

Intercultural Universities in Mexico: Identity and Inclusion

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Abstract. The purpose of this paper is to explore the ethos of *interculturalidad* in Mexico's recently founded *universidades interculturales*. On the basis of documentation and interviews with faculty in five universities, institutionalisation of intercultural higher education within the state sector can be seen to have created a space in which the politics of recognition meet the radical ideas of educators in the tradition of constructivism and *educación popular*. Intercultural higher education does not select students on the basis of race, but the location of the campuses and the content of courses are designed to attract indigenous students. The introduction of field research early in the undergraduate course should transform the relationship between students and their communities of origin, and prepare them for leadership roles. The article concludes with a critique of what it calls 'hard' multiculturalism.

Keywords: affirmative action, *interculturalidad*, higher education, indigenism, Mexico

Introduction

During the Vicente Fox *sexenio* (2000–6), the Mexican state embarked on an initiative in the then quite new field of intercultural higher education which marked a radical departure in state-sponsored attempts to overcome the social and cultural exclusion of indigenous peoples in Latin America. Previous state initiatives had tended to focus on institutional pluralism, as in the establishment of *usos y costumbres* in local government in Oaxaca or of legal pluralism in the Bolivian and Colombian constitutions, and on bilingual

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education in primary schooling, as in Bolivia and Ecuador.¹ The *universidades interculturales* (intercultural universities, UIs) created a new type of institution from the ground up, for a new type of student – mature and post-secondary – together with new buildings, newly recruited teaching bodies, and new, untried course content and structure. Moreover, given Mexico's notorious six-year political and budgetary cycle, it had to be done fast, so that the UIs would be up and running, with students and staff in place and an established budget, before the end of the terms of office of the president and the various state governors involved.

This experiment will eventually be the subject of educational evaluations, but at this formative stage, in which many issues are under discussion and systems are still not set in stone, it offers a unique opportunity to explore what is meant by a concept, *interculturalidad*, which has become steadily more prominent in Latin America, coming almost to replace, for reasons which we shall discuss later, that of multiculturalism.² Following on from the important work of Luis Enrique López in defining intercultural education and of Joanne Rappaport in analysing the debates of Colombian indigenous intellectuals and sympathetic scholars linked to the Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca (Cauca Indigenous Regional Council, CRIC) about what it means, this Mexican initiative offers an insight into the meanings of the term in the context of state-run institutions.³ Like sections of Rappaport's study, it concerns the meaning of interculturalidad in higher education – but the UIs are located within the state, unlike the CRIC's plans, and this means that they cannot be reserved for any one ethnic (or other) group, or even for the broad category of indigenous people, nor can they resort to the technical 'fix'

¹ David Recondo, *La política del Gatopardo: multiculturalismo y democracia en Oaxaca* (Mexico City: CIESAS – Casa Chata, 2007). See the recent Bolivian Constitution, and Donna Van Cott, 'A Political Analysis of Legal Pluralism in Bolivia and Colombia', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 32: 1 (2000), pp. 207–34; on bilingual education, see Bret Gustafson, *New Languages of the State: Indigenous Resurgence and the Politics of Knowledge in Bolivia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); and Barbara Noel, 'Language, Power and Schooling: Bolivia's Education Reform Program', MA thesis, College of Education and Human Development, George Mason University, 2006.

² For reasons which are unclear, no one speaks of *interculturalismo* – the term which has established itself is *interculturalidad*.

³ Gustafson, *New Languages of the State*; Joanne Rappaport, *Intercultural Utopias: Public Intellectuals, Cultural Experimentation, and Ethnic Pluralism in Colombia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Luis Enrique López and Inge Sichra, 'La educación en áreas indígenas de América Latina: balances y perspectivas', in Ignacio Hernaiz (ed.), *Educación en la diversidad: experiencias y desafíos en la educación intercultural bilingüe* (Buenos Aires: IPE-UNESCO, 2004). The CRIC was among the very first organisations to fight for a modern *indigenismo* and has been in existence in the Colombian highlands since the 1970s. It is a combination of a politicised movement and an NGO providing services to the Nasa people and others in the Cauca region, and it also runs local government under the autonomy brought in by the 1991 Constitution.

of bilingual education for indigenous people (as in Ecuador).⁴ The resources and skills for teaching indigenous languages to people in their early twenties are too scarce, and the potential and actual students have, save for a minority, grown up monolingual in Spanish or with only a limited command of an indigenous language, and even less knowledge of a written version.

Whether intentionally or not, the UIs have come to constitute an arena in which different ideas of interculturalidad and intercultural education are brought into contention and worked through under pressure from the practical exigencies of time and institution-building. The debates and decision-making involve a range of interested parties on a variety of levels and in a context where theories of ethnicity and education and issues of principle and policy encounter the day-to-day life of universities. These are universities with many distinguishing features, not least the close social contact between staff and students, unheard of in the large state and national universities. The actors involved include state governors, the academic staff and the rectors, the students themselves, the leadership of the Coordinación General de Educación Intercultural y Bilingüe (General Coordinating Office of Intercultural and Bilingual Education, CGEIB), the Education Ministry's Programa Integral de Fortalecimiento Institucional (Comprehensive Programme for Institutional Strengthening, PIFI), which reviews teaching and learning in Mexican public higher education, and also external social researchers who study and write about them. This paper focuses mainly on the teaching staff and their interpretation and implementation of interculturalidad. The upshot will be that interculturalidad is far from a ready-made formula, and that although the UIs were created under the Fox administration they had little to do with the 'neoliberal indigenism' label which was fastened onto the government during that period by some anthropologists.⁵ Furthermore, they also operated with little academic (as opposed to budgetary) interference from governors who appointed their rectors or, so far as can be told, from Fox himself, who was content to give broad freedom of manoeuvre (and reputedly generous budgets) to Xóchitl Gálvez, the head of the Comisión de Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas (Indigenous Peoples' Development Commission, CDI). The rectors were appointed by state governors, and as *puestos de confianza* no doubt with political considerations in mind in many cases, but no one claimed during my interviews that the

⁴ I use the term 'fix' because bilingual teaching can be a way of responding to exclusion in a narrowly technical manner, especially since the exclusion suffered is only partly to do with language use.

⁵ Rosalva Aida Hernández, Sarela Paz and María Teresa Sierra (eds.), *El Estado y los indígenas en tiempos del PAN: neoindigenismo, legalidad e identidad* (Mexico City: CIESAS and Porrúa, 2004).

governors had any particular agenda as far as the content of interculturalidad was concerned.

Demands by or on behalf of indigenous groups and organisations are usually directed at the state, and the UI experience may offer an instructive framework for the development of state responses to indigenous demands which are consistent with the universalist principles of Latin American republicanism. By this I refer not to autonomy or legal pluralism, but to major investments of resources in affirmative action in education and social policy.⁶

The paper begins with a descriptive account of the UIs and an explanation of where intercultural education sits in relation to other approaches to education for indigenous peoples. It then explores the meanings of interculturalidad and the purposes of intercultural education as expressed in documents, interviews and academic discussion related to the UIs. This will establish the influence of *educación liberadora* on the model and practices of the UIs and provide a bridge to an illustration of that influence in the introduction of field research early on in the courses followed by UI students. The article concludes with a critique of ‘hard’ versions of multiculturalism and its theoretical pitfalls in light of the UI experience.

Interculturalidad and Its Institutionalisation

It is necessary to clarify briefly the practical meanings of indigenous, bilingual and intercultural education, and also to distinguish education programmes that are dependent on ‘soft money’ – that is, NGOs or international aid agencies – from those which are embedded and institutionalised in the state. Distinctions must then be made between primary schooling and higher education, and between teacher training and broader-based courses. Many institutions straddle these classifications.

Indigenous education is usually primary education with emphasis on the bilingual, and is present in Bolivia, Ecuador and parts of Peru and the Brazilian Amazonia.⁷ Children are taught in the indigenous language, and the

⁶ This distinction is developed in David Lehmann, ‘Identity, Social Justice and Corporatism: The Resilience of Republican Citizenship’, in Mario Sznajder, Luis Roniger and Carlos Forment (eds.), *Shifting Frontiers of Citizenship in Latin America* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 101–32.

⁷ Bilingual education has been institutionalised within the state in Bolivia and Ecuador, and it has also had substantial external financial support from UNICEF in the Bolivian case and the German Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (International Development Agency, GIZ) in Ecuador: see Catherine Walsh, ‘Políticas y significados conflictivos’, *Nueva Sociedad*, 165 (2000), pp. 121–33; and Gustafson, *New Languages of the State*. In Peru state provision of bilingual teacher training is half-hearted at most and the GIZ has provided technical support to bilingual teacher training, while in 2008–10 bilingual teacher training in the Amazon was almost brought to a halt by changes in the qualifications required for

hegemonic language is initially taught as a foreign language. Teachers are therefore supposed to master the indigenous language and ideally to be native speakers.⁸ Mexico has a fully fledged indigenous education system: its Dirección General de Educación Indígena (General Directorate for Indigenous Education) has 470 professional staff and employs 37,000 *maestros indígenas* (indigenous teachers) in primary schools. It oversees the schooling of indigenous people or indigenous areas, but does not have a particular commitment to intercultural or even bilingual education.

Bilingual teaching in higher education is mostly to be found in teacher training and is provided in Peru, Bolivia and Brazil, and to a limited extent in Mexico.⁹ A broader concept, namely bilingual and intercultural teacher training, for *educación intercultural y bilingüe* (EIB) has been adopted in Peru on two regional campuses established by San Marcos University for the lowland tropical *selva* region.¹⁰

In principle, *intercultural education* is distinguished by being neither specifically aimed at indigenous peoples nor centrally concerned with language. Gustafson describes its 'ideal product' as 'a citizen-subject, literate, numerate and orally proficient in both languages'.¹¹ It is more likely to include second-language teaching, which can include, paradoxically, learning 'one's

student admission. In Brazil bilingual teaching for indigenous peoples is supported by the state.

⁸ All sorts of complications arise, some of which form part of the present research but cannot be discussed here for lack of space. See Marc Becker, 'Social Movements and the Government of Rafael Correa: Confrontation or Co-optation?', in Gary Prevost, Carlos Oliva Campos and Harry E. Vanden (eds.), *Social Movements and Leftist Governments in Latin America: Confrontation or Co-optation?* (London: Zed Books, 2012), p. 126. For Peru, see Sheila Aikman, *La educación indígena en Sudamérica: interculturalidad y bilingüismo en Madre de Dios* (Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 2003); and 'Interrogating Discourses of Intercultural Education: From Indigenous Amazon Community to Global Policy Forum', *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 42: 2 (2012), pp. 235–57. For the highlands, see Virginia Zavala, *Desencuentros con la escritura: escuela y comunidad en los Andes peruanos* (Lima: Red para el Desarrollo de las Ciencias Sociales en el Perú, 2002); and 'Una mirada a la formación docente en educación bilingüe intercultural en la zona andina del Perú', in Ricardo Cuenca, Nicole Nucinkis and Virginia Zavala (eds.), *Nuevos maestros para América Latina* (Madrid: Ediciones Morata 2007), pp. 162–90.

⁹ For Mexico, see Bruno Baronnet, 'La question de l'interculturalité dans les expériences d'éducation en terres zapatistes', in Christian Gros and David Dumoulin Kervran (eds.), *Le multiculturalisme au concret: un modèle latinoaméricain?* (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2011); for Bolivia, see Gustafson, *New Languages of the State*.

¹⁰ I visited the San Marcos *sede* in the Comunidad Arizona outside Satipo in 2009. The teaching staff are more academic (that is, they have postgraduate qualifications) than in an *instituto superior pedagógico* (state teacher training college), the students all identify as indigenous, and indigenous languages mix with Spanish in class.

¹¹ Gustafson, *New Languages of the State*, p. 14.

own language' – that is, teaching the indigenous language to indigenous students who primarily use the hegemonic language.

For many of those involved in its birth and development, the purpose of intercultural education is, variously, to raise awareness of different cultures among the bearers of the dominant culture and language as well as among bearers of indigenous cultures, or to achieve a situation of mutual respect among them, or to achieve a degree of competence in the hegemonic culture among the bearers of minority culture. It goes without saying that all these terms are potentially contentious and contestable. However, in practice, given its image and the circumstances in which it is provided, intercultural higher education principally attracts, and has been designed principally for, (self-identified) indigenous students.

Rappaport describes interculturalism as less a concept than a collective phenomenon or a web of shared meanings: it is, she writes, invoking Luis Enrique López, 'the selective appropriation of concepts across cultures in the interests of building a dialogue among equals'. She then adds that it has been 'harnessed as a vehicle for connecting such domains as indigenous bilingual education to the political objectives of the native rights movement'.¹² She too regards interculturalism not as a doctrine or a theory but as a political or policy tool, and she also contrasts it with multiculturalism, which is seen by Luis Enrique López as 'fostering tolerance but not equality'.¹³ The difference with respect to my account is small. I see interculturalidad less as a political notion in a partisan sense of connecting with the political objectives of indigenous movements, and more as a web of values and sensitivities which, at least in Mexico, are installing themselves in parts of the state apparatus and especially in parts of the country's educational system, and have been well established for some time in the anthropological profession. It is thus more an arena in which competing ideas are debated and adopted than a dogmatic posture.

Within the Latin American panorama, Mexico's UIs are the only fully fledged, free-standing and state-funded intercultural higher education institutions. They are unlike previous institutions in the educational field as a whole or in higher education in Mexico, and are one of the very few institutional departures accompanied by substantial commitments of state resources to be undertaken in Mexico, or indeed in Spanish America, in the name of multiculturalism, interculturalidad or simply indigenous peoples.¹⁴

¹² Rappaport, *Intercultural Utopias*, p. 5.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ There have been innumerable legal and bureaucratic ventures, such as constitutional amendments, the creation of commissions and departments of indigenous affairs, and provisions for intercultural and bilingual education, but this claim refers to substantial capital projects with funding for established institutions and positions beyond the legal or administrative spheres.

The capital needed for their founding, in three cases for sumptuous buildings, owed much to Xóchitl Gálvez, head of the CDI, which paid half the capital costs.¹⁵ Gálvez was an unusual person to hold that office: a civil engineer proud of her indigenous origins in a low-income family in Hidalgo, with a successful business background, and reputed to be close to President Fox.¹⁶ She teamed up with educator Sylvia Schmelkes, founding *coordinadora* of the CGEIB, set up in 2001, who made the UIs her flagship project. Their work ensured that UI budgets are tied to established institutions, so neither they nor their permanent posts can be removed, though of course they can be eroded by inflation or non-replacement.¹⁷ The UIs, therefore, are institutionalised within the state or, in one case, within an established public university (see below); this brings the security of permanent existence and a stable core of academic staff, which in turn means that, like other state universities, they constitute a space in which a variety of ideas and missions can be developed and pursued.

Even so, the UIs have less formal autonomy from government than mainstream *universidades autónomas*, since state governors appoint their rectors and much of the course structure and broad content seems to have been, at least initially, provided by the CGEIB.¹⁸ Like all public universities, the UIs are also subject to the PIFI, with its procedures, inspections and standards for recognition. Students at UIs get the same entitlement to financial support from the state as students in other public universities.

Mexican background

The total number of students in the state UIs is small: just 5,700 at the time of my last field visit in October 2008 (see [Table 1](#)). Of this number, 2,900 were

¹⁵ The UI buildings in San Cristobal de las Casas exhibit a pastiche colonial mode, while those in Tabasco and the State of Mexico are of modern conception: the former consists of two buildings opposite one another to form the Mayan zero, while the latter combines a snail-like shape reminiscent of the Guggenheim Museum in New York with decorative motifs also evoking Mayan design. Not all architectural critics are impressed.

¹⁶ She later tried to be elected as governor of the state of San Luis Potosí, but was defeated through what she claimed was electoral manipulation.

¹⁷ The only comparable case to the UIs is the Universidad de las Regiones Autónomas de la Costa Caribe Nicaragüense (University of the Autonomous Regions of the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast, URACCAN), widely regarded as the pioneer for higher education for indigenous people and intercultural higher education, although it relies on international NGO support. See Alta Hooker Blandford, 'Universidad de las Regiones Autónomas de la Costa del Caribe Nicaragüense (URACCAN)', in Lourdes Casillas Muñoz and Laura Santini Villar (eds.), *Educación superior para los pueblos indígenas de América Latina: memorias del Segundo Encuentro Regional* (Mexico City: CGEIB, 2004).

¹⁸ The UAİM in Sinaloa has 'autonomous' in its title, but its rector is appointed by the governor.

in two institutions, the Universidad Intercultural de Chiapas (Intercultural University of Chiapas, UNICH) and the Universidad Autónoma Indígena de México (Autonomous Indigenous University of Mexico, UAIM) in Sinaloa, and the majority are women – in one case reaching double the number of men (see Table 1).¹⁹ The Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural (Veracruz Intercultural University, UVI) enjoys slightly more autonomy because it is established inside the Universidad Veracruzana as a stand-alone operation, but one that is governed by that university and thus somewhat insulated from direct dependence on the state government. However, it is comparable to the other UIs because the state Chamber of Deputies has increased the Universidad Veracruzana's budget to fund it, so it is more than just a department within the Universidad Veracruzana. Its administration is housed in premises in Xalapa, the state capital, but teaching takes place in small campuses located far from any town. The UNICH has a central campus in San Cristóbal as well as satellite campuses (*sedes*) across the state, and the Universidad Intercultural del Estado de México (Intercultural University of the State of Mexico, UIEM) is located next to the small town of San Felipe del Progreso, some three hours' ride from Mexico City's Tasqueña bus station. The Universidad Intercultural del Estado de Tabasco (Intercultural University of the State of Tabasco, UIET) is deep in the countryside, and the UAIM in Sinaloa is located in the rather dilapidated village of Mochichahui, 20 minutes' drive from Los Mochis (250,000 inhabitants).

In the course of three visits, in late 2006, May 2007 and May 2008, I attended the UAIM twice; the UVI, in both Xalapa and Huazuntlan, twice; the UNICH and UIET twice; and the UIEM once. The multi-sited character of this research has enabled me to listen to a variety of actors, particularly teaching staff in different places – some permanent, some temporary, some full-time, some part-time. I have attended discussions among them, and I have heard contrasting versions from different actors – from officials, at the CGEIB for example, and interested outsiders, notably anthropologists. The outcome resembles somewhat María Elena García's account of bilingual education in Peru: different agendas and interests homing in on a population perceived by activists and teachers as vulnerable and lacking power, yet at the same time also as bearers of voices which deserve to be empowered and heard, and which the educators sincerely wish to hear.²⁰

¹⁹ Data kindly provided by Lourdes Casillas of the CGEIB, May 2009.

²⁰ María Elena García, *Making Indigenous Citizens: Identities, Education and Multicultural Development in Peru* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

Table 1. *Overview of Universidades Interculturales*

Name	Location	Courses	Languages taught or used	Student population (Aug. 2008 to Feb. 2009)		
				Men	Women	Total
Universidad Intercultural del Estado de México	San Felipe del Progreso	- Language and culture	Mazahua	164	322	486
		- Sustainable development	Otomí Tlahuica Matlatzincan Mixteco			
		- Intercultural communication	Nahuatl Mismito Spanish			
Universidad Intercultural de Chiapas	San Cristóbal de Las Casas	- Language and culture	Tzeltal	571	601	1,172
		- Sustainable development	Tzotzil Chol Zoque Tojolabal Zapoteco			
		- Intercultural communication	Mame			
		- Alternative tourism	Akateco Spanish			
Universidad Intercultural del Estado de Tabasco	Oxolotan, Tacotalpa	- Language and culture	Chol	232	215	447
		- Sustainable development	Yokotan Zoque			
		- Alternative tourism	Tzotzil Spanish			
Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural	1. Totonacapan (El Espinal) 2. Huasteca (Ixhuatlán de Madero)	- Intercultural management for development, with professional specialisations in communications, health, rights, sustainability and languages	Nahuatl Otomí Huasteco Tepehua	263	418	681

Table 1. (Cont.)

Name	Location	Courses	Languages taught or used	Student population (Aug. 2008 to Feb. 2009)		
				Men	Women	Total
	3. Grandes Montañas (Tequila)		Totonaca Zapoteco			
	4. Región de los Tuxtlas (Huazuntlán)		Zoque Popoluca Mixe Chinanteco			
		- Master's degree in intercultural education	English French Other Spanish			
Universidad Intercultural del Estado de Puebla	Lipuntahuaca, Municipio de Huehuetla	- Language and culture	Totonaco Nahuatl Popoloca	149	173	322
		- Sustainable development	Mixteco Spanish			
Universidad Autónoma Indígena de México	1. Mochicahui, El Fuerte 2. Los Mochis, Sinaloa	Degrees: - Social and community psychology - Tourism for business - Rural sociology - Law - Accounting	Yolem 'me Jiaki Raramuri Huichol Chol Tseltal Tzotzil Zoque	882	832	1,714

		Engineering: - Computing systems - Forestry - System quality - Sustainable development	Chinanteco Chatino Mixteco Zapoteco Mixe Mazahua Mayagna Criol Misquito Kichua Warao			
		Master's courses: - Social education - Economics and business - Sales	Kariña Pemon Jivi Chaima Wayuú Spanish			
Universidad Intercultural Indígena de Michoacán	Pátzcuaro	- Language and culture - City management	Purépecha Mazahua Spanish	117	180	297
Universidad Intercultural Maya de Quintana Roo	José María Morelos	- Language and culture - Production systems engineering - Alternative tourism	Maya Spanish	199	201	400
Universidad Intercultural del Estado de Guerrero	La Ciénega, Malinaltepec	- Language and culture - Sustainable rural development	Me'phaa Náhuatl Tu'unsavi Spanish	57	108	165
Total number of students in UIs, 2008				2,634	3,050	5,684

Source: CGEIB and Secretaría de Educación Pública, October 2008.

Interpretations of Interculturalidad in Higher Education

The higher education context of interculturalidad in the UIs brings more emphasis on cultural than linguistic course content, and a much more diverse constituency than in primary or secondary indigenous or bilingual education. In schools it is feasible to use an indigenous language as the medium of instruction, whereas at the higher education level such languages are taught as second languages – in effect as foreign languages, with Spanish as the medium of instruction. Students are heterogeneous so it cannot be assumed that they will all understand any one of the 58 officially recognised languages, and even when they do know an indigenous language they are very unlikely to know a written version, which is regarded as a necessary part of language teaching. A school, because of its location, will have a linguistically homogeneous constituency, and teachers trained in a uniform way to teach from a fixed set of texts, but in the UIs there is no question of reserving entry to certain culturally or ethnically defined categories of people.²¹ The UIs draw students from a wider area than schools, so that even if students do predominantly identify as indigenous they are likely to be ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous. Dietz writes that at the UVI in Veracruz, two-thirds of students are ‘native speakers of an indigenous language’. He cites eight different languages, but does not say how fluent the students are; the other third speak only Spanish.²² It is impractical for any UI to provide teaching in more than one or two indigenous languages, given the shortage of qualified teachers.

Affirmative Action

Given that UIs do not directly select students on the basis of race or ethnicity, they can be described as extending affirmative action. As explained by Lourdes Casillas, director of secondary and higher education at the CGEIB, the idea of intercultural education has gained recognition as a reaction to years of frustration in trying to improve the education of indigenous peoples and of the excluded generally. In 2006 the CGEIB published an exhaustive 288-page *Modelo educativo* for the UIs, which is available as a book and on the internet.²³ The document contains an account of the genesis of the UI project

²¹ Sylvia Schmelkes, ‘Intercultural Universities in Mexico: Progress and Difficulties’, *Intercultural Education*, 201 (2009), pp. 5–17.

²² Gunther Dietz, ‘Diversity Regimes Beyond Multiculturalism? A Reflexive Ethnography of Intercultural Higher Education in Veracruz, Mexico’, *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies*, 7: 2 (2012), pp. 173–200.

²³ María de Lourdes Casillas Muñoz and Laura Santini Villar, *Universidad intercultural: modelo educativo* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación Pública and CGEIB, 2006), available at www.uimqroo.edu.mx.

and guidance for legal and bureaucratic purposes, as well as national legal and policy documents and texts of international conventions and declarations on human and indigenous rights. The core of the document lies in 60 pages of detailed guidelines concerning the UIs' underlying pedagogical and philosophical principles, curriculum design, evaluation and assessment.

The text explains that the title 'universidad indígena' was rejected in order to 'avoid the idea of segregation of ethnic groups from the rest of society' (p. 131). Rather, by their location in the vicinity of indigenous populations, by their image and promotion and by the content of their courses, the UIs are designed to increase the number of indigenous students in higher education, and to make them feel that their particular needs are being met and their background appreciated. Thus I would describe them as affirmative action, which provides a more universalist rationale for intercultural education, and reduces the sense of ghettoisation which would come from an exclusive emphasis on the role of cultural recognition in overcoming exclusion.

The *Modelo* also sees the UIs as playing an important role in regional and local development, by providing professional qualifications for people from indigenous areas and by placing high priority on students' own research and on links to communities. But the education provided also focuses on 'the fundamental humanist and social values of the intercultural approach', so that it is not solely a matter of gaining knowledge but should also instil a sensibility with respect to social commitment and to the preservation of and respect for cultural diversity, the environment and sustainability.²⁴ To this is added the strengthening of self-esteem and the appreciation of art and culture in all their manifestations.²⁵

In their early stages the UIs are expected to provide degree courses (*carreras*) in indigenous language and culture, sustainable development, intercultural communication and alternative tourism, though adoption has been uneven. The UVI in Veracruz, for example, set aside alternative tourism as 'superficial' despite the subject's possible merits.²⁶ This syllabus testifies to the quasi-vocational dimension of the project, which clearly hopes to open the way for students to work in areas relevant to the socio-economic development of indigenous communities. But it may well be more important to pay attention to the culture emerging in the UIs themselves, which stands in contrast to the prevailing educational culture in Mexico and many other countries, starting with the social constructivist approach emphasised by the *Modelo* and by some of my interviewees.²⁷

²⁴ *Modelo educativo*, p. 207.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ In the words of the director of the UVI's communications programme, it seemed 'superficial para empezar' – that is, superficial as a subject for first-year students.

²⁷ Laura Mateos claims an influence from contemporary Spanish ideas about interculturalidad, but I heard none of this in my interviews – even at the UVI, on which her findings are

Social Constructivism and 'Hard' Multiculturalism

In the social constructivist perspective knowledge is acquired or built (not merely transmitted) by placing value on a student's prior experience and potential, with a focus on 'knowing how to do' (*saber hacer*). The entire five-page section on the UIs' 'psychopedagogical approach' in the *Modelo* is devoted to this subject – far more than is given over to themes dear to multiculturalists like cultural difference and indigenous knowledge. Reference is made to the two leading constructivists, psychologists Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner (both of whom have been translated into Spanish), who were frequently cited in my interviews. Vygotsky (1896–1934) is known for his emphasis on the creation and communication of meaning in education, as distinct from the transferring of skills, while Bruner denounces the 'mold in which a single, presumably omniscient teacher, explicitly tells or shows presumably unknowing learners something they presumably know nothing about'.²⁸ Instead, Bruner defends a concept of learning as 'an interactive process in which people learn from each other, not just by showing and telling'.²⁹ These ideas, associated also with one of the most famous radical educators of the twentieth century, Paulo Freire (1921–97), have been widely applied in Latin American informal education – in the form of *educación popular* or *educación liberadora*, often stimulated and orchestrated by sectors of the Catholic Church committed to base communities. They have also been applied in participatory research – a method associated with the name of the Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda, in which some people working in UIs have been schooled and which Joanne Rappaport also used when working with the Nasa people in Colombia.³⁰

The authors of the *Modelo* make it clear that the method to be adopted in the UIs stands in stark contrast to that prevailing in most educational institutions. Their purpose is to create a system in which the students are invited to interpret new information in the context of their own experience, and to break with the established practice of one-way transmission of information (p. 156). Learning is exploration, in which the subject formulates

based – though Téllez did mention a research collaboration with the University of Granada and the Madrid-based Universidad a Distancia, funded by the EU. Laura Mateos, 'The Transfer of European Intercultural Discourse Towards Latin American Educational Actors: A Mexican Case Study', *Anthropology Matters*, 13: 1 (2011), pp. 1–13.

²⁸ Jerome Bruner, *The Culture of Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 20.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 22. See also Luis Moll, *Vygotsky and Education: Instructional Implications and Applications of Sociocultural Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

³⁰ Rappaport is currently engaged in a research project to study 'the dynamics of collaborative research teams in Latin America' which involves using Fals Borda's work and his archive: see <http://pdba.georgetown.edu/CLAS>.

doubts and hypotheses, and explores links inspired by personal experience and context. To this end the authors of the *Modelo* give pride of place to research and *vinculación* (linkages): students learn about research methods from their first year and are expected to undertake projects of developmental interest linked to their communities, as advocated by participatory research. But they also create a context for radically new social relationships between teachers and students, reflected in the design of the first-year preparatory course consisting entirely of workshops or seminars, and reflected also in the relationships that I observed during my research. Unusually, they prescribe *tutorías*, in accordance with a commitment to a student-centred education in which students have assigned tutors who oversee their progress and provide advice on personal as well as academic challenges. All the parties involved appreciate the particular problems which arise when they attract students from a rural, indigenous and low-income background – though in this respect the UNICH, with its location in San Cristobal de las Casas (population 185,000), is somewhat different.

Towards the end of this discussion, the *Modelo* links the constructivist approach to the mutual exchanges between modern science and the ‘knowledge and wisdom based on the axiology of the peoples of Mexico’ in which the knowledge of the *pueblos* can complement and collaborate with modern science.³¹ And so constructivism feeds into the ‘intercultural dialogue of knowledge’, but the message from the *Modelo* as well as from my interviews is that the two elements are of equal weight in the thoughts of policy-makers and in the daily culture of the institutions themselves. In terms of feasibility, the constructivist objectives are more straightforward than those inspired by ‘harder’ versions of interculturalidad, which require elaborate constructions of other knowledges, other epistemologies and indigenous cosmovisions. These versions imply that ‘indigenous knowledges’ are somehow incommensurable with the knowledge described as Western, modern and monocultural, as in the extreme cultural relativism of Dietz and to some extent Walsh, who denigrates what Dietz calls the ‘mono-logical’ or ‘mono-epistemic’ character of Western university education.³²

In fact the CGEIB did issue an earlier document which provided a good example of ‘hard multiculturalism’, aimed principally at the primary education sector and entitled *Políticas y fundamentos de la educación intercultural bilingüe en México* (2004). In this document, which may no longer reflect the CGEIB’s philosophy but is a good example of the genre, the word ‘diversidad’ is mentioned at least 45 times in the space of

³¹ *Modelo educativo*, pp. 158–9.

³² See Dietz, ‘Diversity Regimes Beyond Multiculturalism?’; and Walsh, ‘Políticas y significados conflictivos’, quoted above.

27 pages.³³ The word 'otro' in the sense of 'my other' or 'one's other' is used 15 times, each time italicised, and the word 'otredad' (otherness) three times. Two other favourites are 'lógica' and 'epistemología', which are mentioned 16 and 13 times respectively. The more universalist words 'equidad', 'inequidad' and 'justicia' each appear only nine times. In contrast, in the *Modelo* (a much longer document, of course), 'equidad' appears 37 times, 'inequidad' five times, 'justicia' nine times, 'diversidad' 37 times (excluding transcribed official documents and bibliography) – and 'otro', 'otredad' and 'epistemología' do not appear at all.

This earlier document speaks emphatically of the equal validity of 'other logics' and of the need to contrast basic scientific concepts with those deriving from other cultures ('so as to uncover the logic contained within different themes of science'). It calls for ethnocentrism to be laid bare so that 'each body of knowledge can be freed of a distorting and unnecessary outlook'. Further on, a more concrete claim is made about the contributions of indigenous cultures which are 'fundamental for modern science' such as *herbolaria*, soil classification and 'the lunar cycles and their relation to human labour'; this is followed by a sentence asking whether the significant contribution of indigenous cultures has not been in 'broadening the horizon of logical possibility and alternative ways to understand the world in which we live'.³⁴ From there the text shifts to claims about cognition ('nuevas síntesis cognitivas') and about how 'an epistemological dimension attempts to articulate the logics of construction of indigenous cosmovisions ... and contains within itself a broad and complex vision of the process whereby knowledge is constructed'. Overall the document is more tentative than dogmatic, as if the authors are hovering on the edge of a claim that thought processes and rationality (denoted by terms such as 'cognitive' and 'epistemological') differ from one culture to another.

Are these ideas about cultural differences purely theoretical, or are they relevant to the classroom? In the UIET I came face to face with this question when I was brought into a staff discussion of 'what constitutes an essay' and above all what weight should be given to 'opinions' in students' work. I gave the standard response based on my own background: an essay is not the place for the expression of personal opinions unless they are grounded in publicly available information. To this one of the teachers replied with an eloquent reminder that codified, established knowledge might invalidate, delegitimise or dominate the students' own knowledge. Now, when stated in theory such ideas

³³ This excludes quotations from other documents and usage other than to mean cultural diversity.

³⁴ The lunar cycles, it should be said, are hardly controversial, and constitute the basis for the Jewish and Muslim calendars.

may sound irresponsible, denying the responsibility of education to provide structure and to develop the students' analytical capacities. But context does matter, and my prescription had quite different implications in Mexico, where students have few opportunities for self-expression. They arrive at the UIs with what the UIET's programme adviser called 'asimetrías escolares y sociales tremendas', having been subjected to an unadulterated version of Bruner's 'teacher knows all' throughout their lives, and are barely able to express themselves orally or in writing in non-colloquial Spanish.

As the discussion about essays continued to bat to and fro, under the guidance of the programme adviser, so opinions fanned out and became nuanced. While one person said that 'if everything or anything goes' then 'todo se vacía' (nothing is left); another said the challenge of *multiculturalidad* was to 'be competent in any place', taking the 'multi' of 'multiculturalidad' seriously; an eloquent voice was raised in reminder of the repressive or humiliating educational background of the 'chamacos' (kids). As children, when they went to school, these students had to stop talking about the magical and supernatural beings which populated their imaginary because teachers would laugh at them. The discussion had two axes: on one, the cultural repression was seen to be inseparable from the authoritarian character of the education system generally, and thus cultural regeneration was very important in building young people's confidence, while on the other the adoption of *educación liberadora* and the constructivist approach were equal in importance to strategies to recover ancient traditions and teach difficult languages.

Educación popular (1): The UAIM project

The most ambitious reformulation of the educational project was developed at the earliest of these institutions, the UAIM in Sinaloa, by the anthropologist Jesús Ángel Ochoa Zazueta and the university's first academic coordinator, Ernesto Guerra, who after being originally trained as an economist engaged himself fully in educational theory and practice. The UAIM enjoyed more autonomy than the later UIs because it came into existence before the federal government had created the CGEIB and was located far from the intellectual centre of Mexico City. It also enjoyed the support of the state governor. In their elaborate programmatic document Ochoa and Guerra start from a simple observation of the spectacular failures of Mexican education, and denounce the preference given to *didáctica* and *pedagogía* over learning.³⁵ In paragraphs

³⁵ This account is taken from two articles in the UAIM's own journal, *Ra Ximhai*: Jesús Ángel Ochoa Zazueta, 'Aneregogía y skopeóutica: retorno a la educación por aprendizaje', *Ra Ximhai – Revista de Sociedad, Cultura y Desarrollo Sustentable*, 1: 1 (2005), pp. 1–14, available at www.redalyc.org/pdf/461/46110101.pdf; and Ernesto Guerra

reminiscent of Paulo Freire and the ultra-iconoclastic Ivan Illich, they sing the praises of education as a process of creation and discovery and denounce the infantilisation (my word) to which the standard methods subject pupils and students. They challenge the standard contrast of adult and child on the grounds that searching, curiosity, conceptualising and investigating are attributes of all people at all ages: they criticise the notion that childhood and youth are for learning, or receiving, knowledge, and that only adulthood is for seeking knowledge. Educators are responsible for preparing people to learn in an exploratory sense and not to depend on teaching. The suggestive phrase ‘pasividades del pupitre’ (the passivity embodied in sitting at a desk) is contrasted with a project to change candidates for instruction into people who are aware that their needs can be satisfied and that they live in a ‘decision-making arena’. In their alternative model the members of the student body, or ‘grupo sociointercultural’ (a variant on ‘intercultural’ designed to encompass non-ethnic differences), are rechristened ‘titulares académicos’ and join together with the ‘facilitadores-clarificadores’ (no longer ‘profesores’) to diagnose learning needs and to plan, evaluate and jointly undertake an activity better described as research or exploration than teaching or imbibing knowledge.

The ‘academic architecture’ of the UAIM as described here and in interviews with Guerra does not include classrooms but rather meeting places suited to learning. There are no admission exams, since they would exclude people from an indigenous background for whom Spanish may be a second language; and when an assignment concludes, the ‘titulares académicos’ (and they do use the term) work in groups to present a piece of work, since the purpose is not to test their knowledge but rather to evaluate their research and learning capacity. In two interviews more than one year apart, Guerra expressed his hostility to traditional forms of assessment which set up unnecessary competition among students and impose uniformity, in circumstances where ‘we are working with diversity’. Exams, he said, ‘produce failure’, as well as carrying a message of cultural supremacy: ‘one culture cannot fail another’ (‘una cultura no puede fracasar a otra’). The UAIM culture is a dissident one: students are invited to draw on what they know of their own lives in order to lay the foundations of a critique of both dominant and subordinate cultures.

Guerra’s cultural relativism was nuanced: he believed that ‘knowledge is relative to each culture’, but also said, ‘no estamos hablando de saberes

García, ‘La aneregogía de la voluntad: propuesta educativa sociointercultural de la Universidad Autónoma Indígena de México’, *Ra Ximhai – Revista de Sociedad, Cultura y Desarrollo Sustentable*, 1: 2 (2005), pp. 15–38, available at www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=46110102.

indígenas, sino de conocimientos indígenas', meaning that indigenous people know many things ('conocimientos') which others do not know, but – in contrast to 'hard' multiculturalists – that theirs is not a different way of knowing ('saberes'). The students mix their own cultural baggage with that of other students and of the 'facilitadores', producing an intercultural dialogue without implications for the veracity, or truth, of one or another culture ('sin decir cuál es el verdadero'). Yet at the same time, he points, as an example, not only to indigenous knowledge of the properties of plants, but also to the need to take into account the perspective from which a person is describing, say, a tree: 'we think there is a universal body of knowledge, but from the viewpoint of Tzotzil, Tzeltal or Yoreme people, the tree's meaning is different'.³⁶ Finally, Guerra criticised the PIFI evaluation system as 'universalist, mestizo and based on the idea that Western culture is the only one'.

The UAIM model encountered a mixed reception in the CGEIB. Leading individuals in the CGEIB team led by Sylvia Schmelkes had themselves emerged from the Centro de Estudios Educativos (Centre for Educational Studies), which, led by the former Jesuit and public intellectual Pablo Latapí (1927–2009), had been at the forefront of research and advocacy on educación liberadora and the constructivist approach – but they were also now institutional actors in the state's education system, which may explain their ambivalent response to the UAIM experiment. On the one hand it simply did not fit into the model of a university in the usual sense, yet on the other it offered a 'natural space for intercultural reflexion and dialogue', especially since, uniquely, it drew students from all over the country. They also found the examining arrangements interesting, which was to be expected since they too wanted to change the authoritarian relationship between pupils and teachers in Mexican education.

The CGEIB sent a team to inquire into the UAIM, and I listened to one of its members as she told me of her astonishment on arriving and finding what seemed like a scene out of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, with students 'reading and studying under the trees' and queuing up to present themselves for examination. She continued: 'there are no set subjects – the *facilitador* offers his or her project to any students who might be interested and remains available'. Once a sufficient number have shown interest they are provided with basic information and a reading list. She also confirmed my observations about the enormous sacrifices that UAIM students made, sleeping 12 to a room in precarious accommodation and collecting harvest remainders from local farmers to supply the university's refectory. But the pressure on teachers in such a system (where they were permanently available to students), the rejection of a conventional examination system and the abandonment

³⁶ The Tzotzil and Tzeltal are from Chiapas, mostly, while the Yoreme are in Sinaloa.

of the classroom made it difficult for either the CGEIB or the PIFI to fully support the 'modelo'. There were also serious issues of budgetary mismanagement, which Guerra himself complained of, under Ochoa. Although Ochoa was ousted and Guerra was eventually shifted out of the position of academic coordinator, the model remained an inspiration at the UAIM and even beyond: in 2007 a seasoned PRI operator had replaced Ochoa, but he too defended the model enthusiastically, albeit with modifications to preserve the UAIM's recognition as a university.

Educación popular (2): the Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural

The UVI is distinguished not only by its location inside an autonomous university, but also by the fact that its leadership came to intercultural education after a long period of involvement in educational research along lines similar to those described for the leadership of the CGEIB. Sergio Téllez, its founding director, who described himself as an anthropologist with a bias towards socio-linguistics, had previously been a leading figure in the 50-year-old Instituto de Investigaciones en Educación (Education Research Institute) of the Universidad Veracruzana. In an interview he described an intercultural agenda – which he distinguished from *indigenismo* – as a conception of education which produces people who will be proud to speak their own or their ancestral language, and will develop projects in their communities. Neither in this interview nor in the interviews conducted at the same time with coordinators of UVI programmes was there any mention of alternative epistemologies or 'saberes'. On the other hand there was much mention of the role of student research in contributing to the development of the students' communities (*vinculación*), and of the ways in which learning indigenous languages strengthened their self-confidence. For example, I was told that quite often candidates do not admit to speaking their own language on the application form – because of the stigma – but once they begin their studies they reveal that they can speak their language, and by the second year they are expected to be able to translate texts in both directions, although by no means all are fluent in an indigenous language.

The *coordinador* of one of the UVI's three campuses, located in an indigenous area, Huazuntlan, who had a Master's degree in Indoamerican linguistics from the well-known social science graduate school the Centro de Investigación y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (Centre for Research and Advanced Studies in Social Anthropology, CIESAS), explained the intercultural ethos in terms of dialogue, mutuality and renewal rather than in terms of emphasising difference and non-translatability. He described interculturalidad as 'a concept still under construction' and said that in the area there are people of different groups including those he described,

interestingly, as ‘castellanos’ (Spanish-speakers), as well as speakers of indigenous languages. So, he said, ‘we are multicultural in the sense that the population is culturally mixed’, which could be described as a minimum definition. But he then went on to speak of the intercultural character of the student body in terms of a shared space in which the students engage in dialogue and in a joint venture to find different ways of being and thinking and a common search for a way forward.

Just as the coordinador joined the theme of interculturalidad with that of dialogical learning, so also the head of UVI’s programme on regional and sustainable development spoke of the importance of joining up the many sources which one person might have acquired in education, with knowledge and practices acquired by others over hundreds, even thousands of years in order to produce useful knowledge.³⁷ His particular concern was with local development projects, reflecting his background in the ‘Latin American tradition of educación popular’ and non-formal education in NGOs, and he included the idea of drawing on the accumulated knowledge of indigenous peoples, but without implying any sort of conflict or incompatibility with modern science; on the contrary, the implication is that such knowledge is a result of testing through trial and error over innumerable generations, like modern science, albeit without the speed and complexity brought by advanced technology.

The Politics of Recognition

Even if they are not devoted to hard multiculturalism, the UIs are still much more than an innovative educational venture open to all, with an interesting sideline in language teaching. Clearly the intention of their originators includes an ideals-driven or cause-oriented intervention in the politics of identity, or recognition. Recognition could mean opening a space for a culture to retrieve a degree of institutional autonomy by reinstating institutions and authorities; it could mean helping the heirs to a culture to learn ‘their own’ language, whether spoken, written or as a historical source. But it could also mean – and this is what I think is in their minds – enabling the bearers of these cultural traditions to achieve recognition of what they actually produce. Recognition also means full participation in ‘mainstream’ institutions such as education, as well as politics and business and the creative arts, and taking part in reshaping them.³⁸ As Charles Taylor said, to value a culture or its

³⁷ Freire uses the term ‘dialogical learning’ repeatedly: see Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy and Civic Courage* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998).

³⁸ Téllez spoke at length of a successful participation by a group of students in a video festival, the ‘Festival de la Identidad’ at Papantla, and another member of staff spoke of students producing fiction and documentary videos entirely independently.

products because one feels obliged to do so – notably on account of a history of victimhood – amounts to ‘unsufferable patronizing’: authentic recognition of a people is for their worth and the worth of their products (in the broadest sense).³⁹ Recognition is a subtle affair and involves much that is unspoken and hard to articulate. If it were limited to specifically cultural renewal, it would risk falling into the genre of state-sponsored folklore, and would also place all the investment in a single basket riddled with the uncertain outcomes arising from the complex interplay between how the ‘recognised’ perceive, interpret and experience the attitudes of the ‘recognising’, and vice versa, in a never-ending play of mirrors. It must be said, though, that this kind of recognition by mainstreaming rests on a degree of acceptance of the legitimacy and ‘reformability’ of mainstream institutions. In that respect it parts company with those, like Iris Marion Young at a certain stage, who would regard mainstream institutions as irredeemably exclusionary.⁴⁰ It also parts company with those who would denounce all and any sort of mainstreaming – otherwise labelled integration or *mestizaje* – as a form of oppression.

In their responses to my questions UVI academics saw themselves as developing a package which aims to equip intellectuals or professionals as development agents, and in which the themes of indigenous language and culture have their place, but not a privileged place. The recovery of a lost or partly lost culture, or simply the desire to learn more about one’s ancestors, did not in their conception seem to be part of a project to reconstruct the past; rather, it was a contribution to a process of enabling their students, once they had graduated, to take up leadership positions in their communities, and Dietz’s article on the subject does mention ‘several former students and two former lecturers’ who have been elected to positions in local government.⁴¹

External agents would do well to distinguish between the content of a cultural heritage and the sense of victimhood which affects the heirs to a repressed or despised culture and leads them to demand recognition. After all, I might want to know more about an ancestral language of which I have only a shaky command, but that does not mean I want to institutionalise its use. In other words, cultural inclusion is part of social inclusion, but the fluidity and uncertainty of the meaning of cultural practices and symbols should moderate the ambitions of those who would rescue and rebuild a culture, especially when it is another’s culture.

³⁹ Charles Taylor, ‘The Politics of Recognition’, in Amy Gutmann (ed.), *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 69–70.

⁴⁰ Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

⁴¹ Dietz, ‘Diversity Regimes Beyond Multiculturalism?’.

Thus we can understand why the same person who speaks of the legitimate resentment of one who is forever 'trying to recover his language – for language gives one identity', and who complains that 'for hundreds of years governments have told us our language and our culture are of no use to the country's development',⁴² also expresses his worries about the 'essentialist or fundamentalist' tendencies of certain indigenous intellectuals who give themselves the authority to speak on behalf of 'we the indígenas', using a discourse which merely serves to reinforce power structures within communities.⁴³

The above quotations replicate the tension found in an anthropology which rebels against the essentialisation of cultures and their representation in excessively homogeneous terms while simultaneously fighting for their recognition. This central and touchy issue is debated, often in interestingly cross-cutting ways, in the Mexican literature. Essays by Aida Hernández and Hector Díaz-Polanco show that even authors who were fiercely critical of what they saw as the manipulative and culturally tone-deaf neoliberal neo-indigenism of Fox's government hesitate to endorse a wholly culturalist or identity-based approach to indigenous marginalisation.⁴⁴ In a similar spirit to the UVI coordinador quoted above, they are particularly unwilling to endorse the marginalisation of women in indigenous cultures, or more precisely, the instrumentalisation of indigenous cultural heritage for the purpose of perpetuating that marginalisation and the position of local power-brokers. And they certainly do not go anywhere near the 'hard multiculturalist' critique, which can sometimes go so far as to describe human rights as a Western imposition. On the contrary, Hernández invokes women's rights as universal human rights, and sees indigenous women's struggle for 'differentiated citizenship' not as a step to self-exclusion but as a 'fundamental axis for setting the terms of their participation in the national project'. Even when she criticises the notion that electoral democracy is the only proper form

⁴² The quoted individual, a coordinador at the UVI, used the metaphor of a student 'running after his dying grandfather'.

⁴³ In the words of a UVI programme head, 'muchas veces tienen rasgos esencialistas o fundamentalistas ... en el lenguaje de ciertos intelectuales indígenas o de líderes indígenas se hablaba de universidades indígenas, para los indígenas, y eso es como un discurso que sirve para mantener ciertas relaciones de poder al interior de las comunidades indígenas ... cuando no forzosamente es la reivindicación de los grupos más a nivel local reivindicar *nuestra* identidad indígena'.

⁴⁴ That is, a new version of the acculturation which lay at the heart of indigenism from Gamio through Aguirre Beltrán, but one which puts the market in the protagonic role that the state had previously occupied. See Guillermo de la Peña, 'La ciudadanía étnica y la construcción de los indios en el México contemporáneo', *Revista Internacional de Filosofía Política*, 6 (1995), pp. 116–40; and 'A New Mexican Nationalism? Indigenous Rights, Constitutional Reform and the Conflicting Meanings of Multiculturalism', *Nations and Nationalism*, 12: 2 (2006), pp. 279–302.

of political participation, she does so in terms of political theory and not with reference to cultural specificities.⁴⁵

Although anthropologists have barely commented on the UIs, the latter would be vulnerable to a common criticism of neoliberal indigenism, namely that they have been developed with no visible input from indigenous representative organisations. There does not even seem to have been an effort to involve the corporatist 'Indian' associations which the state has occasionally tried to encourage.⁴⁶ The only significant ones available would of course have been the Zapatistas, but the state would not work with them and they probably would not want to work with the state – though it is rumoured that an independent UI in the municipality of El Rayón in Chiapas which has attempted unsuccessfully to gain recognition is under their influence.

The one anthropological view of a UI as an exercise in the politics of recognition is provided by Gunther Dietz, who was appointed director of the UVI by the director of the Universidad Veracruzana as this article was going to press.⁴⁷ Dietz describes the UVI's programmes in some detail, together with the aim of developing 'flexible, interdisciplinary and professional degree programs of a good academic standard that are also locally and regionally relevant, useful and sustainable for both students and their wider communities'. This sounds very practical, almost managerial, bringing the knowledge transmitted through generations of agricultural production or informal medical treatment into contact with conventional science and medicine. But Dietz also repeatedly returns to notions such as the 'intercultural construction of knowledge' (drawn from García Canclini) and the 'epistemic diversification embedded in these processes'.⁴⁸ In terms characteristic of 'hard multiculturalism', he speaks of the hybridisation of knowledge, of knowledges in the plural, of 'the identity discourses and the epistemological ownership of academic actors, associations and community stakeholders', as if indigenous people really think differently from people educated to respect the procedures of modern or formal science. In a similar vein, he claims that 'the inclusion of a diversity of actors and a broad range of regional knowledge in the very nucleus of academic degree programmes challenges the universalist, rather mono-logical and mono-epistemic character

⁴⁵ Héctor Díaz-Polanco, 'Reconocimiento y redistribución', and Rosalva Aida Hernández, 'La diferencia en debate: la política de identidades en tiempos del PAN', in Hernández Paz and Sierra (eds.), *El Estado y los indígenas en tiempos del PAN*, p. 302.

⁴⁶ Guillermo de la Peña, 'Social and Cultural Policies toward Indigenous Peoples: Perspectives from Latin America', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 34 (2005), p. 733.

⁴⁷ Dietz, 'Diversity Regimes Beyond Multiculturalism?'

⁴⁸ Nestor García Canclini, 'Sociedades del conocimiento: la construcción intercultural del saber', in Canclini (ed.), *Diferentes, desiguales y desconectados: mapas de la interculturalidad* (Barcelona: Gedisa, 2004), p. 194.

of the classical western university'.⁴⁹ This highly controversial language does not chime with what I have quoted here from my interviews in the UVI and elsewhere, or the CGEIB's *Modelo*, though the ideas do bear similarity to the earlier document (*Políticas y fundamentos*). Dietz's article contains no quotations from the mouths or pens of UVI staff or students, aside from programmatic documents, so we have no way of knowing whether this language reflects what was said in the interviews he conducted.

To describe this language as controversial is not to deny that different indigenous peoples have different classification systems of, for example, plants or illnesses, or that they have different ideas about causality in nature. That has been standard since at least the publication of Lévi-Strauss's *La pensée sauvage* in 1962 and the ethnobotanical work of Brent Berlin. But those same authorities also confirm that folk classification and modern science see 'essentially the same discontinuities in plants and animals regardless of their scientific background'.⁵⁰ This view that there are deep-rooted problems of communication between cultures originated in Benjamin Whorf's ideas about language, so really these are arguments about language and not culture in general. But psychologists have found only the flimsiest of evidence for this line of thinking, and even then not in wide-ranging aspects of culture but in very detailed things like the perception of certain hues of certain colours.⁵¹ The evidence certainly does not justify wide-ranging claims placing Western and non-Western cultures in opposition as radically different ways of knowing – indeed, if the evidence did support the Whorfian claims, it would make the gulf between, say, English and Tzotzil cultures as great as that between English and Finnish cultures. Many people, including many scientists, hold views which are incompatible with modern science (religious views notably), but that does not imply either that those views should be granted some sort of scientific equivalence, or even that those who hold them believe they should, let alone that those people are incapable of grasping modern science. In the same way, people who use plants as objects in ritual procedure may very well use the same plants in non-ritual ways as food or decoration, and may also use them in contexts of trial and error, looking for causal relationships and seeking peer-group consensus on the results. In other words, to construe beliefs surrounding magic and ritual procedures as representing

⁴⁹ Dietz, 'Diversity Regimes Beyond Multiculturalism?', p. 192.

⁵⁰ Laurence Hirschfeld, review of Brent Berlin, *Ethnobiological Classification: Principles of Plant and Animal Classification in Traditional Societies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), *American Ethnologist*, 21: 2 (1994), pp. 430–1.

⁵¹ This field is outside my expertise, but a survey can be found in John Lucy, 'Language, Culture and Mind in Comparative Perspective,' in Michel Achard and Suzanne Kemer (eds.), *Language, Culture and Mind* (Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications, 2004). I am indebted to Dan Sperber for clarification on this issue.

an indigenous notion of causality is to misunderstand the anthropological study of these matters, starting from Durkheim.

Vinculación

In an interview in May 2007, the head of higher education at the CGEIB, Lourdes Casillas, described how she and her colleagues had been taken aback by hearing of students' incomprehension when being told to learn agricultural techniques from a blackboard: had they not learnt all this from their parents?⁵² Her conclusion was that a balance has to be sought between the contributions of science and the experiences of communities. She attached much importance to encouraging students to value their own experience and also to stimulating teachers to appreciate how 'on the ground things can be conceived differently and be systematised in a different way', and continued with the theme of 'action research linked to the strong work-based ties in communities' – in other words, 'vinculación'. But since students usually undertake such research in their home communities, vinculación is bound to be more than an educational device, bringing personal issues into the learning experience. Thus, at the Pátzcuaro Conference on Higher Education for Indigenous Peoples in 2009, the head of research at the UNIET revealed the moral and even emotional hazards which may arise when students undertake research in their own communities, telling of an occasion when the issue had arisen of sexual violence against women: one woman in the community concerned was so deeply affected that she followed the students back to the UNIET campus to join in a class with them.

To illustrate how this translates into classroom activity, I can describe discussions of research projects – known also as 'investigación-intervención' or 'investigación-acción' – at the Sede Selvas of the UVI in 2007. The class in question had three staff and eight students, and the latter presented their projects, all to be undertaken in their home communities. It was conducted like a committee meeting: first a chair and rapporteur were elected from among the students, amidst a ripple of amusement and chatter, though as the students seemed uncertain as to how to proceed, a teacher eventually took the lead. The projects were concerned with the solutions to local problems, and they were to be conducted in a 'reflexión común' with the people in the communities, without any 'imposition' – though there was an admission that they did have a 'concrete objective to encourage the indigenous language'.

⁵² '[L]a imposición del maestro ... la creencia absoluta en lo que da el maestro ... Nos dimos cuenta hablando con estudiantes que decían que no entendían cómo un profesor podía enseñar como sembrar en el pizarrón cuando ellos lo saben perfectamente ... o sus padres les han enseñado otro tipo de cosas.'

The academics laid down five guideline questions:

1. How will my research contribute to the development of my community (pueblo)?
2. Do I have the required theoretical and practical tools?
3. How will my subject strengthen my community's culture?
4. How can I ensure that the research-intervention will not get stuck in 'activitis' and fail to contribute to the community's development?⁵³
5. How can I help to create a space for the discussion of the problem of culture?

These students were talking about projects in their own communities, where they had probably grown up, but within two years of studying at the UVI, their words already expressed their feelings as quasi-outsiders: 'We must start from their needs, not our own ... we must be neither *campesinistas* nor *tradicionalistas* ... it will be hard to coexist [*convivencia*] with parents, children and schoolteachers.' Thus, paradoxically, their return home with a project to recover heritage and promote development places them at a distance because they come armed with a theory of what the community is doing. It also points to a simple but crucial aspect of their experience. They have not just been on an intercultural training course – they have become immersed in university life.

The origins of the UVI's *vinculación* system may not lie only with the constructivist approach. As Dietz describes it, there seems to have been a debate between academics looking to 'introduce constructivist student-centered pedagogical approaches' and 'indigenous activists' who 'rejected these "too postmodern attitudes"' and wanted students to be 'trained as bearers of collective ethnic cultures that require group empowerment through the transfer of knowledge from academia to community actors'.⁵⁴ Eventually the debate was also joined by environmentally conscious NGOs, and out of it came a mutual fertilisation in which 'teachers and students share community development experiences through their NGO participation, indigenous organizations learn from continuous education courses and NGOs enter the university through "expert" teaching and student supervision activities'.⁵⁵ This account portrays indigenous activists (who rarely got a mention in my interviews) as looking to the university to provide tools for their politics in a somewhat instrumental, even 'top-down' way which they believe to be out of harmony with the constructivist approach. Dietz for his part may be

⁵³ 'Activitis' was the term used; it means feverish activity without much reflection.

⁵⁴ To my mind, if anyone, it was the activists who were the postmodernists, since they contested practical teaching in the name of identity politics.

⁵⁵ Dietz, 'Diversity Regimes Beyond Multiculturalism?', p. 189.

the postmodernist, advocating a multiculturalist relativism which he describes as intercultural, inter-actor and inter-lingual. In any case his description provides support for my interpretation: that the UIs constitute a space in which interculturalidad is debated and experienced, not imposed.

Whereas communities are accustomed to 'losing' their young people once they acquire an education, these students are returning home, but with ideas acquired in a university atmosphere of open discussion and dispassionate analysis. Paradoxically, this project to recover, or at least gain a respect for, indigenous heritage is something which could destabilise customary relationships of authority, though my interviewees did not mention this. So while, as Dietz describes them, indigenous activists view education as providing tools for their agenda, the constructivist teachers wanted the students to explore their identity for themselves.

Although interviews with individual students were not part of my agenda, collective conversations were arranged in four institutions. In a meeting with a group of third-year students at the UNICH in San Cristóbal de las Casas, I heard of four projects. One involved waste management, and another crop diversification (from maize to market gardening) with the use of natural fertilizer. The other two were presented as providing a responsive survey and diagnosis service to issues raised by villagers, arising from a concern that communities were going from one project to the next without sustained guidance. In response to my observation that the use of natural fertilizer would require much more labour than chemical fertilizer, a student said that the most important part of their course was combining what they have learnt theoretically with the experience accumulated in the community. There was nothing in this exchange regarding the superiority or inferiority of one way of knowing or another, simply a recognition that people who are heirs to centuries of farming experience have much of value to say on the subject.

In conversation with a group of teachers also at the UNICH, similar ideas were expressed with more elaborate vocabulary: through 'vinculación comunitaria', 'the university goes to the community not to bring knowledge to it, but rather to gain feedback from the traditional ways of knowing [saberes] which are to be found in those places'. Here again we find a practical construction of what in multicultural jargon would be a story about other knowledges and epistemologies. Similarly, third- and fourth-year students at the UNIEM used the term 'cosmovisión', but not in the sense of a system of knowledge or a religious eschatology. It merely served as the opening to an ethnographic discussion about cultural differences: there was mention of blessings to bring on rain and of rituals and exchanges surrounding marriage among the Mazahua – that is, among these students' own people – and a general remark about the importance of religion 'which forms part of their beliefs and their relationship with nature'. In other words, they were speaking

of a heritage, not an epistemology, and, speaking in the third person, did not quite claim it as their own, though they identified themselves to me as Mazahua.

In contrast to the detached quasi-ethnographic third person used to describe the social character of their communities, the subject of language could bring out the first person in students' reflections and thus a stronger sense of identification: in the UNICH group, each participant began by identifying himself or herself, unprompted, as a speaker of one or another language, and there were remarks about the contrasting experiences a person can have in using his or her language – and indeed about the very notion of possessing a language of one's own. In several conversations students also spoke of a range of situations in which language issues were complicated for them or for people like themselves: often parents had distanced themselves from their mother tongue when migrating because they felt ashamed to speak it and had likewise discouraged their children from doing so; stories were recounted, autobiographical or not, of schoolteachers who punished children for speaking 'lengua'. Students described how some people, because they get told off for using an indigenous language, prefer to cover up their ethnicity, 'keeping it just for themselves', like the applicants to the UVI who did not mention their knowledge of an indigenous language on their application forms. Others, in contrast, 'are in the fight for recognition as persons, whether or not they speak an indigenous language ... they are proclaiming the culture from which they sprang however much or little they knew of it'. The sentence is confused, yet the confusion is itself revealing: language is identified with the affirmation of origins. These words are saying, surely, that poor command reflects the strenuous effort required to learn an indigenous language in adulthood; it is the effort that counts as part of the reclaiming of one's distinctive heritage. In the end the command will probably be limited, but that is not the point.

Universalism, Relativism and a Space for Experimentation

If this paper has described a range of opinions, including doubts, about the nature and purpose of intercultural education, that is because it draws on the experience of state institutions which, as I have said, are quite unique in this field at the higher education level.

Within this context we observe a confluence of ideas derived from educación popular, or constructivism, and from multiculturalism. The former is universalist and addresses the repressive and authoritarian features which pervade public schools in many parts of Mexico, not only in indigenous areas, while the latter is concerned with redressing the unequal respect paid to different cultural traditions by claiming, in its 'hardest' versions, that indigenous cultures are so radically 'other' that their bearers have a different

epistemology – that not only do they know different things, which is not controversial, but that they ‘think differently’. The people I have interviewed tend to skirt around that issue; instead, they bring into the classroom the indigenous students’ distinctive knowledge and heritage, encouraging them to undertake development-related research projects in their own communities and helping them to develop their self-confidence. Their vocation could be described in the words Sylvia Schmelkes used in an interview when she explained that Mexico’s new self-description, inscribed in the Constitution in 1992, as ‘pluricultural’ put an end to centuries during which the dominant culture said to *indígenas* that ‘if you want to mix with me, you have to cease being yourself.’⁵⁶ Now, she said, intercultural higher education is taking up the challenge of strengthening indigenous languages and cultures in order to enable Mexicans to be more plural than ever before, while also trying to pull down the innumerable barriers against indigenous participation in society’s mainstream.

These elements have come to constitute a culture in the UIs which is different from that found in other intercultural ventures and in other educational institutions. One difference vis-à-vis other intercultural ventures from the students’ viewpoint is the prolonged immersion in higher education, since the UIs offer four-year degrees rather than short or one-year courses. The pedagogical difference vis-à-vis other higher education institutions lies in the intensity of contact between staff and students, and the introduction of research activity from the beginning of the first year. At the same time, the intercultural identity of the UIs has created a culture within them which encourages the constant inclusion of resources drawn from indigenous culture, and also a recurrent atmosphere of debate and invention about how to achieve this, whether through the teaching of languages, undertaking research projects, the infusion of indigenous elements into courses on development and on tourism, or the encouragement of students to take their video productions to a video-makers’ festival.⁵⁷

Conclusion

This paper has been an attempt to overcome a normative, policy and interpretative impasse in the literature on interculturalidad and indigenism in Latin America. The normative impasse consists in the difficulty of ensuring that a politics of recognition goes hand in hand with a politics of inclusion. It is revealed in the difficulties over women’s rights and in claims that official indigenist initiatives are a modernising façade or a neoliberal distraction from

⁵⁶ ‘Si quieres mezclar conmigo tienes que dejar de ser tú.’

⁵⁷ See note 38 above.

underlying structures of inequality, as Hale seemed to be saying in 2002.⁵⁸ The view in this paper is that these concerns are secondary once it is understood that cultural and even juridical recognition in the form of legal pluralism, as in *usos y costumbres* in Oaxaca, or bilingual education, should not operate as a distraction from socio-economic inclusion, such as measures like conditional cash transfers or more radical policies like the wholesale reform of education or the provision of genuinely free medical care. This fits with the approach taken by the leading figure in teacher training for bilingual education, Luis Enrique López, who takes what he calls the traditional and the modern to be complementary, and argues for incorporating indigenous knowledge and the cooperative learning habits found in indigenous society, while adapting to variations in levels of bilingualism and the indigenous demand for the revitalisation of their own languages.⁵⁹ It would be consistent with his approach to say that if one seeks to resist the undoubted destructive effects of modernisation (marginalisation, ecological destruction, neglected or trampled heritages), the way to do it is not for outsiders, be they activists, professors or state officials, to attempt a reconstruction of a mythical or lost past, or to artificially promote the literate usage of languages whose survival is owed entirely to oral transmission. Precisely such a tension is documented by Emiko Saldivar, who describes the differences dividing Instituto Nacional Indigenista (National Indigenous Institute, INI) field workers, proud of their practical, 'down-to-earth' commitment, and office-holders in thrall to the rhetoric of indigeneity and cultural difference.⁶⁰

This article emphasises the 'inter' of interculturalidad by conceiving it as a programme of affirmative action with recognition which depends on the encouragement and empowerment of indigenous voices in all their variety. These are grandiose ambitions, and the resources and mission of the UIs are limited in comparison with the dual challenge of recognition and inclusion. No wonder, then, that they are treated here as an experimental arena and, by implication, a venture which should encourage the growth of indigenous professionals and the broadening of indigenous leadership, which is very scarce in Mexico despite the media projection of the Zapatistas.

Some commentators see interculturalidad as the pursuit not just of equality of cultural respect but of equality between cultures *tout court*. This is

⁵⁸ Charles R. Hale, 'Does Multiculturalism Menace? Governance, Cultural Rights and the Politics of Identity in Guatemala', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 34: 3 (2002), pp. 485–524.

⁵⁹ Luis Enrique López and Inge Sichra, 'La educación en áreas indígenas de América Latina: balances y perspectivas', in Hernaiz (ed.), *Educación en la diversidad*, p. 143.

⁶⁰ Emiko Saldivar, 'Everyday Practices of Indigenismo: An Ethnography of Anthropology and the State in Mexico', *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology*, 16: 1 (2011), pp. 67–89.

disingenuous, not least because it portrays the hegemonic and indigenous cultures as either radically separate or separable, because it ignores their internal diversity and intermingling influences, and because it sometimes can spill over into a radical essentialisation of 'Western culture', reducing it to a single body of knowledge and experience to be summarily dismissed as 'monologic'. Instead, the cases reported here start from two recognitions: that the cultural traditions, apparatuses and hierarchies in play in Mexico, or elsewhere, are interpenetrated and cannot be unbundled, yet also that the collective exclusion and individual discrimination suffered by the bearers of indigenous culture have an undoubted cultural dimension which can be confronted inside the state's higher education system, among other places. This is achieved by offering courses in subjects hitherto marginal to higher education but relevant to the development needs of indigenous areas, as well as by providing access to a four-year university life experience, and by introducing *vinculación*, which can create a new type of role for young people as researchers and eventually leaders in their communities and beyond. The perhaps optimistic argument is that the methods and ethos of *educación liberadora* and *educación popular*, combined with the practices of cultural recognition which permeate those institutions, in their course content, in their student population and in the commitment of their academic staff, as well as the intellectual curiosity aroused by their location and social contexts, will contribute to an enhancement of the politics of recognition regionally and nationally. These are ambitious aspirations, but they are aspirations proper to *interculturalidad*, one of the purposes of which is to avoid or escape the ghettoisation that may not be the intention of multiculturalism but is often laid at its door in Europe.⁶¹ That, however, is a subject for another discussion.

Spanish and Portuguese abstracts

Spanish abstract. El propósito de este artículo es explorar el ethos de la interculturalidad en las recientemente fundadas Universidades Interculturales (UI) en México. Sobre la base de documentos y entrevistas con profesores en cinco universidades, se puede observar que la institucionalización de la educación superior intercultural al interior del sector estatal ha creado un espacio en el que la política de reconocimiento encuentra a las ideas radicales de educadores en la tradición del constructivismo y la educación popular. La educación superior intercultural no selecciona a los estudiantes sobre la base de raza aunque la ubicación de los campus y el contenido de los cursos están designados para atraer a estudiantes indígenas.

⁶¹ Lourdes Arizpe, a Mexican anthropologist who has occupied important positions in Mexico and the UN, told me that the term 'intercultural' has gradually replaced 'multicultural' in Latin America because of a desire to distinguish the Latin American concept from the ghettoisation and cultural relativism associated with the European and North American versions.

La introducción temprana de la investigación de campo en el curso de licenciatura debería transformar la relación entre los estudiantes y sus comunidades de origen, y prepararlos para papeles de liderazgo. El artículo concluye con una crítica de lo que llama multiculturalismo 'duro'.

Spanish keywords: interculturalidad, educación superior, indigenismo, México, acción afirmativa

Portuguese abstract. Este artigo se propõe a explorar o *éthos* da *interculturalidad* nas recém fundadas *Univerdades Interculturales* (UI) mexicanas. Com base em documentação e entrevistas com professores de cinco universidades, pode-se observar que a institucionalização da educação superior intercultural dentro do setor estatal tem criado um espaço no qual as políticas de auto-reconhecimento se encontram com as ideias radicais de educadores da tradição construtivista e da *educación popular*. A educação superior intercultural não baseia sua seleção de estudantes em critérios raciais e sim de acordo com a localização dos campi. Ademais, o conteúdo dos cursos é elaborado de forma a atrair estudantes indígenas. A introdução de trabalhos de campo desde o princípio do curso de graduação tem como intuito transformar a relação entre estudantes e suas comunidades de origem e prepará-los para desempenharem papéis de liderança. O artigo conclui com uma crítica a o que o autor chama multiculturalismo 'duro'.

Portuguese keywords: *interculturalidad*, educação superior, indigenismo, México, ações afirmativas