in extreme poverty, compared with 41% and 5.8%, respectively, of non-Indigenous language-speakers (Villagómez, 2019). The educational gap was equally extreme, with Indigenous language-speakers attending an average of 5.7 years of school, compared with 9.1 years among the general population. In addition, 23% of Indigenous language-speakers were illiterate, compared with 5.5% of the general population (INEGI, 2015).

While the intercultural universities could be viewed as a form of affirmative action for Indigenous students, the system’s goals are far more ambitious. The universities have a triple mandate: to revitalize Indigenous languages and cultures, promote development in Indigenous communities, and produce graduates who are both socially minded and competitive in the globalized labor market (Casillas & Santini, 2009; Lloyd, 2019). The institutions, which require students to study an Indigenous language, offer primarily “intercultural” majors such as Language and Culture, Sustainable Development, and Intercultural Health, which seek to prepare the mostly Indigenous graduates to act as leaders and entrepreneurs in their communities of origin. At least in theoretical terms, the model seeks to decolonize the academy by deconstructing hegemonic knowledge hierarchies and prioritizing knowledge that is relevant to Indigenous communities.

¹ Words spoken by Mazahua leaders during the visit of then-presidential candidate Vicente Fox Quesada to San Felipe del Progreso, Mexico State, in 2000. (Celote, n.d., cited in Barquín, 2015, pp. 307-308).

² Interview with Luisa, a graduate of the first generation of Intercultural Health at the Intercultural University of Mexico State.

It is a tall order, given the major challenges facing the universities, including severe resource constraints (in terms of finances and human capital), the low level of academic preparedness among students, and the absence of clarity and consensus surrounding the intercultural model (Dietz, 2009). The implementation of the system has been characterized by “epistemic frictions” (Hernández, 2017) over the degree to which the universities should depart from hegemonic models of higher education.

Another key factor limiting the decolonializing potential is the lack of institutional autonomy, including little participation on the part of Indigenous actors in the curricular design and in university decision-making processes. For instance, state governors appoint the rectors, most of whom are non-Indigenous. The “top-down” model of Mexico’s intercultural universities contrasts sharply with the “bottom-up” approach adopted by most Indigenous-serving higher education institutions in Latin America, where the universities were created by and for the Indigenous communities (Vargas, 2020).

A third challenge is the mismatch between the intercultural model and the realities of the labor market. Such tensions, which are particularly visible in the debate over the curriculum and reflect the institutions’ competing goals, are the central focus of this article. The universities are divided over whether to offer “traditional” programs such as medicine, law, and accounting, to increase graduates’ possibilities of finding decent-paying jobs, as an alternative to the “intercultural” majors—a debate which has confronted policymakers in Mexico City with Indigenous academics at some institutions (Lloyd & Hernández, 2021).

Given the innovative nature of the model, the intercultural universities have inspired a growing body of research over the past two decades. Generally, these studies can be divided into four groups: those that trace the origins and the debate surrounding the intercultural model (the largest group) (for ex., Dietz, 2009; González Apodaca, 2017; Hernández, 2016); those that recount the history of individual institutions (Ávila & Ávila, 2016; Celote, 2013; González Ortiz, 2017); overviews of the current state of the system (Dietz & Mateos, 2019; Lloyd, 2019); and studies of student experiences at individual campuses or universities (for ex., Sartorello & Cruz, 2013). However, there are very few studies that focus on the graduates’ perceptions, experiences, and work trajectories.

In this article, I share the findings of one such study at the Intercultural University of Mexico State (UIEM, for its initials in Spanish), the pioneer of the government-sponsored institutions. The research focuses on graduates of the three majors with the highest demand: Intercultural Health, Nursing, and Sustainable Development. Through two dozen interviews conducted in 2019 and 2020 with graduates, students, and administrators, as well as participant observation, I seek to answer a central question: To what degree does the intercultural model achieve its stated mission of empowering Indigenous students and to what degree does it contribute to the reproduction of inequality, by failing to prepare students for the realities of the labor market?

My analysis is guided by the complementary lenses of critical and decolonial theory. The former views higher education as a field of contestation and power, in which different groups compete for a scarce commodity (Ordorika, 2003). Within that framework, Bourdieu and Passeron (2001) posit that education tends to reproduce economic and social hierarchies, through the imposition by dominant groups of arbitrary cultural and knowledge hierarchies. Decolonial theory, meanwhile, seeks to deconstruct and dismantle the colonial logics behind those hierarchies, while emphasizing the potential of education to transform society and empower subordinate groups (De Sousa Santos, 2011).

In promoting a dialogue—or ideally, a multilogue—among different forms of knowledge, intercultural higher education is closely aligned with the decolonial project. However, there are strong tensions within the model, including the dispute over the multiple definitions of

interculturality. Catherine Walsh (2010) makes the distinction between “an interculturality that is functional to the dominant system, and another conceived as a political project of decolonization, transformation and creation” (p. 2). In arguing for “critical interculturality,” Walsh argues that [...] intercultural education will only have meaning, impact and value when it is assumed in a critical manner, as a pedagogical-political act that seeks to intervene in the refoundation of society [...] and, as a result, in the refoundation of structures that racialize, inferiorize and dehumanize. (2009, p. 2)

The study seeks to problematize hegemonic definitions of development, as primarily related to economic growth. In contrast, the decolonial perspective emphasizes sustainable development, both in human and ecological terms. Thus, universities should be reconceived as “pluriversities” (De Sousa Santos, 2019), with the potential to deconstruct and transform colonial structures through the revalorization of Indigenous forms of knowledge and culture. Such a shift requires a form of “border thinking” (Mignolo & Thlostenova, 2006), which not only entails revaluing alternative knowledge traditions, but also serves as a call to political action. From that perspective, the potential of the universities to revitalize Indigenous cultures could be viewed as of equal or even greater value than their role in producing graduates who are competitive in the labor market.

This article, which is divided into four sections, focuses on these complexities. I begin by outlining the political context in which the intercultural university system emerged in Mexico in the early 2000s. I then describe the origins of the Intercultural University of Mexico State, as well as providing recent data on enrollment and the university’s educational offerings, among other areas. The third section—the central focus of this article—presents the results of the interviews with graduates and deans of the three study programs; the analysis centers on the graduates’ perceptions, experiences, and work trajectories, and their visions of their academic experiences. Finally, I reflect on the implications of the research for intercultural higher education in Mexico and elsewhere, as well as the need for future studies.

The Origins of the Intercultural Model in México

While demands for indigenous universities first emerged in the 1970s, it took the 1994 Zapatista uprising, in which a poorly armed group of Mayan rebels declared war on the Mexican government, to set the stage for the country’s first intercultural universities. It was an instance of what Critical Race Theory has termed “interest convergence” (Bell, 1980), in which dominant groups respond to demands from subordinate ones only when both benefit. Still, it was not until 2000, when opposition candidate Vicente Fox Quesada won the presidency, that the federal government took the rebels’ demands seriously.

Fox, a former Coca-Cola executive whose upstart candidacy put an end to seven decades of one-party rule in Mexico, famously promised to resolve the Zapatista conflict “in 15 minutes.” Once elected, he drafted a raft of legislation to respond to the least controversial of the Zapatistas’ demands on behalf of the country’s Indigenous minority, including access to culturally relevant higher education. The most important of those changes were the colloquially termed “Indigenous Law”—in reality, a series of constitutional reforms enacted in 2001 enshrining the concept of Mexico as a “pluricultural” society—and the 2003 Law of Linguistic Rights, which mandated the creation of the National Institute of Indigenous Languages (INALI).

Also in 2001, Fox created the General Coordinating Office of Intercultural and Bilingual Education (CGEIB) within the Public Education Secretariat (SEP), to oversee the creation of a nationwide system of public intercultural universities. During the following decade, IUs opened in 10 states with significant Indigenous populations: Mexico State, Chiapas, Tabasco, Veracruz, Puebla,

Michoacán, Quintana Roo, Guerrero, San Luis Potosí, and Hidalgo, in that order. In addition, the Mexican Autonomous Indigenous University—an institution founded by anthropologists in Sinaloa state in 2001—joined the government-run system in 2005.

According to the CGEIB's bluebook, *Intercultural Universities: Educational model* (Casillas & Santini, 2009), the institutions should serve the following goals:

To promote the formation of professionals committed to economic, social, and cultural development, particularly of the country's Indigenous peoples; revalidate the knowledge of Indigenous peoples and foment a synthesis with advances in scientific knowledge; promote the dissemination of Indigenous values, [...] and the revitalization, development and consolidation of native languages and cultures. (p. 149)

Despite the apparent focus on Indigenous students, the first director of the CGEIB, Sylvia Schmelkes, insisted that at least 20% of the students should come from other ethnic groups (including mestizos, the Spanish term for Mexico's majority, mixed race population). In her view, "segregating the Indigenous population in educational institutions reserved for them has been a historic mistake. The intercultural universities are open to all, although they predominantly serve Indigenous students due to the regions where they are located" (Schmelkes, 2003, p. 5). In practice, however, the model tends to be equated with Indigenous higher education, both in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America.

Past and Present of the First Intercultural University

In 2000, a candidate for mayor of San Felipe del Progreso invited Vicente Fox, then in the throes of his presidential campaign, to visit the township. Members of the local Mazahua community seized the opportunity to present their petition to Fox and make the following arguments:

We want to live in this globalized world, have equal access to education [...] We have already waited more than 500 years and we are not willing to wait any longer. We demand a fair price for our corn, better salaries for all workers; we request a regional, public university where our children can be educated and which will conduct research and disseminate our culture. (Celote, n.d., cited in Barquín, 2015, pp. 307-308)

The effort paid off and "right then, Fox committed to creating an office of Indigenous affairs and to establish the university" (Barquín, 2015, p. 308). However, rather than the proposed "indigenous university," his government opted for the intercultural model recommended by international organizations like UNESCO, prompting frustration from Indigenous activists (Barquín, 2015).

The Founding of the Intercultural University of Mexico State

The decision to build the university in the Mazahua community of San Felipe, due to their decades-long advocacy, also sparked controversy. Although the Mazahuas are the largest Indigenous group in the state, comprising 52% of Indigenous residents, there are also four other Indigenous communities that vied to have the university in their region (Barquín, 2015).

The UIEM was created in December 2003, with the following mission:

[...] to form intellectuals and professionals committed to the development of their communities and regions, whose activities contribute to promote a process of revalorization and revitalization of the Indigenous languages and cultures, with the

idea that once they finish their students they do not emigrate, but rather practice their profession to the benefit of their communities. (UIEM, 2020)

That emphasis on graduates returning to their places of origin has also sparked controversy, given the scarce job opportunities in Indigenous communities. Critics argue that the policy risks reproducing stereotypes of Indigenous professionals, who have traditionally been confined to the fields of education and anthropology, conforming to what Rivera Cusicanqui (2010) terms the “indio permitido”; the term refers to past governments’ efforts to divide and domesticate Indigenous movements by subordinating their members into “permitted” roles. However, proponents of the intercultural model insist that the curriculum is designed to empower Indigenous youths by preparing them to serve as “agents of development” in their communities.

In 2006, construction began on the main campus in San Felipe, using Indigenous motifs. Then, in 2014, the university opened an Intercultural Health Clinic on campus, training students in the two medical programs and also providing low-cost health services to the surrounding population. A year later, UIEM opened a second campus in the town of Tepetlixpa, 70 km southeast of Mexico City.

During the 2019-2020 academic year, UIEM had a total enrollment of 1,644 students, of which 73% were from Indigenous communities, 68% spoke an Indigenous language and 67% were women (ANUIES, 2020; UIEM, 2020). The university currently offers six undergraduate majors and two master’s programs. This article focuses on the graduates of the three undergraduate majors with the largest demand. In 2019-2020, Intercultural Health had 490 students (368 women and 122 men); Nursing had 429 (326 and 103, respectively); and Sustainable Development enrolled 282 (155 and 127; ANUIES, 2020). It is worth noting the preponderance of female students at UIEM (69%), as well as at the other IUs (ANUIES, 2020), which is partly due to resistance in many Indigenous communities against women studying far from home.

Of the three majors studied for this article, Sustainable Development was the only one included in the original CGEIB curriculum. The second, Intercultural Health, emerged amid controversy in 2011. Its creators incorporated techniques from India and China, advocating a broader interpretation of interculturality as a dialogue of knowledge (Dietz, 2009) among cultures throughout the world. For instance, the program teaches Mexican cleansing rituals alongside acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine. The program faced considerable resistance from the CGEIB, due to the incorporation of non-Mexican traditions. However, another IU has already incorporated Intercultural Health and the government is now considering offering the program at the proposed Yaqui Intercultural University in Sonora state .

The final degree program, introduced in 2013, was initially called “Intercultural Nursing.” However, as the degree was not sanctioned by official health authorities—preventing graduates from getting jobs at government hospitals or clinics—the university decided to remove the word “intercultural” from the title .

The program, which incorporates techniques such as massage and acupuncture into a standard nursing curriculum, is currently known as “Nursing (with an intercultural focus).” I would argue that the change is symbolic and signals the challenges facing the intercultural universities in balancing the alternative project with the demands of the labor market. As we will see in this article, it also reveals the stigmas associated with the intercultural universities, as well as the persistence of racism toward Indigenous peoples.

Some Methodological Considerations

The research for this article entailed semi-structured interviews with 14 graduates of Sustainable Development, Intercultural Health and Nursing, as well as the current rector, the deans

of the three majors, three administrators of other areas and five students. Given the difficulty of contacting students once they leave the university, the interviews were held during the yearly reunions of graduates on campus. I also attended workshops with dozens of graduates of the different programs, in which they shared their experiences in the workplace. The interviews were selected from a cross-sample of participants, balancing gender, age, Indigenous status, and attitudes toward the intercultural model, in a bid to achieve theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), and then analyzed using the qualitative software Atlas.ti. I used pseudonyms for all the interviewees—except for the rector, who is not quoted directly in this article—to preserve their anonymity.

The process followed the grounded theory model (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), in which researchers develop hypotheses through the collection and analysis of qualitative data. Among concepts that emerged were: the “intercultural stigma”, the revindication of Indigenous knowledge and culture, racism, institutional fragility and autonomy, graduates as cultural pioneers, critical mass, gradations of Indigenous identity, among others. While the process of selecting excerpts from interviews is inherently arbitrary, I sought to highlight themes related to Indigenous identity and empowerment, as well as the tensions between the intercultural model and the realities of the workplace.

The research project initially included analysis of all six undergraduate majors. However, due to the challenges of conducting fieldwork during the COVID-19 pandemic, I postponed the interviews with graduates of the remaining three programs — Intercultural Communication, Language and Culture, and Art and Design— until a second phase of the project.

My analysis is informed by a separate research project I conducted in 2020 at the Mexican Autonomous Indigenous University, in Sinaloa state, analyzing surveys of nearly 400 graduates over the past 10 years (Lloyd & Hernández, 2021). That study revealed significant challenges for graduates of intercultural majors while also highlighting the model’s role in strengthening students’ self-esteem and Indigenous identities. The results of the initial round of interviews at UIEM enabled me to analyze in greater detail the impacts of the intercultural curriculum on graduates’ work trajectories and experiences. As stated by Bourdieu (2000), “those types of analysis that we call ‘qualitative’ are key to understanding, that is, fully explaining what the statistics can only document” (p. 30). In the following sections, I present the results of that qualitative research.

The Graduates’ Perspective: The Struggle for Legitimacy

Before analyzing the experiences of UIEM graduates, it is important to characterize the student population, a majority of whom are the first in their family to attend college. Most are products of the weakest links of the public education system, including indigenous or multigrade primary schools, TV-based middle schools (known as telesecundarias) and technical high schools (Schmelkes, n.d). That lack of academic preparation, as well as the low level of economic and cultural capital—in the Bourdieuan sense of access to cultural products deemed relevant by the dominant group (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2011)—has important implications for the students’ academic performance at UIEM.

The Last Choice

For most UIEM graduates, the university was their last or only option for attending higher education. Many reported “failing” in their attempts to gain enrollment to the region’s main public universities—the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), the National Polytechnical Institute (IPN), both of which are in Mexico City, and the Autonomous University of Mexico State

(UAEM), in Toluca—where tuition is virtually free and competition is fierce. Meanwhile, most Indigenous families cannot afford the cost of attending private institutions.

The UIEM’s location in an inexpensive rural community is a plus for many students, including Luisa, a 28-year-old graduate of Intercultural Health. She is from the Mazahua Indian town of San Juan Coajomulco, a few kilometers outside San Felipe. “I took the exam for the UNAM, but I didn’t pass. My parents couldn’t pay for a private university. I also considered the UAEM in Toluca, but I didn’t take the test because it would have been too expensive,” she explained. Even if she had been able to get into the medical program at the UNAM—a remote possibility given her previous academic training at a government technical school—the cost would have been prohibitive. Luisa’s mother works as a maid in Mexico City and her father is a bricklayer. However, the fact that Luisa tried to enter the most competitive program in the country shows the personal motivation of many Indigenous students, despite the enormous obstacles they face.

Other interviewees expressed frustration that the UIEM was their only option since job prospects for graduates of the intercultural programs are often less secure and lower-paid. Gabriela, a 21-year-old Intercultural Health major, explained that she first tried to get into the medical program at UAEM and later at a private institution near San Felipe del Progreso.

To be honest, the intercultural university was my last option, although later I was pleasantly surprised by the preparatory courses, in which they explain what they’re going to teach. Still, I wasn’t 100% convinced. I like what I do ... [but] it was the biggest heartbreak of my life not getting accepted to study medicine and to have to stay here.

On the other hand, many graduates of UIEM said that their initial skepticism faded or disappeared once they became familiar with the intercultural model. Guillermo, a 29-year-old graduate of the first generation of Intercultural Health students and a native of San Felipe del Progreso, said he applied to the university only after being rejected from the IPN. However, he described his experience at UIEM as “very positive,” and when asked whether he would have preferred to study at a different university, he responded: “sincerely, no.” After graduation, Guillermo managed to land a job with the municipal health authority, as well as to open his own private clinic, although he attributes some of that success to his politician father’s ties to the municipal government. Since graduation, he has been working to expand opportunities for other graduates of the Intercultural Health program.

Dropping Out

That many students do not consider UIEM to be their first option may be a factor in the university’s relatively high drop-out rate: 15% during the first year (Schmelkes, n.d.). In a survey conducted by the CGEIB during the early years of the intercultural system, students cited the following causes for abandoning their studies: economic problems, even though a majority receive government scholarships; academic difficulties; the need to take care of family members; and a lack of interest in their major (Schmelkes, n.d.).

In the case of Sustainable Development, the lack of an admissions filter may also fuel student attrition. As part of the university’s inclusion policy, most academic programs accept all applicants with a high-school degree; the only exceptions are the Intercultural Health and Nursing programs, which are required by state health authorities to limit enrollment, thus some students are turned away.

Not everyone at UEIM agrees with the open admissions policy, however. Ricardo, the dean of the Sustainable Development program, argued that the university had sacrificed academic standards in an effort to improve retention rates.

We have lots of students who are rejected from other universities, who never undergo an admissions exam with us. Therefore, we basically know nothing about their [academic] level when they get here. There are students who enroll in UIEM two weeks after classes have begun. They see us as their last option or an alternative to their parents making them get a job. These students ruin things for the few that do have a real interest in their studies because they're only there to waste time and goof off.

Such a perspective reveals the tensions within the intercultural model: between the meritocratic discourse that has predominated during decades or centuries within higher education, and the more recent emphasis on inclusion and equity. It also reveals the divisions among professors and administrators at the intercultural universities: between those who seek a radical “epistemic break” or “disobedience” (Mignolo, 2010) from the hegemonic and exclusionary models, and those in favor of incorporating some aspects of interculturalism while preserving existing academic hierarchies and competitive logics.

The “Intercultural Stigma”

Another recurrent theme among interviewees was the “intercultural stigma;” that is, the widespread perception that the intercultural universities are solely for Indigenous students and are thus of inferior quality. The roots of such stereotypes can be found in the history of education for Indigenous people in Mexico. A century of neglect—including the scandalous shortage of resources, assigning teachers to “bilingual” schools who are either monolingual or speak a different Indigenous language, and the prevalence of multi-grade schools—has resulted in Indigenous students consistently testing at the bottom of national standardized exams (Schmelkes, n.d.). Although the IU model aspires to serve a variety of populations, in the popular imagination the institutions are seen as “Indigenous universities,” with all the associated pejorative baggage. Thus, it is hardly surprising that many graduates suffer discrimination because of their alma mater.

Luisa, the Intercultural Health graduate, described her own experience while job-hunting: They look at our papers and there is a stigma for having studied at an intercultural [university]. They say it is the university for the Indigenous, that we don't know anything, that it's a school for the poor, for those who don't have opportunities.

The stigma goes beyond the association of Indigenous people with poverty; it also includes the widespread dismissal of native languages and cultures. Karina, a 25-year-old graduate of Sustainable Development, who comes from an Otomí Indigenous community, explained:

There were occasions in which I was asked if I wore leather sandals and Indigenous clothing to school and I told them no, that the fact that someone goes to a certain type of school doesn't justify discriminating against them. It's a school that's open to everyone.

Also fueling the stigma is the lack of government support for the intercultural model—another form of institutional discrimination. According to Ricardo, the dean of the Sustainable Development program:

At the state and federal level, the intercultural universities don't exist. We're the dark grain in the rice. Something you see, but you don't know what it is, what it's for, or even how it can help you. The people in the SEP [Public Education Secretariat] who should know about us simply don't. That's why we're making a huge effort to get the word out.

However, many interviewees said that attitudes toward the university had changed as the number of students and graduates increased. The university’s outreach efforts in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities have also paid off, in terms of positioning UIEM as an attractive and novel option, not just a place of last resort.

Indigenous Identity

As part of the enrollment process at UIEM, students fill out a questionnaire about their socioeconomic and ethnic origin, whether they identify as Indigenous and if they speak an Indigenous language. According to Guillermo, the Intercultural Health graduate: “we usually say no, although it’s *part of our roots*. This is really common, that people don’t recognize their roots or their language *out of shame*.” However, he and other interviewees said those identities tended to evolve during the students’ time in the intercultural curriculum.

The shift in students’ identities is largely a result of the university’s emphasis on revalorizing Indigenous languages and cultures, as well as the mandatory language courses. These are offered in all five Indigenous languages spoken in Mexico State. Also, the “critical mass” of fellow Indigenous students at UIEM empowers students and reaffirms their self-esteem in the face of societal discrimination (Joshi, 2017).

Some students said the discrimination often originated in their own families—an example of *symbolic violence*, though which subordinate groups unconsciously accept the imposition of arbitrary norms and other aggressions inflicted by dominate groups (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2001). Leticia, a 26-year-old Sustainable Development graduate, related her experience with her own family:

I consider myself Indigenous, but not *so Indigenous*. They used to criticize me and ask me why I went to that university that was for people who were *more Indigenous* than I am; to a certain degree they made me feel bad when I decided to enroll. Those who said that were my own family. They scolded me for the fact that my cousins went to other schools and I went to *that school for Indigenous people*. However, as I advanced in my studies, I stopped caring.

The distinction between degrees of indigeneity reflects the effects of centuries of discrimination against Indigenous people in Latin America, where ethnicity and skin color are directly correlated with socioeconomic status and access to positions of power. In that context, shedding one’s identification with the discriminated group, either through intermarriage with a whiter person or by disassociating oneself with the culture, is viewed as the best strategy for avoiding or mitigating the impacts of racism.

In many cases, the Indigenous identity goes hand-in-hand with the Indigenous language. It’s very common to hear students say they are not Indigenous because they don’t have complete command of “the language.” However, as they start to learn or polish language skills, their self-identification as Indigenous people also increases.

Being able to speak an Indigenous language—and Mazahua in particular—also facilitates working with the local Indigenous communities. However, even speaking a different Indigenous language can open doors by generating cultural affinities. Itzel, a 26-year-old Mazahua-speaking Sustainable Development graduate, recalled her experience conducting research on tropical ecology in nearby Veracruz state.

Despite the fact that we were from another state and culture, the Totonaca people opened their homes to us and made us feel completely welcome. When we finished our work, they bid farewell *as if we were their own children* and they gave us baskets of jungle fruit. Afterwards,

we returned to the community to present them the results of our research and they didn't want us to leave.

Cultural Revalorization

Many graduates cited the university's emphasis on revalorizing Indigenous knowledge and cultures as one of its biggest strengths. Luisa, the Intercultural Health graduate, explained:

I think it's very important to have intercultural universities, because they teach us to *respect the ideas of others*. For example, here we have classmates who speak other Indigenous languages, and they can develop those abilities. The university places a lot of emphasis on different cultures. Here *people don't look down on students who come in Indigenous dress...* Here they try to rescue *all the cultural practices that are being lost*.

In the case of Sustainable Development, the curriculum instills in students a sense of responsibility for the environment while teaching ancestral stewardship techniques, something that is rarely present in traditional agronomy programs. Xóchitl, a 25-year-old Otomí graduate of the program, described how her coursework increased her personal commitment to environmental conservation. "No, I don't regret studying here. It inspired in me a new passion for preserving [Indigenous] cultures, for conserving natural resources and gave me an understanding that everything is interconnected with the environment, including society, the economy and even politics."

The Nursing program adopts a similar holistic approach through its curriculum, which combines conventional patient-care skills with alternative, traditional techniques. Elizabeth, a 23-year-old Nursing graduate who considers herself mestiza and whose husband also went through the program, related her experience at UIEM:

I loved the humanistic values of the university. For example, we know that we will acquire the scientific basis for our nursing work. But the intercultural focus teaches us to *speak more to the patient* and to be in closer contact... For example, they teach us to *put ourselves in the place of the patient*.

She and other graduates said the program's holistic focus is a "plus" when it comes to working in hospitals and clinics. The university has been negotiating with the state health authorities to incorporate its graduates into the system, a process made easier by removing the term "intercultural" from the program name.

Community Outreach

Another key element of the intercultural curriculum is mandatory community outreach, where students conduct research and offer services in the neighboring villages. For instance, Intercultural Health and Nursing students conduct surveys to determine the main health problems affecting the communities, while learning traditional medicinal techniques from local shamans. The students also work as interns at the university's intercultural health clinic, which provides low-cost treatment to 1,200 patients per month (UIEM, 2020). Meanwhile, the Sustainable Development students conduct research in local communities on traditional agriculture and stewardship practices, while also proposing solutions for common problems. That work often serves as the basis for undergraduate thesis and graduate research.

Institutional Challenges

As new institutions, UIEM and the other intercultural universities face serious challenges, including: a lack of adequate and reliable funding, with budgets fluctuating wildly from year to year; difficulties attracting qualified personnel, many of whom are also unfamiliar with the intercultural

model; the frequent rotation of deans and rectors; and the low-level of academic preparation of most of the students.

The lack of resources and the university’s remote location, in particular, complicate efforts to hire and retain qualified professors. Full-time professors earn the equivalent of US\$700 per month, and salaries are much lower for part-time professors. In addition, the university has difficulty attracting academics with advanced degrees and research experience. As of 2019, only three UIEM professors were members of the National Researchers System (SNI, for its Spanish acronym), a highly competitive, government-funded program that provides stipends to more than 30,000 university researchers in the country. Ricardo, the dean of Sustainable Development, said the rector had made efforts to attract more members of the three-level system, but had run into a funding wall.

Our objective is to increase our research production, but how do you convince a SNI I, II, or III to come teach classes with these salaries? It’s just *not attractive to them*.

There are people who are really committed to their work, and yes, they *may do you a favor* and come teach for one year, but then they find a better option and they go.

The focus on attracting more SNI members reveals the persistence of knowledge hierarchies, which assign value based on a culturally arbitrary certification process—in this case, on the researchers’ ability to publish in peer-reviewed journals and, preferably, in English. However, there appears to be little correlation between membership in the research system and knowledge of Indigenous languages and cultures.

Another problem is the high rotation of professors, who, until very recently, were only offered six-month or 1-year contracts. The current rector of UIEM, Aníbal Mejía Guadarrama, has negotiated with the state government for more funding and longer contracts for full-time professors. He has also secured money to expand the health clinic and build a third campus in the town of Xonacatlán, 70 km west of Mexico City, which would allow the university to meet its enrollment goals. However, the university has yet to receive money to build a permanent campus in Tepetlixpa³, a sign of the fickle nature of the government funding system.

The Labor Market

The challenges students face become even more acute once they enter the work force. The few existing studies of graduates of the intercultural universities paint a complicated picture. A minority can find stable, well-paid work, generally in government offices or for the private sector, while a majority have little to no job security, typically working for government agricultural programs, non-government organizations or as self-employed (Mateos et al., 2016).

Meanwhile, there is evidence that job opportunities are even scarcer for graduates of the “intercultural” majors than for those who opt for more conventional programs offered by some of the IU, such as law or accounting, according to a recent survey of graduates of the Mexican Autonomous Indigenous University (Lloyd & Hernández, in press). Such results worry advocates of the intercultural curriculum. However, as we will see in the following section, they show only part of the story and do not reflect the less tangible benefits of the intercultural model.

In the case of the Intercultural Health graduates, a majority operate their own small clinics – often out of their homes—or work in the UIEM’s health clinic, where 80% of the staff are graduates of the university (UIEM, 2020). Nursing graduates, in contrast, typically work for state-run health clinics, although some have opened their own clinics offering traditional medicinal techniques. Meanwhile, Sustainable Development graduates tend to work for local NGOs (the most

³ Interview with Aníbal Mejía Guadarrama on Dec. 9, 2020.

common option, according to graduates), government agriculture programs, as professors at UIEM, or as teachers at local high schools.

Among the three majors, graduates of Intercultural Health have had the toughest time finding decently paid jobs, largely due to the lack of familiarity with the program among potential employers and bureaucratic hurdles, according to graduates and administrators. However, the university has signed several agreements with state and municipal health authorities to create positions for graduates of this novel field.

Confronting Stereotypes: “Shamans” and “Witch Doctors”

For the Intercultural Health graduates, making their way in the job market has meant confronting stereotypes surrounding alternative medicine, which is often viewed as prescientific and non-professional. According to Guillermo, the graduate of Intercultural Health who works for the municipal government: “the doctors look down on us. I realize that because they sound surprised when I tell them what I studied. People call us *shamans* or *witch doctors*.” He said that rather than try to convince people that his degree was the equivalent of an allopathic doctor, he concentrates on proving the utility of traditional medicine. In the process, he is challenging hegemonic knowledge hierarchies.

Dispelling such prejudices necessarily take time. In fact, many Intercultural Health graduates argued that they are at a disadvantage compared to their Nursing counterparts, whose field is better known. Luisa, the Mazahua-speaking Intercultural Health graduate, related her experience looking for a government job to supplement her earnings from the private clinic she opened soon after graduation. She first tried to find work as a health promoter and later as a biology or chemistry teacher, “but they told me my profile didn’t fit.”

Finally, four years after graduation, she landed a job in the new “multidisciplinary” system implemented by the San Felipe mayor for rural health clinics, each of which now has a doctor, a nurse, and an Intercultural Health professional. However, while the doctors earn \$700 per month, Intercultural Health professionals receive \$500 and nurses, \$200. That means that despite efforts to create a new, more inclusive system, existing knowledge hierarchies still persist.

For the dean of the Intercultural Health program, Sebastián, such difficulties are to be expected, due to the novelty of the intercultural model.

The program started with a *lot of uncertainty*. The students, professors, and administrators didn’t really know what they were doing. The study plan had been approved, but no one knew what the profile of the graduates should be or where they would find work. The first graduates had it the hardest. No one knew about them. They associated them with *shamans* and *witch doctors*. This is a very new program, without precedent.

Nonetheless, he insisted that the work opportunities for graduates had improved in recent years, due to the trailblazing of the first generations and the presence of the university’s intercultural health clinic.

I tell my students that *they can’t compare themselves with anyone*, because they are neither doctors nor nurses, but rather intercultural health professionals with their own set of skills. They are making progress. Today Intercultural Health professionals feel this *sense of identity and pride*, although more so in the current groups that are about to graduate, since they have a much clearer idea of their profession.

However, the Intercultural Health graduates are not the only ones struggling for legitimacy. Some Nursing graduates said they faced resistance when they tried to apply techniques such as acupuncture or massage while treating patients at government hospitals.

Meanwhile, for Sustainable Development graduates, the main challenge is finding well-paid jobs. Due to the program’s focus on traditional farming techniques, the graduates are not logical candidates for private companies. At the same time, several interviewees said they faced barriers when trying to launch local projects, due to the lack of government and community support. As a result, they ended up pursuing master’s degrees in Tropical Ecology at the Veracruzana University, a public institution that runs its own intercultural university in neighboring Veracruz State.

However, graduate degrees do not always ensure higher pay. Esteban, a 26-year-old graduate of the Veracruzana program, said that even with a master’s degree, the best job he was able to find was as a parttime lab manager at UIEM. While the position requires almost full-time work, he earns between \$300 and \$325 a month. He explained: “I like what I do here, but the minute I find a better opportunity, I’ll leave. But for now, it’s ok. I also realize I’m fortunate to have this job because many of my classmates in the master’s program, even those with doctor’s degrees, have yet to find work.”

Itzel, another graduate of Sustainable Development with a master’s degree, earns \$410 per month as a Mazahua translator, helping local farmers apply for support from the federal government. She supplements that income with the \$230 a month she earns teaching four classes as an adjunct professor at UIEM. Despite the low wages, she insists: “I love what I do.”

Final Considerations

In this article, I have explored the origins and rationale for the new system of intercultural universities in Mexico, while focusing on the graduates of the pioneer of these institutions: the Intercultural University of Mexico State. The research incorporates the complementary perspectives of critical and decolonial theories to highlight the challenges facing graduates, both on a personal level and in applying their intercultural education in the workforce. It also addresses the central question of whether the institutions represent a step forward in terms of educational equity and Indigenous rights, or in fact reproduce existing ethnic hierarchies, stigmas, and socio-economic inequality in Mexico.

In general, the findings are mixed. On the one hand, for thousands of Indigenous students and members of other underrepresented groups, UIEM and the other IUs serve a valuable function in expanding access to free, higher education. Many of the graduates also describe how attending an institution with a critical mass of Indigenous students has empowered them personally and professionally, transformed their cultural identities, and given them a new appreciation for their Indigenous roots. Such achievements are not easily quantifiable, but nonetheless reflect the potential of the intercultural model to generate an *epistemic break* with hegemonic forms of learning and knowledge.

The institutions are also contributing to the configuration of a new class of *Indigenous professionals and intellectuals* in the country (Schmelkes, n.d.). However, the process is not without contradictions. Graduates of the intercultural majors face major hurdles in finding well-paid, steady jobs, given the mismatch between their professional credentials and the job market, as well as a lack of familiarity or acceptance among potential employers of the intercultural degrees. Graduates of the Intercultural Health program—and to a lesser extent, the Nursing program—must also overcome bureaucratic barriers and cultural stigmas regarding non-western forms of medicine, including being derided as “shamans” and “witch doctors” by potential employers or patients.

The research has important implications for the debate over the transformative and decolonializing potential of the intercultural universities, as well as the role of these institutions in combating existing educational and socioeconomic inequalities. In order for the institutions to serve as a viable option for Indigenous students, both the federal and state governments must commit to providing significantly more funding and autonomy to the universities. That means vastly increasing the participation of Indigenous communities in the curricular design and in the selection of top university authorities, and not only paying lip service to the raft of laws enacted over the past two decades. Furthermore, the government must fulfill its promise to create positions within the public sector for graduates of the intercultural universities, as well as to increase funding for community-based development projects in Indigenous areas, which are key to creating viable job opportunities for graduates in their communities of origin.

In terms of future research, there is a need for more large-scale graduate surveys, such as the one underway at the Mexican Autonomous Indigenous University, to better assess labor market outcomes and the differential effects of the “conventional” and “intercultural” programs. The Mexican government should fulfill its pledge to provide funding and technical assistance to the universities to carry out such studies, which are labor-intensive and costly. A further topic in need of research is the impact of the intercultural model, and the community outreach programs in particular, on the Indigenous communities located near the intercultural universities.

In sum, beyond expanding opportunities for marginalized students, the intercultural university model should aspire to transform colonial logics and hierarchies within society, in keeping with “critical interculturality” (Walsh, 2009). That entails shifting from a “top-down” model of intercultural higher education to a “bottom-up” approach, in which Indigenous actors play a crucial role in determining both the design and the day-to-day functioning of the institutions.

There are some hopeful signs, however. In designing three new intercultural universities in Sinaloa, Baja California and Guanajuato states, the government has negotiated on a much more equal footing with the local communities. Similarly, the decision to grant autonomy to a new Indigenous-serving university in Oaxaca may pave the way for other UIs to demand the same status.

There is also a need for affirmative action programs to increase access for Indigenous students at traditional higher education institutions. Only then could the intercultural option really represent a choice, rather than the only possibility for the country’s most underserved populations. Finally, traditional institutions should incorporate elements of the intercultural model into their curriculum, so that the *dialogue of knowledges* (Mateos et al., 2016) can take place not only at a handful of “intercultural” universities, but among the population at large. Such efforts are necessary to combat more than 500 years of discrimination and stigmas surrounding indigenous cultures and their knowledge.

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