"Indigenizing" or "Interculturalizing" Universities in Mexico?
An ethnography of diversity discourses and practices
inside the *Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural*

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Abstract

Multicultural discourse has reached Latin American higher education as a set of policies targeting indigenous peoples, which are strongly influenced by the transfer of European notions of "interculturality". In Mexico, innovative and often polemical "intercultural universities or colleges" are being created either by governments, by NGOs or by pre-existing universities. Paradoxically, this trend towards "diversifying" both ethno-cultural profiles and curricular contents, coincides with a broader tendency to force institutions of higher education to become more "efficient", "corporate" and "outcome-oriented". Accordingly, these still very recent "intercultural universities" are often criticized as part of a common policy of "privatization", "neoliberalization" and "particularization" which weakens the universalist and comprehensive nature of Latin American public macro-universities. Indigenous leaders, on the contrary, frequently claim and celebrate the appearance of these new higher education opportunities as part of a strategy of empowering ethnic actors of indigenous or afro-descendant origin.

Going beyond this polemic, this paper presents the first findings of an activist anthropological and ethnographically based case study of the actors participating in the configuration of one of these new institutions of higher education, the *Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural* (UVI), located at the Mexican gulf coast. On the basis of fieldwork conducted in the four indigenous regions where the UVI offers a B.A. in "intercultural management for development", the appropriation of the discourse of interculturality is studied by comparing the actors' teaching and learning practices, which are strongly shaped by an innovative and hybrid mixture of conventional university teaching, community-oriented research and "employability"-driven development projects.

Introduction

The anthropological notion of cultural diversity has in recent decades been modified from being stigmatizingly perceived as a "problem" – scarcely integrated and / or specified, according to an essentialist and functionalist notion of culture –, passing through being demanded as a "right" – by a given minority, by indigenous peoples or even for the sake of humanity as a whole, as in the case of the "Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity" (UNESCO 2002) –, until being anthropologically-pedagogically proclaimed as a key "resource" – for intercultural education, for the diversity management, for the development of essential competences in knowledge-based societies (García Canclini 2004). This gradual modification reflects a critical, sometimes selective reception and appropriation of the legacy of multiculturalism by social sciences in general and anthropology in particular. Anthropologists have contributed their professional practice in programmes dedicated to the "interculturalization" of institutions that provide educational, socio-cultural and social services (Dietz 2007). In Latin America, such anthropological-pedagogical programmes that illustrate the end of classical *indigenismo* - of those programmes specifically designed by non-indigenous social scientist in order to integrate indigenous communities into their respective nation-states - have highlighted the necessity of combining the existing and long-standing national traditions of "indigenous education" for basic education levels with this multicultural focus of the educational policies and their expansion into high-school and higher education levels. In this way, through a close collaboration between applied anthropology and post-*indigenismo* educational projects, novel higher education institutions have been created, on occasions explicitly focussed on indigenous populations – known as "indigenous universities" –, while in other contexts they are called "intercultural universities" (Casillas Muñoz & Santini Villar 2006) in order to target society in general by using an "intercultural education for all" focus (Schmelkes 2008).

Inspired by the principles of "activist anthropology" developed by Hale (2006, 2008), we are currently carrying out a dialogical-ethnographical case study inside one of these new, culturally diversified institutions, the *Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural"* (UVI) in Mexico. Our project aims at analysing how the participation of indigenous and non-indigenous, anthropologists and other social scientists shape in such a programme the still recent move towards the social, political and even legal recognition of diversity within public universities. Through their academic programme that principally targets indigenous and non-indigenous students living in marginalized, rural and indigenous communities, the UVI is trying to diversify supposedly universalist academic "knowledge" in order to relate it to local knowledge, to subaltern, "ethno-scientific" and alternative

knowledge, all of which mutually hybridize each other and thus create new, diversified, "entangled" and "globalized" cannons of knowledge (Mignolo 2000, Escobar 2004). As will be illustrated below, this emerging *diálogo de saberes* or "dialogue among different kinds of knowledge" (De Sousa Santos 2006, Mato 2007), which involves "inter-cultural", "inter-lingual" and "inter-actor" dimensions, also forces academic anthropology to redefine its basic theoretical concepts as much as its methodological practices, that are still all too mono-logically and mono-lingually oriented.

From pilot programme to university structure? The creation of the UVI

In order to generate education systems that are more pertinent to the cultural realities and needs of the target population, the present decentralization efforts of higher education institutions are accompanied by programs to diversify curricular contents and teaching-learning methods. In this way, in 2005 the Universidad Veracruzana (UV), an autonomous, public higher education institution based in Xalapa, the state capital of Veracruz located at the Mexican Gulf coast, decided to open its own 'Intercultural Programme' to preferentially focus on the claims for higher education in and for indigenous regions of the state. In contrast to other "intercultural universities" promoted by the Mexican federal government (Schmelkes 2008), the so-called Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural" programme (cf. http://www.uv.mx/uvi) was not created as a "new university", but within an established public university – it originated from a "Multicultural Education Seminar in the State of Veracruz" (SEMV), a team consisting mainly of local anthropologists that – coordinated by Sergio Téllez Galván at the Institute of Research in Education of the UV – offered diploma, specialization and postgraduate courses for professionals in the field of intercultural education and intercultural studies (Téllez/Sandoval/González 2006).

Combining the academic interest in developing culturally pertinent educational programmes with the demands of indigenous organizations and movements for a broader and better adapted offer of higher education options in indigenous regions and communities, an agreement was established in November 2004 between the UV and the General Coordination for Intercultural and Bilingual Education (CGEIB) of the federal government's Ministry of Education (SEP) in order to start from within the university such an intercultural program. Since then, the resources for this venture are principally provided by the general budgets of the Veracruz state government, through federal government funding from CGEIB and by the UV's own budget. In August 2005, this "intercultural programme" started by simultaneously offering two B.A. degrees in four regional centres: one in "Sustainable Regional Development" and the other in "Intercultural Management and Education".

The first two generations of UVI students entered the university through one of these two degree programmes. However, both the community claims to expand the range of academic courses on offer and the impossibility of generating "conventional" degree courses in indigenous regions led the UVI staff, composed mainly of anthropologists, educators, agronomists and linguists, to redesign studies on offer opting for just one degree course with a multimodal structure and diverse orientations (cf. below). Hence, since August 2007 the students that had already started their respective degree courses were integrated into the new B.A. degree in "Intercultural Management for Development", which is able to offer a wider range of educational options without reducing the number of regional campus locations where this B.A. is taught.

Decentralising or Devolving? The "intercultural regions" of the UVI

Even though Veracruz University already had a decentralised system of five campuses distributed throughout the state, these academic centres again were concentrated in urban areas, where rather conventional degree courses based on western university models were taught. However, from the very beginning the new programme decided to establish centres in less privileged and in the most marginalised areas of the state, which as a matter of fact – and as a colonial or postcolonial legacy – are those regions where mostly indigenous population lives (Lomnitz Adler 1995). Hence, after carrying out a regional diagnosis that applied a combination of ethnolinguistic and socioeconomic criteria, along with marginalisation, social and human development factors (UVI 2005), four "intercultural regions" were chosen[1] and within the same indigenous communities the new centres of the UVI were established: the Huasteca intercultural region based in Ixhuatlán de Madero; the Totonacapan intercultural region based in Espinal; the Grandes Montañas intercultural region based in Tequila; and the Selvas intercultural region based in Huazuntlán (cf. map). In each of the four regional centres, the UVI hired a regional coordinator, an academic support facilitator, five full time lecturers and several part time lecturers.

Furthermore, the central office in Xalapa administers the programmes of study and offers continuous training courses for both UVI staff and the wider University community (cf. below). Apart from rather conventional academic decision making structures, the UVI incorporates both one central and four regional "Advisory Councils" which who observe, supervise and advise the educational programmes, the teaching, research and community extension activities. The General Advisory Council is made up of academics external to the UVI and / or the UV, who periodically

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[1] This term was employed to reflect the plural ethnic nature and internal diversity that characterises each of the indigenous regions in the state of Veracruz.

advise the team of directors on the future projection of the institution, while the four Regional Advisory Councils are integrated by local mayors, civil, agrarian, and/or religious authorities as well as representatives of NGOs and civil associations which are active in the respective region. They jointly supervise teaching activities and research projects carried out by students and academic staff together with local communities in the regions.
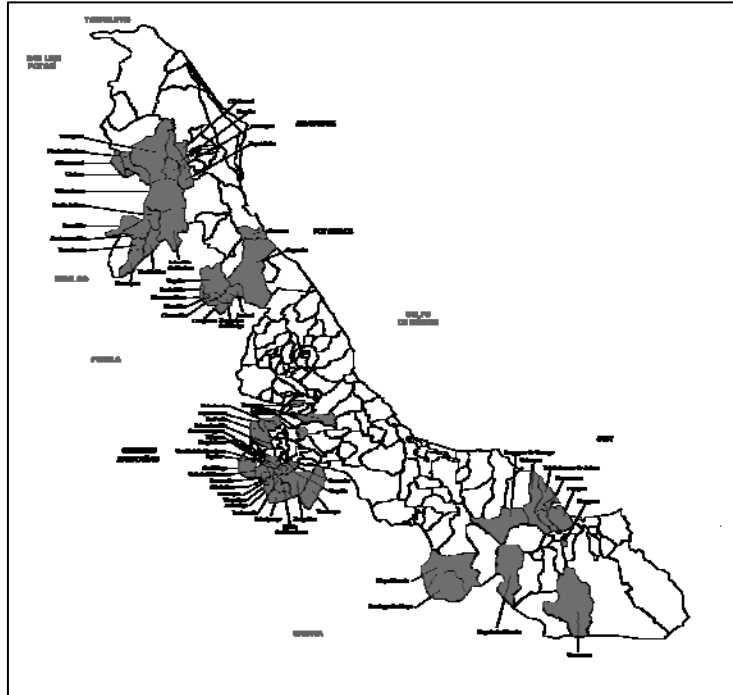

Map: The five UVI regional centres (Ávila Pardo & Mateos Cortés 2008)

Transdisciplinary Teaching Methods? Towards an "Intercultural Management for Development"

As previously mentioned, the B.A. degree in "Intercultural Management for Development" is presently offered in the four regional centres. It comprises an official and formally recognised degree programme in eight semesters that responds to an inter- or transdisciplinary, multimodal, flexible curriculum that requires student autonomy and that has been adopted inside the UV as a whole. Students choose "educational experiences" instead of classical subject courses, which are grouped by area (basic-instruction, disciplinary, terminal and free choice courses) and per module (conventional face-to-face classes, virtual or e-learning classes and/or a combination of both types of teaching styles).

These courses or educational experiences generate a range of educational itineraries called "orientations"; they are not disciplinarily specialized curricula, but interdisciplinary fields of

knowledge provided for a professional future activities of "intercultural managers", of knowledge brokers and intercultural translators (cf. graph).
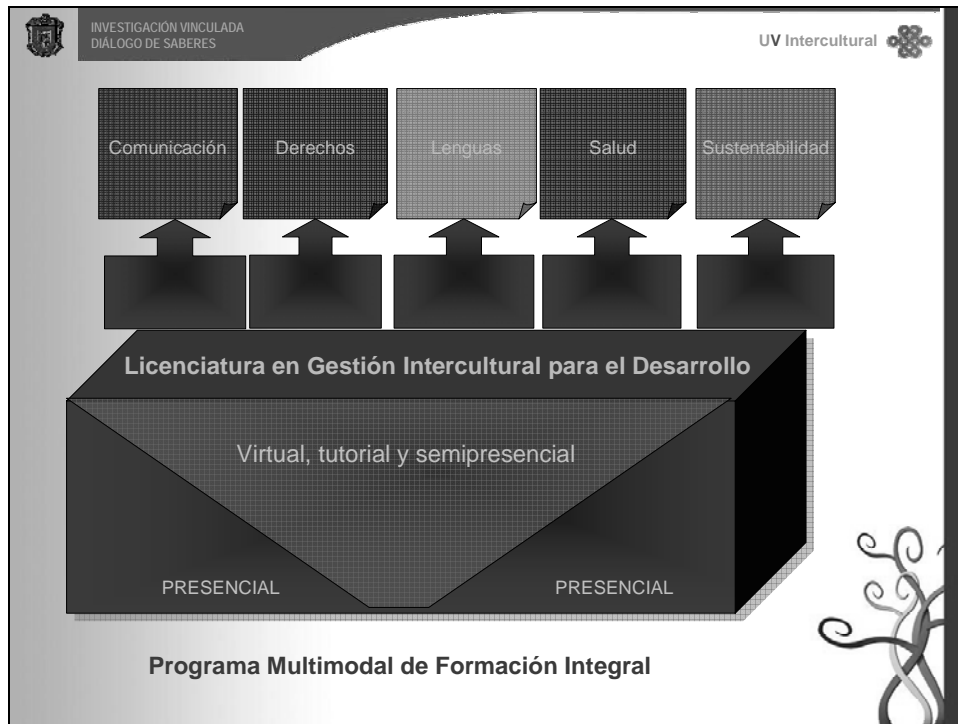
Graph: Structure of the Degree in Intercultural Management for Development
(UVI 2007)

Since 2007, the following orientations are offered in the four UVI regional centres:

- Communication: according to its programme of studies, this orientation "prepares professionals in the field of cultural promotion, based on the diversified use of media and communication and a critical view of their role in the construction of identities within a framework of globalization. (…) The training focuses on participative methodologies that enable a contextualized appropriation of tangible and intangible heritage" (UVI 2007: n.p.).

- Sustainability: this orientation "establishes spaces for the intercultural construction of knowledge for training professionals capable of contributing to the improvement of the quality of life in the regions and the construction of options for sustainable development, thanks to the generation of knowledge, skills and attitudes targeting the re-appraisal, development and promotion of ancestral knowledge associated with dialogical society-nature relations" (UVI 2007: n.p.).

- Languages: this orientation "fosters an academic re-valuing, management and mediation of inter-lingual communication processes within an intercultural focus" (UVI 2007: n.p.).

- Rights: this orientation "strives to prepare human resources to improve the areas of justice and legal issues in order to promote effective access of vulnerable sectors of society to the legal system, as well as to secure human rights as a guarantee for broader legal security" (UVI 2007: n.p.).

- Health: finally, this orientation "seeks to improve the health situation in the indigenous regions of Veracruz, through the training of professionals who can act as intermediaries between traditional medicine and state-run health services for communities" (UVI 2007: n.p.).

Independently of the orientation the students choose, this B.A. programme is particularly shaped by an early and continuous immersion of students and lecturers in activities carried out inside the host community. Based on a cross-cutting methodological axis, courses and modules including methodologies of community and regional diagnosis, ethnographic tools, participatory project management and evaluation, from the first semester onwards students begin to carry out their own research and knowledge transfer activities inside their home communities.

Creating New Hybrid Subjects? The UVI students

Taken together, all three student generations currently involved in the B.A. programme (2005-2009, 2006-2010 and 2007-2011) carried out throughout the five different orientations and in the four regional study centres, the UVI has a population of 562 students, of which 336 are women and 226 are men. Of this student body, 335 are native speakers of an indigenous language and 227 only speak Spanish. The main indigenous languages spoken by students are Náhuatl, Tachiwn tutunaku (Totonaco); Núntah+'yi (Zoque-popoluca); Diidzaj (Zapoteco); Ñahñü (Otomí); Teenek (Huasteco); Hamasipijni (Tepehua); and Tsa jujmí (Chinanteco). Classes are normally taught in Spanish, but certain kinds of teaching and project activities are also carried out in the main indigenous language in the region: in Náhuatl (in the Huasteca, Grandes Montañas and Selvas centres), in Totonaco (in the Totonacapan centre), in Zoque-popoluca (in the Selvas centre) and in Otomí (in the Huasteca centre).

Taking into account the striking lack of educational options at high-school level that still shapes the indigenous regions of Veracruz, which often obliges students to pursue precarious modi of distant education such as *telesecundarias*, the "normal" process of choosing students through multiple choice entrance exams is not applied in the UVI regional centres. Instead, students must run through a qualitative selection interview and present a personal letter of their motives for pursuing studies at

the UVI as well as a letter of recommendation by a traditional, civil or religious authority of their local community. Given the recent nature of this new kind of university, it is until next year that the first UVI Intercultural Managers for Development graduates will leave university, in order to start working as project managers, mediators, translators, liaison officers and/or technical assistants in governmental or non-governmental projects. Others will work through self employment in local and regional development initiatives or consultancies.

In order to smoothly transit from UVI studies to employment, the majority of students have rather early started to carry out intermediary and advisory activities and to design projects while still studying. Almost all of the UVI students are from indigenous regions and would otherwise not have been able to access higher education in urban centres. However, recently an increase in student mobility between regions is perceivable due to the fact that more students who are from other regions, including urban centres, decide to apply for studying at the UVI. The three generations of students are currently involved in their third, fifth and seventh semesters, respectively. As mentioned above, the B.A. in Intercultural Management for Development is taught through a mixed format that combines conventional face-to-face classes in small groups with newer kinds of workshops-based classes and intensive community outreach work, which students carry out under the supervision of a lecturer-tutor and in close collaboration with communal authorities, NGOs and civil associations present in the regions.

For this reason, the UVI has signed a series of agreements with local actors and regional networks, who thus get involved as counterparts in the extra-curricular teaching-learning process. Through such early work experiences the students have to compare, contrast and translate diverse types of knowledge: formal and informal, academic and community-based, professional and experiential knowledge, generated in both rural and urban contexts by both indigenous and non-indigenous actors. This continuous exchange of knowledge and methodologies, of academic versus community-rooted kinds of knowledge, is generating new, rather hybrid subjects which are able to oscillate not only between different kinds of knowledge, but also between rather diverse ways of putting knowledge into daily practice inside and outside their communities of origin.

New Intermediaries? The role of the teaching staff

The UVI lecturers cover a wide range of humanities, social sciences and engineering disciplines and includes many young, recently graduated teachers which are just starting postgraduate or Ph.D. studies. These lecturers and tutors are not contracted with regard to their ethnic origin, but

following criteria of professional experience and considering above all their intimate knowledge of and their rootedness inside the region in which their UVI centre is located. Accordingly, most UVI lecturers and tutors come from the same region in which they work in and thus provide their students not only with academic, but also with local and regional knowledge. Other non-academic professionals and/or local experts also participate in the teaching of certain modules or of specific courses which are directly related to their own professional practices. In total, the UVI has a teaching body of approximately sixty, including full time and part time staff, as well as those in charge of designing and coordinating the B.A. orientations from the central office in Xalapa.

Graph 2: The UVI loop of research, teaching and outreach (Dietz & Mateos Cortés 2007)

A substantial change that is currently underway within the UVI is associated with the relationship between teaching, research and community outreach services. Until recently, research and project implementation activities were mainly carried out by students, while lecturers concentrated on teaching and on tutoring projects carried out by their respective students. Reflecting the university-wide process of "departmentalization" [2] which has been started inside the UV in recent years, and in an effort to bridge the traditional gap between university teaching, organised in "faculties", and research, channelled through "research institutes", by creating the new figure of "departments", the UVI is just transforming its "orientations", offered as part of the B.A. programme in Intercultural Management for Development, into the future departments of "Communication", "Sustainability",

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[2] In general terms, these university "departamentalization" efforts are detailed in Universidad Amazónica de Pando (2005) and Zambrano Leal (2006).

"Languages", "Law" and "Health". Each department is made up of the lecturers in charge of their respective orientation in each of the four regional centres and in the central office in Xalapa, thus forming small units that combine tasks of teaching, research and community outreach. Hence, the lecturers' outreach research activities are closely linked to community demands and to onpoing student projects. The result is a mutually enforcing and complementary "loop" of circular teaching, research and community outreach activities, as illustrated in graph 2.

Diversity as a Resource? The anthropological contribution

The recognition of cultural diversity, the development of culturally pertinent educational programmes and interculturality as a new form of initiating relations between diverse cultural, linguistic and ethnic groups – these are the anthropological principles which shaped this new kind of university from its very beginnings onward. Furthermore, the team of mainly anthropologists and educators that designed this programme had the explicit general purpose of "favouring democratic coexistence in Veracruz society, as well as the processes of generating knowledge in the localities of the Intercultural Regions, through the training of professionals and intellectuals committed to the economic and cultural development of community, regional and national territories, whose activities contribute to promoting a process of revaluing and revitalising the native cultures and languages. These will be attained by privileging cultural diversity and the participation of communities under the principles of sustainability of the regions of interest, a sense of belonging in the communities to avoid out-migration and protection of the environment" (UVI 2008: n.p.).

These objectives and their underlying proposals have developed since the programme was created in 2005. Originally, the UVI was principally promoted from an anthropological-academic field, when lecturers and researchers from a predominantly European school of "Intercultural Studies" generated new spaces for research and teaching within the UV (Ávila Pardo & Mateos Cortés 2008). Strongly influenced by the contemporary anthropologies of ethnicity and of education, the team that promoted this pilot project opted for a transversal and constructivist focus of interculturality (Téllez Galván 2000): a special emphasis is made on the development of new "intercultural competences", understood as the students´ future key competences enabling them for future interaction in an evermore diverse and complex society.

However, this western-trained team of promoters quickly established close and fruitful relationships with indigenous activists and intellectuals for whom interculturality must be understood as a strategy of ethnic empowerment in contexts of cultural and ethnic differences and as a key tool for

reacting against racist discrimination, which evidently persists in the indigenous regions of Mexico and Veracruz. Finally, the exchange of knowledge and of intercultural discourses between these actors – urban academics and indigenous activists – is deepened and once more transformed by these two groups' encounter and close collaboration with NGOs stemming from social and/or environmental movements which are rather strong inside these regions (Mateos Cortés 2007). The protagonists of these NGOs emphasize the need to initiate more sustainable relationships with the environment and to promote a recovery of local, rural and/or indigenous knowledge which is traditionally related to the management of natural as well as cultural resources which may support indigenous ecosystems facing the inequalities of global power structures. Under the political impact of the Zapatista movement and the claimed re-definition of the relationship between the neoliberal nation-state and the country's indigenous peoples (Dietz 2005), these three types of actors start to mutually fertilize their intercultural discourses and their respective educational proposals, such as those specified in the UVI programmes. As a result, more emphasis is placed on processes of negotiation, intermediation and translation of heterogeneous kinds of knowledge between the diverse groups participating in the UVI – academics, professionals, development agents and "local experts". Thus, three dimensions through which interculturality is conceived emerge from this encounter of different perspectives:

- an "inter-cultural" dimension, centred on complex expressions and links of cultural and educational practices which respond to different cultural logics, such as the community culture of common Mesoamerican roots, threatened by many waves of colonization and globalization, but still in use in the indigenous regions; the organizational culture of the social movements that struggle for defending the regions' cultural and/or biological diversity; and the western academic culture –presently inserted in a transition from a rigid, mono-logical, "industrial" and "Fordist" paradigm of higher education to a more flexible, dialogue, "postindustrial" or "post-Fordist" one, as illustrated in the above mentioned flexible and modularized UV educational model;

- an "inter-actor" dimension, that values and profits from the negotiations and mutual transference between diverse forms of knowledge between UV academics participating in the different orientations, providing anthropological, educational, sociological, linguistic, historical, and agro-biological knowledge, generated in the western epistemic cannons; indigenous organisation activists and NGOs present in the regions, that contribute with professional, contextual and strategic knowledge; and local experts and knowledgeable

sabios who provide collective memoirs, local and contextual knowledge on cultural and biological diversity of the immediate environment;

- and an "inter-lingual" dimension, that – reflecting the great ethno-linguistic diversity that characterises the indigenous regions of Veracruz – overcomes the conventional bilingual focus of classic *indigenismo* and profits from non-substantial, but relational competences that make the translation between such diverse linguistic and cultural horizons possible; this inter-lingual focus does not aim to provide the complete set of UVI educational programmes in various languages, but centres on the development of key communicative and translation skills provided by the student and teacher bodies in each of the regions.

Relating these different dimensions of interculturality and their different academic-anthropological as well as ethno-regional and activist sources, the UVI presently pursues both "empowerment" objectives of the (future) indigenous professionals, on the one hand, and cross-cutting key competences required for professional and organisational performance, on the other hand.

Conclusions

As innovative and rather recent pilot project, the UVI has encountered a range of bureaucratic, financial, academic and political problems since it started only three years ago. The heterogeneity of the participating academic, political and organisational actors has proved quite a challenge when efficient institutional stances must be taken that are also to be legitimate for all the involved sectors. After a long process of diagnosis and political negotiation on the choice of regions and communities in which to establish the UVI regional centres, the main political representatives continue to decidedly support the UVI project. Nevertheless, the great cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity in the indigenous regions of Veracruz still poses an important challenge for curricular development and diversification as well as for the implementation of programmes relevant to the regional population.

While the UVI is widely supported by the regional societies it serves, within the public university which gave birth to the project resistance and misunderstanding persist. Due to the heterodox notion of "university", of "degrees" and of "curriculum" employed by the UVI staff, some more traditional and "disciplinary" sectors of academia aim to confine this initiative to old fashioned assistantialist "outreach" activities rather than to open their own teaching and research activities to such experiences. The fact that a diversity of actors and a broad range of regional knowledge have been included in the very nucleus of academic degree programmes challenges the still present

universalist, rather mono-logical and "mono-epistemic" character of the classical western university. In this field, for a public anthropologist and his or her corresponding "activist" methodology (Hale 2008), one of the main challenges consists in linking the characteristics of an "intercultural university", orientated towards and rooted in the indigenous regions, with the dynamics and criteria of a "normal" public university, which through its curricular traditions, studies and degrees, its autonomy and its Humboldtian "freedom of teaching and research" provides decisive institutional "shelter" for the UVI, but which also often imposes all too rigid and orthodox academic practices that are insensitive to the rural and indigenous medium in which it operates. This process of negotiating habits and aspirations among university actors, host communities, professionals and involved students has triggered authentically intercultural experiences: whereas more academic, urban and non-indigenous representatives start recognising the viability and promoting the visibility of the UVI as a culturally diversified and relevant higher education alternative, in the indigenous regions novel learning processes of mutual transfers of knowledge are emerging.

The official recognition of the right to a culturally pertinent and sensitive higher education sparks an intense debate, not only on the need to create (or not) new "indigenous" universities, but furthermore on the challenge of generating new professional profiles for the alumni of these institutions, who will focus on professional activities shaped by intercultural dialogue and negotiation. The conventional and disciplinary profiles of professionals educated in western universities have failed to offer fields of employment related to the needs of indigenous youngsters, but have instead explicitly or implicitly promoted their out-migration and their assimilation to urban and non-indigenous environments and professions. Hence, the new professional profiles which are just being created and tested through pilot projects such as the UVI must meet a double challenge that higher education institutes have not yet faced: the challenge of developing flexible, interdisciplinary and professional degree programmes that are also locally and regionally relevant, useful and sustainable for both students and their wider communities. In this way, and thanks to their *in situ* implementation of work experiences and student research projects, the first generations of UVI students have gradually become the promoters and shapers of their of their own future professional practices and profiles. Their emerging role as intermediaries in their communities is already outstanding. In this way, a new generation bearing both academic and community, both indigenous and western knowledge has emerged – a generation that will certainly in the near future assume a new role as inter-cultural, inter-lingual and inter-actor "translator" who manages, applies

and generates knowledge from diverse worlds, worlds which are often asymmetrical and antagonistically shaped, but which are necessarily ever more closely related.

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