

Indigenous Youth Graduating from Intercultural Universities: Capability Building Through Intercultural Higher Education in Veracruz, Mexico

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ABSTRACT

Intercultural higher education in Mexico aims at creating new, culturally and linguistically appropriate, professional career opportunities that empower indigenous youth and their communities. In this paper, empirical results are presented from a research project which ethnographically accompanies graduates from an intercultural university, the Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural (UVI), located in four indigenous regions of the South Eastern Mexican Gulf coast. After briefly describing the way this university operates by opening up alternative kinds of knowledge, the features of the new indigenous professionals who graduated from this institution are analysed. In the second half of the article, the graduates' professional and community development related capacities to link diverse sources of academic and non-academic knowledge are empirically studied; finally their emergent political broker capabilities and community roles are explored.

KEYWORDS

Indigenous higher education; intercultural universities; indigenous knowledges; rural knowledges; pluriversity; critical decolonial pedagogy; cultural translation; decolonial epistemology; intercultural graduate

In Mexico, so-called Intercultural Universities are a new type of institution that emerged in 2002, mainly promoted by the Mexican state through the General Coordination of Intercultural and Bilingual Education (CGEIB, by its Spanish acronym) inside the Ministry of Public Education (SEP, is the Spanish acronym). These intercultural universities introduce an intercultural focus as a way to overcome the assimilationist legacy adopted by the educational policy generated under previous governments, thus contributing to the creation of 'Intercultural Institutions of Higher Education' (Mato 2009) that recognise indigenous regional knowledge and that train professionals who are rooted and engaged in their communities.

These universities aim to generate culturally relevant knowledge, to recover and transmit cultural expressions, to revitalise indigenous languages as well as to promote a continuous dialogue with community agents and/or associations; all through the provision of degree courses based on an intercultural model. Thus, this new kind of university aims to widen access to higher education to rural areas of Mexico. The main objective is to train professionals who will drive local and regional development for the

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communities in which these universities are located, as well as to preserve regional languages and knowledge.

In this paper, empirical results are presented from a research project which ethnographically accompanied alumni who graduated from one of these intercultural universities, the Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural (UVI).¹ Following a brief contextualisation of these new higher education institutions, this article goes on to describe the way the UVI operates by opening up alternative kinds of knowledge. The main features of the new indigenous professionals who graduated from this institution are then analysed. In the second half of the article, the graduates' professional and community development related capacities to link diverse sources of academic and non-academic knowledge are empirically studied; finally their emergent political broker capabilities and community roles are explored.

Intercultural Universities and the UVI

In general terms, intercultural universities cater for a social group which differs from the conventional university system, dealing with indigenous youths or rural youth who come from vulnerable and highly marginalised areas. During the '2011–2012 academic year, these universities together attended to 9,448 students who, in great part, came from indigenous communities' (SEP 2014). According to the former general coordinator of the CGEIB, Fernando Salmerón Castro, until 2012, the Intercultural University sub-system was made up of 12 institutions, located in different Mexican states and located in diverse indigenous regions: the *Universidad Intercultural del Estado de México* (UIEM), the *Universidad Intercultural de Chiapas* (UNICH), the *Universidad Intercultural del Estado de Tabasco* (UIET), the *Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural* (UVI), the *Universidad Intercultural del Estado de Puebla* (UIEP), the *Universidad Intercultural del Estado de Guerrero* (UIEG), the *Universidad Intercultural Indígena de Michoacán* (UIIM), the *Universidad Intercultural Maya de Quintana Roo* (UIMQROO), the *Universidad Autónoma Indígena de México* (UAIM) located in Sinaloa, the *Universidad Intercultural de San Luis Potosí* (UISLP), the *Universidad Intercultural del Estado de Hidalgo* (UICEH) and the *Universidad Intercultural del Estado de Nayarit* (UIEN) (Salmerón 2013: 345).

Apart from these state-led institutions, some intercultural universities are independent from state governments and from the CGEIB, such as the Ayuuk Intercultural University (*Instituto Superior Intercultural Ayuuk*, ISIA), created under the Jesuit University system made up of the *Universidad Iberoamericana*, the *Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Occidente* and the *Universidad Loyola del Pacífico*. Furthermore, the *Universidad Intercultural de los Pueblos del Sur* (UNISUR), located in the state of Guerrero, *Universidad Campesina e Indígena en Red* (UCI-Red), which is represented in several states, and the *Universidad de la Tierra* in Chiapas and Oaxaca are examples of independent intercultural higher education initiatives (Mateos Cortés and Dietz 2013: 350–351).

In intercultural universities, the degree course programmes offered are characterised by their constructivist elements, the flexible framework of their curricula, as well as the links they forge with the surrounding communities and their promotion of community participation (Salmerón 2013). In each of these universities, 'similar degree courses are offered, but they are autonomous in their design of study programs, academic approaches and strategies for creating ties with the community' (Salmerón 2013: 348). The B.A. degree

courses on offer include: language and culture, alternative tourism, intercultural health, forest management, sustainable development and intercultural communication, among other subjects.

One example is the *Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural* (UVI), which responds to:

The demands that were proposed by indigenous organisations in the Sacam Ch'en/Larrainzar Agreement in 1996, for the development of culturally and linguistically relevant higher education. This reflects the contents of international treaties such as Convention No. 169 of the International Labour Organisation and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (articles 8 and 11–16), ratified by Mexico, and of the national legal framework, such as the Political Constitution of the United Mexican States (articles 2 and 3), the Education Act (article 7, part IV) and the Linguistic Rights of the Indigenous Peoples Act (article 11, amongst others). (Dietz 2014: 14)

In contrast to other intercultural universities, this decentralised multi-campus institution² was created not as a new university, but as part of an existing, autonomous public university, the *Universidad Veracruzana* (Dietz 2012). Its B.A. degree in Intercultural Management for Development (LGID, is the Spanish acronym) is made up of subjects grouped into four areas of training: core, preparatory, final and optional courses, which are directed at generating learning processes that closely link research, teaching, and the creation of community ties (Dietz 2012).

In contrast with mainstream Mexican universities, the UVI combines teaching and research from the first semester onward: the research, which is carried out by both students and researchers-instructors,³ strengthens teaching in so far as classroom content is drawn from the material obtained through fieldwork and in exchanges with the surrounding communities, from which most of the students come from. Thus, a conventionally sharp divorce between on-campus theoretical learning and off-campus practical learning, which characteristic of conventional university systems, is avoided in the case of UVI. The resulting practice is intended to be collaborative and consists of four stages: (1) exploration; (2) diagnosis and identification of problems; (3) intervention; and (4) systematisation; during the research process, what has been learnt in the classroom shall be linked to what is experienced, observed, recorded and analysed in the field, and finally academic papers (the B.A. degree theses) are produced that necessarily relate the theoretical to the empirical (Arcos and Zebadúa 2009: 170–171).

Teaching as such is based on 'a) integrated training, b) student-centred education, c) [moving] from a teaching-centred paradigm to a learning-centred paradigm, and on [creating] d) academic flexibility' (UVI 2005: 22). For the University of Veracruz at least, this is a new style of teaching provides contextualised learning processes and gives rise to critical, creative and self-reflective thinking in students, who often report feeling empowered and 'taken seriously' by their teachers; in contrast to their pre-university education experiences shaped by conventional teacher monologues and decontextualised learning. In the case of the UVI, the teacher-instructor becomes a facilitator promoting autonomy and self-instruction. The attractive staff–student ratio prevailing in the four UVI campuses supports these more horizontal teacher–learner exchanges, as many graduates reported in their interviews.

Creating community ties strengthens the teaching and learning processes, 'opens' the university up to society and community life, and contributes to teaching and research. These ties are developed when teachers and students establish exchanges with institutions,

associations and community agents, who may or may not be involved in the educational context, through the creation and support of joint projects or the signing of collaboration agreements.

At the UVI, Regional Consultative Councils are one of the main bodies that promote community ties. These councils, functioning in each of the four UVI campuses, are made up of diverse community agents such as local ‘wise women and men’; local officials including mayors, council leaders, union representatives and so on; and members of NGOs and civic organisations, amongst others. Apart from taking care of the smooth running of the UVI centres in each region, these councils supervise and advise the teaching and administrative staff in the creation of community ties as well as in their research and teaching by emphasising and giving priority to the needs, traditions and interests of local and regional agents.

Furthermore, in the second half of the four-year B.A. degree studies, courses start to diversify towards five labour-market employability oriented study profiles, called ‘orientations’, through which the students specialise in languages, law, sustainability, communication and health issues (UVI 2007: 8–10). These allow students to carry out work experience and fieldwork in their communities, engage in collaboration between the university and the community, manage projects and participate in events at a state or national level, in contrast to what usually happens in the conventional higher education system. Through these orientations, students on the LGID course strengthen collaborative ties with a variety of community and non-community agents, including leaders of political parties, religious leaders, farm-workers, midwives, cattle ranchers, folk healers, local wise men and women and so on.

Around 450 students are now studying at this university, in its diverse orientations and regional centres. In July 2009, the first generation (2005–2009) graduated with a total of 212 intercultural managers. Since then, from a total number of 1207 registered first semester students, the UVI has seen 700 students graduate with a degree in Intercultural Management for Development from its four centres between 2009 and 2016 (see Table 1; UVI 2016). This rather high UVI drop-out rate is, however, still lower than that of mainstream Mexican universities, estimated to be around 61 per cent (De Vries *et al.* 2011).

The Ethnographic Research Conducted

The current research was employed mainly ethnographic methodology (Hammersley and Atkison 2007), which made it possible to record and reconstruct the discourses of graduates from the LGID course (Mateos Cortés *et al.* 2016). The data used specifically in writing this article were drawn from four focus groups (Greenbaum 1997), organised at

Table 1. LGID graduates 2009–2016.

Campus	2005– 2009	2006– 2010	2007– 2011	2008– 2012	2009– 2013	2010– 2014	2011– 2015	2012– 2016	Sum
Huasteca	54	38	17	26	10	11	7	15	178
Totonacapan	37	21	16	16	9	16	16	6	137
Grandes Montañas	47	30	12	26	21	6	4	7	153
Las Selvas	74	48	28	33	20	15	11	3	232
Sum	212	137	73	101	60	48	38	31	700

Source: UVI (2016).

each of the four UVI centres: Huasteca, Totonacapan, Grandes Montañas and Las Selvas, which have then have been categorised using grounded theory (Charmaz 2006) and analysed with the help of *Atlas.ti* software. Each group comprised 7 to 14 graduates, chosen from the total sample of 81 UVI graduates – 17 from the Huasteca campus, 15 from the Totonacapan campus, 19 from the Grandes Montañas campus and 30 from the Las Selvas campus.

During the focus groups, these graduates engaged in collective reflection about: their experiences of training at the UVI; strengths and weaknesses of their training; skills specific to the LGID; professional experience and their relationships with other professionals. These graduates belonged to communities from the region of their respective university campus, regions in which mainly indigenous languages are spoken and which suffer a high levels of marginalisation and poverty. Most of them graduated in the first or second generation of student cohorts (2005–2009 and 2006–2010), and were aged on average between 24 and 32 years. Many of them speak an indigenous language as their mother tongue, above all Nahuatl, but also Totonac, Popoluca or Tepehua. Another feature that many of them shared was being academic ‘pioneers’: they are mostly the first person in their family to obtain a university degree, distinct from their parents’ generation who might not have completed primary education. A large number of these pioneer UVI graduates had been schooled through a precarious rural public education system based on multi-grade and/or bilingual primary schools, rural indigenous schools, ‘tele-secondary’ schools and ‘tele-high school’ colleges (an educational model based on a single teacher showing students educational TV programmes and then presenting them with exercises based on their content). They come from humble origins, being the offspring of farm labourers, local traders, seasonal migrant workers, rural teachers and the like. Many chose to study at the intercultural university due to the lack of other opportunities, the impossibility of their moving to the city, or in order to minimise costs for their families.

Emerging Professionals Trained at an Intercultural University

What capabilities does an intercultural university succeed in promoting in their graduates? In Mexico, and particularly in the case of Veracruz, this kind of institution pretends to open up the university to community life, community knowledge and community concerns, in order to include other kinds of traditional, rural, indigenous, folk knowledge, to work on promoting and revitalising autonomous languages, and in general to avoid the social exclusion that until recently have affected youth from minority ethnicity backgrounds attending conventional universities (Santos 2007).

In contrast to the conventional university system, these new institutions train young indigenous professionals who are aware of their origins and who identify with and are dedicated to their communities. They train these young students in two perspectives: on the one hand, as ‘indigenous professionals’, youths who acquire a certain recognition and professional prestige by studying a bachelor’s degree and sometimes further post-graduate qualifications; on the other hand, they also prepare them to act as ‘indigenous intellectuals’, youths who are very conscious of their ethnicity, who value the common good of their community above the personal and individual, and who build their status

on the instruction they receive in their community, in their family life and on their way through the educational institution (Caballero 1998).

In order to carry out this educational process, UVI particularly attempts to mainstream a cross-cutting intercultural, dialogical focus throughout its teaching, research and community service activities. In this way it aims to help the students and graduates to recognise the values of their own communities and appreciate the knowledge, traditions, and lore that are generated within them, so that they can opt to preserve or revitalise them. It is indispensable for this institution that graduates develop 'capabilities, abilities and attitudes that allow them to carry out crucial roles in the effective development of programs and initiatives that arise from the communities and intercultural regions themselves' (UVI 2007: 70).

It is believed that over the four years that the LGID lasts, the students will have developed 'competences' as capabilities, in the sense defined by Amartya Sen (1985) as the practical knowledge every human being needs to translate her or his rights into real, substantial enjoyable liberties. Thus, competences are not thought of as instrumental capabilities, but as those that imply and deepen human agency (Sen 2001). Accordingly, the intercultural university aims at promoting the students' competences as both cognitive capabilities, such as the use and implementation of concepts, theories, methodologies and the like, and competences in more practical matters, implying the development of technical and/or linguistic capabilities – all of these competences must be achieved under the umbrella of an intercultural and dialogical focus.

The UVI Graduates' Professional Experiences

Throughout Mexico, graduates from conventional universities and from intercultural higher educational institutions alike share difficulties in finding employment and obtaining attractive and well-paid positions in the formal labour market. In the case of the former, this is due to the general, structural unemployment and to related limitations of employability in Mexico⁴ and the saturation of conventional degree courses. These reasons also apply in the case of the latter, but is compounded by the graduates low-quality pre-university schooling, their stigmatised use of an indigenous language, their lack of 'urban' work experience and related job skills, but also an often-found lack of awareness and knowledge among the wider public of the degree courses taught at this new kind of intercultural university.

Our ethnographic study of UVI graduates revealed some former intercultural management students who found employment that fits their profile, and others who only found temporary or part-time work that is low-paid or inappropriate for their professional profile. Yet, the degree course in intercultural management for development offered at the UVI is mostly orientated not towards formal salaried employment, but towards self-employment and the generation of new job opportunities related to the promotion of new kinds of knowledge that respond to the needs and problems of the indigenous communities and regions of Veracruz. The founding UVI documents state that the professional field for these graduates 'will not be limited to being employed by organisations or institutions, as they will have the necessary skills to design, set up, manage and promote a wide range of community initiatives that will allow them to be self-employed' (UVI 2007: 78). This refers to work in which the graduates themselves manage resources and use their

social and cultural capital, their knowledge, skills and abilities, their networks and, occasionally, invest their own financial resources. For example, they create civil associations, small companies that deal with the production of plant-based medicines, with the production and distribution of regional clothing and indigenous textiles, with the creation of agro-ecological projects, with the promotion of community radio stations, and so on.

According to an internal UVI report on the employment and employability of their graduates (UVI 2016), in February 2016 out of a total of 120 respondents 86 per cent were currently employed, 11 per cent unemployed and 3 per cent were studying. Divided according to employment sectors, approximately 42 per cent were working in government institutions, 20 per cent were self-employed, 14 per cent were working in educational institutions, 13 per cent employed by non-governmental organisations and 11 per cent were active in private enterprises.

Throughout our fieldwork we noticed that the jobs that the graduates are entering since the first cohort left UVI in 2009 can be mostly classified as ‘non-traditional’ employments, independent of whether they are employed or self-employed. These are ‘non-industrial, informal, unprotected’ jobs (De la Garza *et al.* 2007: 1) that are characterised by being carried out in an indeterminate space, in collaboration with other individuals, without officially accumulating days worked (for seniority or pension purposes), and very often without benefits such as state health care provision.

Those indigenous professionals who do get a paid job do so through family connections, through wider social networks, or through direct contact with their future employer. There are graduates who have obtained formal employments; and in most cases these are posts in government agencies associated with cattle ranching, with forestry, with the promotion and preservation of indigenous languages, with socio-cultural development projects, and in educational or health initiatives, among other areas (Mateos Cortés *et al.* 2016).

We also found graduates who, as indigenous professionals, decide to continue their studies through some national or international postgraduate programme. Graduates from the UVI have successfully applied to join postgraduate master programmes in education, in management, in agronomy and in anthropology. They compete for both ‘conventional’ postgraduate grants and special grants that the CONACyT (the National Science and Technology Advisory Committee) offers each year for outstanding indigenous students. This shows that the intercultural university manages to offer a ‘competitive’ academic preparation, which is comparable to that of conventional universities, but at the same time suggests that these new institutions cannot completely avoid the ‘brain drain’ of highly qualified graduates, even though the UVI course design promotes rootedness in the community and a commitment to the study and development of the students’ own indigenous areas. Instead of completely avoiding emigration on the part of graduates, the UVI manages to ‘qualify’ their subsequent migratory processes: the graduates no longer emigrate to the city as low-skilled labourers, but now rather as postgraduate students with scholarships and as future teachers or researchers.

Capabilities of UVI Graduates

What are the specific abilities the former intercultural university students acquire and develop, as they are proven throughout their professional experience as intercultural

managers? In order to answer this question, we will focus our data analysis on those alumni who are currently employed or self-employed in occupations that are close to the original degree course profile. The capabilities that the intercultural university has sketched out for graduates from the LGID course can be summed up in five areas: (1) the connection or bridge between knowledge and initiative, (2) the management of resources and information, (3) the strengthening and implementation of grassroots development initiatives, (4) the display of local knowledge and initiatives and (5) the creation of diagnostic and practical, applicable knowledge. In this way graduates participate and collaborate in diagnostic, planning and evaluative exercises that reflect the needs and interests of participants, within a trusting and respectful framework (UVI 2007).

Each of these capabilities can be distinguished in what Dietz (2013) calls a 'typology of capabilities', composed by a combination of knowledge, action and ability coined as 'knowledge-for-action' (*saberes-haceres*), 'action-based-knowledge' (*haceres-saberes*), 'knowledge-for-ability' (*saberes-poderes*), 'ability-based-knowledge' (*poderes-saberes*), 'ability-for-action' (*haceres-poderes*) and 'action-based-ability' (*poderes-haceres*). As Figure 1 shows, Dietz introduces this typology of knowledge–action–ability to guide the debate 'through different constellations of the intercultural focus within education and which, in practice, can become a starting point to define the distinctively intercultural capabilities of the agents with whom we work in the educational realm' (Dietz 2013: 192); his proposal is based on a reflexive and dialogical kind of ethnographical methodology (Mateos Cortés *et al.* 2016).

In our study, each of these axes helps to illustrate the ways in which graduates from the UVI relate the academic knowledge, gained in the course of their university training, to the knowledge acquired through everyday life, practical and/or local knowledge, acquired through their experience in family or community life. In the data analysis process, we identified which of these kinds of knowledge–action–ability combinations graduates use

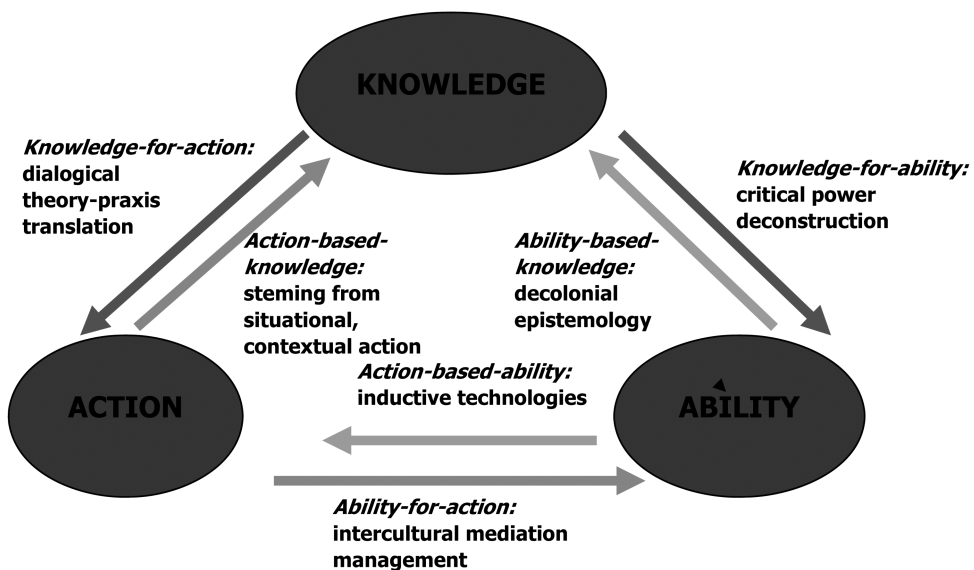


Figure 1. A triangle of capabilities. Source: (Dietz 2013: 191).

in their professional lives. The article will now turn to an analysis of the characteristics that identify each of these axes.

‘Knowledge-for-action’ (*saberes-haceres*) is a kind of applied knowledge that is acquired by formal educational learning processes. It stems from the application of what is learnt in the classroom and the respective translation of theory into practice. Here is a self-reported example of a work experience which shows how graduates build this type of knowledge:

In the Rights orientation we worked with indigenous legal issues; the Convention 169 of the International Labour Organisation, [...] customary law, conventions, laws and articles relating to indigenous rights [...]. All of this helped us to create our co-operative, called ‘Defenders of the Huastec Communities’, which is a working group in which we try to raise consciousness within our communities on indigenous rights and human rights. (GD-e⁵)

Academic, interdisciplinary training that is directed at being linked to real-world situations and problems has given the intercultural managers interviewed the knowledge they need to create organisations, cooperatives and associations that provide their communities with services concerning indigenous rights. These graduates are working as intermediaries between local authorities and traditional local magistrates dedicated to the application of customary law inside their communities.

‘Knowledge-for-ability’ (*saberes-poderes*) are graduate capabilities of critical thinking, of questioning asymmetrical power constellations, which they apply for the benefit of a particular local group or organisation with whom they share a certain struggle or commitment; these capabilities generate a feeling of empowerment amongst those who share them, as a graduate explains:

Working in a Rights Centre, I realise what rights we have as women, and I talk about them to the women in my family who then talk to our female neighbours [...] the idea is to re-educate the men in the communities. (GD-e)

Having more specific information about women’s human rights, several female graduates protect and promote the rights of indigenous women locally and regionally, often by consciousness raising to avoid violence and discrimination and to have the right to a decent life not only at a community level but also beyond. These graduates are concerned with having a say in family and community life, and in the execution of projects in collaboration with institutions or non-governmental organisations they seek to gain equal treatment with regard to men in order to move beyond their vulnerable position.

‘Action-based-knowledge’ (*haceres-saberes*) is understood as a local, inductively gained kind of knowledge which arises from cultural and non-formal educational practices acquired through community life. This capability is the result of the subjects’ own lived practice, so it is highly contextual and situational in nature. One of the intercultural managers interviewed provides this example:

I work with doctors, government health campaigners and nurses at the Health Centre, but they don’t speak Nahuatl, they don’t go out into the community, they just stay in the centre [...]. They don’t care whether the people who come to the centre understand or not [...]. I try to find a way to help them understand, speaking their language, I look for material that they [the indigenous patients] can understand because I know what life is like in the community [...]. I worry about them understanding what is said. (GD-e)

Many of the graduates are employed as ‘bilingual intercultural campaigners’ for health, in hospitals and rural clinics, where they hold workshops for health promotion and preventative health in indigenous languages; bringing these services to indigenous regions. They also work as interpreters and provide cultural translation services to monolingual indigenous language speakers who arrive in hospitals seeking medical attention.

‘Ability-for-action’ (*haceres-poderes*) is understood as a mediatory capability of linking those practices that are learned within academia with those gained outside a formal educational context; it allows subjects to mediate among different power constellations by ‘managing’ intercultural tensions between diverse actors:

I work in the town hall and I arrange housing for people in very marginalised areas, last year I had to obtain one million nine-hundred and eighty-something thousand pesos of funds for eighteen houses [...]. I work with the mayor and other people on the council, but as I am also the representative for the *Oportunidades* [social assistance] program, I work with around three or four thousand women in different communities. (GD-e)

In their work in town halls as cultural promoters or as representatives of social support programmes such as *Prospera* (‘Prosperity’, the current version of the mentioned *Oportunidades* social assistance programme; see, SEDESOL 2016), *Cruzada nacional contra el hambre* (the ‘National Anti-Hunger Crusade’; see, Presidencia de la República 2016) and *Programa 65 y más* (a support programme for elderly people; see, SEDESOL 2015), among others, implemented by the federal Ministry for Social Development (SEDESOL), the intercultural managers interact with people on low incomes and simultaneously with officials in government agencies who hold a certain status and exert power over their ‘clients’. In their activities, the UVI graduates are aware of the role they play and of the value they accord to the people with whom they connect in order to achieve the goals of the programmes that they implement; thus they are mediators of possible conflicts between the institutional and governmental sides of the programmes and their supposed beneficiaries.

This is closely related to another capability, the ‘ability-based-knowledge’ (*poderes-saberes*), which refers to educational processes that create leadership roles that are culturally sensitive and rooted in local political traditions. It is a capability used by those graduates who are aware of their ethnic culture and of the knowledge that comes from this cultural background, while at the same time being able to acquire and exercise power in an intercultural context, as is expressed by the following statement:

One thing that strengthens us as intercultural managers is that we know the areas where we work [...]. We learn a bit about farming, we speak the [indigenous] language and we know about local health, in our degree courses. And what makes us more special is that we not only know the culture, but we know the regions [...], we know several cultures at the same time. (GD-e)

In their working life, some of the graduates become aware of the advantages and opportunities provided by an interdisciplinary, hybrid degree such as the LGID; their broad training allows them to get jobs not previously designed for them but for more conventional graduates in social work, agronomy or education.

Finally, ‘action-based-ability’ (*poderes-haceres*) is an experiential capability stemming from grassroots, bottom-up practices in the subjects’ local or regional contexts and based specifically on experience:

I had to work on a healthy eating project in a Totonac community, there the people showed me how they produce their food, how they used fruit to make sweets, how they grew mushrooms [...]. My work was to support a farmer, to supervise production processes and to carry out interviews in order to assess and to evaluate the project. (GD-e)

In contrast to graduates from conventional degree courses, the intercultural management graduates are multi-faceted, they hop from one type of knowledge to another and they are aware that not all of their capabilities have been acquired inside the university. In fact, they recognise that much of their knowledge and abilities come from their experience of applied and action research initiatives carried out during their university studies, but carried out outside the classroom, outside the campus, through student research projects, through their participation in their teachers' projects, through their social service activities, but also through knowledge acquired in their own family environment or through their immersion in community practices.

Furthermore, compared with other indigenous professionals such as, for example, bilingual teachers,⁶ UVI graduates explicitly self-identify as 'intermediaries', as 'brokers' and/or as 'translators' between institutions, associations, government levels and communities. This mediation is linked to their ability to translate the knowledge and world-views of their cultures to the dominant Mexican *mestizo* culture and vice-versa. Accordingly, they are subjects who understand the logic of both cultures and carry out a process of reciprocal, two-way translation, although depending on their interests and objectives they may take one point of view or another. With regard to this process of translation, one graduate said of their work at a hospital in one of the indigenous communities:

We had a workshop about culturally sensitive approaches to childbirth [by healthcare professionals] where I was an intermediary, the people from the community spoke in Nahuatl, the [Spanish-speaking] workshop leader used technical words that don't exist in Nahuatl. So apart from translating, you need to interpret and explain these expressions based on what you know [...], in order to explain things in a different way so that they can be understood by people in the communities. (GD-e)

These professionals are gradually beginning to make up a new indigenous intelligentsia, they are subjects who, by receiving a university education, acquire a certain prestige inside their families and communities. For some of them their culture-sensitive training at the intercultural university has made them recognise how and why they have been previously educated in an authoritarian, monolingual and monocultural way which led them to deny their ethnic identity and their cultural background, so throughout their studies at the intercultural university they rediscover and regain their ethnic identity, which is now combined with a novel, but rather strong identity and pride as pioneer university graduates and as indigenous professionals.

Conclusions

Our study of the graduates of a Mexican intercultural university reveals that we are witnessing the emergence of a new generation of educated indigenous youths who are beginning to work as intermediaries, translators and intercultural managers between their communities of origin and the wider, non-indigenous world. In a still very unstable and precarious way, this generation of university graduates is entering the job market –

largely self-employing rather than entering formal paid employment – and is above all taking on important liaison and broker roles as nodes and representatives of their communities vis-à-vis civil society organisations and external governmental institutions.

Some of the graduates are still destined to be sub-contracted or outsourced by government institutions, or to accept poorly-paid, part-time work without receiving mandatory benefits or the rights accrued through length of service. Even so, the focus group data show that several individuals from this pioneering generation are graduating from the intercultural university with a sense of autonomy, agency and ethnic empowerment and with a desire to create self-development and self-management projects thought up and implemented at a local level, within their own communities.

The present study, therefore, illustrates that the intercultural university analysed here is creating what Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007, 2010) calls ‘pluriversity knowledge’, a new type of knowledge that goes beyond not only the disciplinary frontiers, but also the social frontiers that separate the academic world from their surrounding community:

[...] pluriversity knowledge is a contextual knowledge insofar as the organizing principle of its construction is its application. As this application is extramural, the initiative for formulating the problems to be solved and the determination of the criteria of relevance are the result of sharing among researchers and users. It is a transdisciplinary knowledge that, by its very contextualization, demands a dialogue or confrontation with other kinds of knowledge, which makes it more heterogeneous internally and allows it to be more adequately produced in less perennial and more open systems, organized less rigidly and hierarchically. [...] In multi-ethnic and multinational countries, pluriversity knowledge begins to emerge from inside the university itself, when incoming students from ethnic or other minority groups understand that their inclusion is a form of exclusion. They are confronted with the tabula rasa that is made of their cultures and of the traditional knowledge of their communities. All of this leads scientific knowledge to confront other kinds of knowledge and demands a higher level of social responsibility from the institutions that produce it and, consequently, from the universities’. (Santos 2010: 278–279)

By bringing the intercultural university closer to everyday life and to community knowledge, this kind of institution potentially creates new ways of learning; contextualised, pertinent and collaborative, as well as contributing to the education of critical citizens who are engaged with their reality. UVI and other alternative university institutions promote amongst their students and graduates activities that were until recently considered ‘non-indigenous’, such as writing, publishing and conducting research, among others (Mato 2002, 2016). These academic activities had been identified as being those of ‘*mestizo* intellectuals’, ‘city-dwellers’ and ‘urbanites’. They also promote amongst their graduates activities what academia would not catalogue as being properly intellectual:

Other practices that are there, but that we do not usually manage to see, and which therefore should be made more ‘visible’ [...], for example, those that many intellectuals carry out outside of academia which, although they are also analytical and interpretive, are orientated towards action, accompanying or supporting various social agents, as well as others whose mere mention destabilises somewhat the stereotypes we apply to what is and what is not ‘intellectual’. (Mato 2002: 39)

This obliges us to rethink – together with the university students and graduates themselves – traditional concepts of what is an ‘educated’ person, what is an ‘intellectual’ or what is the professional ‘ethos’ of a university graduate. As we have detailed above, graduates from

the Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural, trained as intercultural managers both in the classroom environment and in their communities, are introducing new ways to apply practical knowledge and abilities both in their mediating community roles and in their professional practice inside their regions.

Notes

1. This postdoctoral research was carried out under the supervision of Daniel Mato at Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero (Buenos Aires, Argentina) and is part of the umbrella project 'Emergent Processes and Agencies of the Commons: Collaborative Social Research Praxis and New Forms of Political Subjectivation' (Spanish Ministry of Economy, 2014 R +D project competition, project reference number: CSO2014-56960-P), co-ordinated by Aurora Álvarez Veinguer (see also Dietz 2012, Mateos Cortés *et al.* 2016).
2. Its campuses are located in the main indigenous regions of the state of Veracruz: Huasteca, Totonacapan, Grandes Montañas, Las Selvas and Xalapa. For more information see: <http://www.uv.mx/uvi/sedes/>.
3. Most of these are teachers who are from the regions in which the UVI has its campuses or who have long professional experience in these regions.
4. According to ANUIES (the national association of Mexican universities), in 2013 about 40 per cent of all university graduates were unemployed (Vargas Hernández 2013).
5. From here on 'GD-e' is used to indicate quotes from the focus groups in which the graduates participated.
6. This role of bilingual teachers has existed in Mexico since the 1960s; they are members of indigenous communities who are trained and supposed to teach in their indigenous language, generally attending only preschool and primary educational levels, as until nowadays secondary education is still monolingual in Spanish.

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