

**Widening the participation of indigenous people in Mexican higher education:
results, challenges and perspectives¹**

**Ampliando la participación de las poblaciones indígenas en la educación superior
mexicana: resultados, desafíos y perspectivas**

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.25087/resur4a3>

Recibido, 31 de agosto de 2017

Aprobado, 20 de octubre de 2017

Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to provide an overview and discuss the results and current situation of the principal programmes and actions taken in Mexico in the last sixteen years to foster social inclusion in higher education, with particular reference to the situation of the indigenous population and some observations on the postgraduate level. I contend that despite a wide range of problems that affect each of such programmes, taken together these actions have laid the groundwork for better informed and effective responses for the next phases of development of similar programmes. The first part of the article addresses the relevance of the subject and our current understanding of it; the second section illustrates the lack of access of the indigenous population to higher education and summarizes the principal programmes and actions that have so far been taken to deal with this situation; the third and final part discusses the progress that has been made and reflects on some important challenges for the years ahead.

¹ This work was partly funded by the Mexican National Science and Technology Council (CONACYT) through a sabbatical grant I spent as guest researcher between March 2015-February 2016 at the Lateinamerika-Institut, Freie Universität Berlin.

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Keywords: Social inclusion and equity; higher education; Mexico; Indigenous people; programmes and policies.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta una visión panorámica de los principales programas y acciones llevados a cabo en México en el presente siglo para impulsar la inclusión social de los indígenas en la educación superior, y reflexiona sobre sus resultados y situación actual. Se incluyen algunas observaciones sobre el nivel de posgrado. Se sostiene que pese a los diversos problemas que enfrentan estos programas, tomados en conjunto han sentado las bases para mejorar la implementación y alcances de acciones similares, mejor informadas y eficientes, en los años subsiguientes. En la primera parte se destaca la relevancia del tema y el estado de nuestro conocimiento al respecto; a continuación, se examinan los bajos niveles de acceso de la población indígena a la educación superior, y se pasa revista a los principales programas ejecutados a la fecha para atender este problema; en la tercera y última parte, se puntualizan los avances principales alcanzados a la fecha y se reflexiona sobre algunos retos importantes que deben atenderse en el futuro inmediato.

Palabras clave: inclusión social y equidad; educación superior; México; pueblos indios; programas y políticas.

Introduction

Social inclusion and equity in Higher Education are high on Mexico's social and educational agenda. Guaranteeing indigenous students access to, and the continued and successful conclusion of, a university education is an urgent undertaking that is being addressed, although there is still much to do. Despite ambitious programmes having been introduced since the turn of the century to alleviate poverty, economic and social inequality still very much exists and has even worsened, affecting the development and results of the various actions aimed at democratizing and diversifying public education. This situation is manifested clearly in the strategic higher education sector.

The case study of Mexico is of particular interest because of the importance of its indigenous population in all facets of Mexican life; because its higher education system is among the most well-established in the Latin American region; and because a series of key social inclusion programmes, some of them pioneering, have been introduced that have been closely observed throughout the rest of the sub-continent. In this essay attention will concentrate on what is happening in Mexico, but it should bear in mind that its development is taking place within a context of issues and resolution efforts common throughout Latin America (see Mato, 2013).

The perspective presented here is open to discussion and to be fine-tuned at a later date. Attention is focused on the most far-reaching actions, without spending too much time on the particulars of their design and operation. Let it be emphasised that the main purpose is to give a general overview of the situation and discuss the results achieved to date. All of the programmes that are mentioned are still ongoing and have yielded experiences and results that should be incorporated into later studies. Social inclusion at university level, and its associated themes, is a fairly new and dynamic field of knowledge in Mexico, where new questions, research findings and interpretations are still just being proposed. Yet, there is still much research to be done, such as gathering data on the members of the indigenous population with a university education, their educational interests and needs, and a rigorous evaluation research on the programmes conducted to date viewed as a whole. The results of these analyses and reviews should be used, among other purposes, to improve the planning of public policy, the implementation of ongoing programmes, and the decisions to be taken in the coming years.

The onset of twenty-first century and the need for strategic information

The underrepresentation and overall conditions affecting the Mexican indigenous population in higher education became a subject of concern and study only recently. When the twenty-first century began, there was only a general understanding of the factors and circumstances that restricted indigenous access at university level, and almost nothing was known about the characteristics and academic needs of the indigenous women and men who wanted to pursue higher education, and the smaller number of those who have completed a university degree. The relevance of the subject at hand can be illustrated by describing the initial conditions under which one of the

first programmes in Mexico was implemented to promote higher educational opportunities to indigenous peoples.³

In the spring of 2001 the “Programa Internacional de Becas de Posgrado para Indígenas” (International Postgraduate Fellowships Programme for Indigenous People) was launched. The programme, also known as IFP Mexico in English, formed part of the International Fellowships Program (IFP), the single largest programme ever supported by the Ford Foundation, a prominent and renowned American philanthropic organisation. As well as in Mexico, the IFP operated in 22 countries in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Russia between 2000 and 2013. The programme supported academically talented and socially committed individuals from marginalized social groups to undertake postgraduate studies. The project’s total investment of around US \$ 420 million dollars gives an idea as to its size and scope. In each country, the Ford Foundation invited an institutional partner to administer the programme and adapt it to the context and needs of the local target population (Dassin, Enders & Kotmann, 2014). In Mexico, this task was entrusted to the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (Centre for Research and Advanced Studies in Social Anthropology, CIESAS).

As for how the programme was designed and run, this was an “unconventional” fellowship programme.⁴ By recognising the incremental impacts of social disadvantage, which manifests itself in different ways throughout the education careers of indigenous students—most of whom attend primary and secondary school in so-called low-quality “peripheral” educational systems—, the IFP Mexico staff was required to come up with specific strategies and procedures to: 1) Recruit candidates and select fellowship students by taking into consideration their level of social exclusion and marginalisation; 2) Advise them on choosing the postgraduate course most suited to their own academic and professional interests; 3) Reinforce relevant academic skills and knowledge before commencing postgraduate studies, and 4) Support and accompany them during their studies.

Critical in ensuring the efficiency of each of these aspects of the programme was the possession of accurate and timely knowledge of the specific social group with which

³ The following observations and remarks are based on my personal experience as director of the Ford Foundation International Fellowships Program in Mexico (IFP Mexico) throughout the lifespan of the programme (2001-2013).

⁴ For an overall view of the design, objectives and results of the IFP Mexico, see Navarrete (2013).

and for which the programme would be working. However, when the IFP Mexico got underway in 2001, there was a lack of knowledge about the indigenous university population. The information available was insufficient, scattered and fragmented. For example, only broad and often contradictory estimates could be found for the number of indigenous university graduates, information that was of particular relevance for gauging the demand the programme could expect. Neither was any consistent information to be found on indigenous graduates' geographical whereabouts or the jobs they did, both of which variables were necessary to come up with strategies to promote the programme and recruit potential fellowship candidates. As far as academic considerations are concerned, apart from a handful of courses that had always been traditionally associated with this segment of the population, there was no mapping of the courses and universities where they studied, and virtually nothing was known about these students' academic needs and interests. Nor did any systematic information exist on postgraduate courses in Mexico or abroad that might be attractive to the students, and more suitable and also interested in the training of indigenous students.

This type of information was not available at the federal or state-run public institutions and organisations in charge of higher education, some of which had been in existence for several decades, such is the case of the Dirección General de Educación Superior (Higher Education Directorate), set up in 1960. Nor was information available at Mexico's federal universities (9) or state universities (34), or at the Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas (National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples, CDI), a body whose origins date back to 1949. The Commission has regional offices in all states of Mexico and one of its functions is to compile information on the indigenous population in each region. Nor did the Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología (National Science and Technology Council, CONACYT), the principal awarding body of postgraduate fellowships in Mexico, have a programme geared to indigenous students.

In view of this situation, the general census taken in 2000 provided one of the best sources of information available, and made it possible to conduct a macro-statistical estimate of certain relevant aspects -such as the spatial distribution of the ethnic groups and their level of schooling- although this did not present enough

information to satisfy the purposes and needs of the programme during the start-up period.⁵

This information vacuum was not insignificant: it is well known that in order for a country to develop, it is necessary to understand exactly what natural and human resources it has available. In the current climate, as knowledge and information begins to replace physical resources as the main source of wealth, having a detailed “inventory” of the available human resources with the training and skills required to boost scientific and technological development is essential in helping the country adapt to the vertiginous social and economic changes of the present day. Indeed, speaking of the acute major issues of inequality and vulnerability which are severely detrimental to Mexico, it is essential that members of these most affected social groups should be represented in the best-educated levels of the workforce, and should be included in the studies and programmes which aim to resolve these issues. The implications of vaguely guessing at their numbers and specific features not only harm the development of Mexico’s indigenous population, but also impact on the country as a whole.

So what about the research produced by the academic community in Mexico? The studies carried out on Mexico’s indigenous population date back to the late 19th century, when the first rigorous scientific studies were conducted. Mexican social sciences have a strong reputation when it comes to the study and understanding of the archaeological, historical, anthropological, linguistic, and ethnographic aspects of the country’s indigenous peoples. Nevertheless, at the start of the 21st century the sector was lagging behind in terms of the information and analytical needs of the programmes and schemes that were then being introduced to boost the involvement and presence of indigenous people in higher education. If in other aspects and key moments the academic sector has lead the way in arguing for and implementing policy and actions aimed at improving the lot of the country’s indigenous peoples, it showed itself to be at best reactive on this occasion.

The Zapatista uprising in 1994 led to renewed interest in Mexico’s indigenous communities, their exclusion and their precarious way of life. Although academic research looked at certain areas concerning primary and secondary education, access to higher education was left to one side, despite its importance to the communities and their incorporation into society in general. It is symptomatic that the Asociación

⁵ Another useful source was the Indigenous National Employment Survey (1997), but it only covered ten indigenous areas in the central and southern parts of Mexico.

Nacional de Universidades e Instituciones de Educación Superior (National Association of Universities and Higher Education Institutions, ANUIES) prospectus entitled *La Educación superior en el siglo XXI* (Higher education in the 21st Century) did not address this subject (ANUIES, 2000). Paradoxically, that same year some leading international aid agencies became more active in the domain of social inclusion in higher education.

There is no doubt that the World Bank document of 2000, *Higher education in developing countries*, and the ensuing institutional action taken to promote equity, acted as a catalyst for experts to pay attention to higher education. Indeed, the Mexican government's *Programa Nacional de Educación 2001-2006* (the 2001-2006 National Education Programme) emphasised the problem of indigenous communities accessing higher education and included a proposal to increase the representation of indigenous students in higher education, make access easier and make these communities a priority for receiving funding. It also set the target of tripling their representation in higher education by 2006 (although it was not achieved).

Returning to the field of academia, it is interesting to note that also around the year 2000, some universities were foci of an active discussion and promotion of the intercultural approach in education, but the proponents' attention was initially focused on the basic education level. In a recent and valuable article about the scholarly production on the subject, Mateos, Mendoza & Dietz (2013) rightly point out that the relatively late inclusion of higher education as a relevant theme of discussion and empirical experimentation on the intercultural agenda explains that only a few in-depth studies on the matter have been published. Yet, there were some specialists (Carnoy et al., 2002) who did react to the rising social awareness about the indigenous issue and the actions projected by the Mexican government at university level at the start of the last decade, and began to analyse more closely the factors that determine indigenous youth's access to postsecondary education. Although not mentioned by the authors of this pioneering article, it is quite possible that their heightened awareness was also due to the higher education programmes for indigenous peoples introduced in 2001, which will be examined later on.

One factor that helps to better understand the meagre informative panorama and lack of thorough evaluations at the beginning of this century, was the focus of the Mexican government and the country's social scientists, in common with the dominant world view at the time, to provide comprehensive and improved education in primary

and secondary schools, which lasted until the closing decades of the last century. Based on the premise that the attention given to formal education should start from the bottom up, it was argued that until these goals were achieved, attention should be paid to higher education. For example, during the first years of the IFP in Mexico (2001-2005), questions were raised by officials at various levels of government and by experts on indigenous affairs on the relevance of allocating funds to help support access to a level of education that was considered to be of a lower priority than primary and secondary education, especially given the supposedly insufficient demand amongst indigenous students and communities to justify this focus.

In addition to overcoming these obstacles, the IFP was also the first postgraduate fellowship programme in the country's history to be exclusively targeted at the indigenous population, hence there were no previous specialised programmes or studies to which the IFP Mexico staff could refer to. The information gaps were filled gradually, mainly thanks to the information produced by the programme itself.

This programme was not alone, however. The IFP Coordinating Office at CIESAS worked closely with the Programa de Apoyo a Estudiantes Indígenas en Instituciones de Educación Superior (Support Programme for Indigenous Students at Higher Education Institutions, PAEIIES), another support programme for indigenous undergraduates that was launched in 2001, financed also by the Ford Foundation. In 2003-04, further measures were taken in the education sector from which useful and relevant information was soon gathered. Although we do not yet know enough about the indigenous university community, the situation we currently find ourselves in is very different to that of sixteen years ago. I will return to this point in the final part of the article.

The marginalisation of the indigenous population

Let us now go into more detail on the marginalisation of the indigenous population and their limited access to higher education. To illustrate the magnitude and longevity of this issue, I shall draw on census figures and other quantitative indicators that will highlight the need for the introduction of new programmes if we are to increase the numbers of the indigenous students in higher education and ensure their fair treatment.

Inequality has been a component of the Mexican society throughout its history. Although a number of ambitious programmes have been introduced in the last twenty years to tackle poverty, these have not had the desired effect and the wide abyss

between the various sectors of the population continues. At the turn of the twenty first century, more than half of Mexico's population was living in poverty, and this situation has not changed much since then (CONEVAL, 2014a: 57). Between 2010 and 2014, Mexico, alongside Honduras and Venezuela, had the greatest increase in poverty in the Latin America/Caribbean region, with this figure climbing above the average for the region as a whole (CEPAL, 2015a: 12). This situation becomes even more drastic when we consider that specialists believe Latin America to have the worst distribution of income in the world.

The rate of poverty in Mexico varies considerably in social and geographical terms. Historically, indigenous areas and groups have been those most affected by inequality, with the lowest quality of life in all areas (health, food, housing and education). Recent estimates based on official data (CONEVAL, 2014b: 12) show that the percentage of the indigenous population living in poverty is nearly twice that of the non-indigenous population (76.8% compared to 43%), and that the number of those living in extreme poverty is nearly five times greater (38% compared to 7.9%). The number of indigenous homes without drainage (44.4%), running water (29.5%) and with earth floors (38%) is three to four times higher than the national average (PNUD, 2010: 56). The death rate is higher than among other segments of the population and the lack of nutrition is reflected in the stunted height of indigenous children. This is partly because nearly half of the population does not have a sufficient income to eat properly; indeed, the average monthly income per capita is just 1,500 pesos (CONEVAL, 2014b: 112). Nationwide, the poorest municipalities are those where indigenous communities live.

This particular segment of society therefore faces a number of social disadvantages as a consequence of its systematic exclusion and discrimination, which have restricted their opportunities to be fully included in critical areas of development such as health, formal employment and education.

The marginalisation of the indigenous population is a major problem. These groups make up a large section of Mexican society in both relative and absolute terms, numbering between ten and fifteen million people, or just over 10% of the total population in the last decade between 2000 and 2010.

Marginalisation in education

The underdevelopment and inequality of the indigenous population at the turn of the century is seen in stark clarity in the education sector.

In 2000, 24% of people aged fifteen or over living in indigenous families was illiterate, a figure far higher than the national average of 7.6% (CDI, 2006). Although this figure had fallen by the end of the decade (Schmelkes, 2013: 7), the literacy rate of the indigenous population remains lower than that of the non-indigenous population across all age ranges. Likewise, the average schooling received by indigenous people is far lower than their non-indigenous counterparts (CESOP, 2011). In terms of the three main components of the Human Development Index—health, education and income—the largest gap is in education, where the indigenous index is 13% lower than the non-indigenous communities (PNUD, 2010: 39).

With these figures in mind, it is no wonder that indigenous involvement in higher education is so low. The population census of 2000 shows that just three out of every hundred indigenous people aged fifteen or over had gone on to higher education. By the end of the decade, this figure had increased to 5.2%, but even so, it is still a long way off the 16.5% figure for the population as a whole (Suárez, 2013; CESOP, 2011). The gap in postgraduate education is even wider: in 2010 just 23,919 indigenous people said they had studied at postgraduate level (although it is not known how many actually graduated), representing just 0.34% of the indigenous population over the age of fifteen. The corresponding figure for Mexico's total population is nearly four times higher (Suárez, 2013).

Aside from the issues of access, indigenous students also often fail to complete their degrees. Exact graduation figures have not been calculated, but the most reliable estimates show that just one in ten university-going indigenous students graduate, which is half of the approximately 20% rate of the overall population (OCDE, 2013; Ocegueda, Miramontes & Moctezuma, 2015).

The widening of the higher education gap can be attributed to a number of factors, including poverty, the low quality of education of primary and secondary schooling and the lack of government support. Traditionally, to be eligible for a university education and fellowships, indigenous students have been at a disadvantage by competing with non-indigenous students from a better educational background. This

is not due to a difference in learning capacity, but rather to the better conditions the latter have had along their educational path.

The principal actions taken

As mentioned previously, the launch of the IFP in Mexico was one of the first steps to increasing indigenous access and equity in higher education. Other programmes followed soon after, forming a set of converging educational measures that substantially enriched the country's social and educational agenda during the first decade of the 21st century and have added an ethnic dimension to tackling inequality in higher education (Didou, 2011). What was behind these changes?

As was the case in other Latin American countries (Peru and Guatemala, for instance), these measures were taken in the aftermath of political and social unrest with the aim of bringing the country together, where the primary focus was on securing the inclusion of the indigenous population. The uprising of the Zapatista movement in Chiapas in 1994—just after Mexico had officially joined the OECD grouping of developed countries—contradicted the impression disseminated by the government, and accepted without question by many both in Mexico and abroad, that Mexico was moving forward in a united and harmonious manner. The uprising also reminded people that Mexico was in fact a multicultural society, and highlighted the cultural, economic, legal and political inequalities that affected indigenous communities and, therefore, the country as a whole. This led to a number of reforms, and programmes and policies were adapted to deal with this situation.

In the year 2000, when the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) was pushed into opposition for the first time in 70 years, several programmes were introduced to promote equity in higher education. We will discuss four of the most important programmes, all of which date back to the first half of the last decade and they are still running today.

- Having already touched on the design and general objectives of the IFP Mexico, it need only be added that just before the programme concluded, in 2012 a new programme called Programa de Becas de Posgrado para Indígenas (Postgraduate Fellowships Programme for Indigenous People, PROBEPI, <http://becasindigenas.ciesas.edu.mx>) was introduced based on the model and results of the IFP in Mexico. This programme is also run by the CIESAS in

partnership with, and funded by, the federal government through the CONACYT. Together these programmes have awarded fellowships to 354 indigenous men and women to undertake postgraduate studies in Mexico and abroad. Viewed as a single scheme, for its focus on the graduate level, and for its uninterrupted operation since 2001, this programme stands out as unique in Mexico and Latin America. Among other results, this has enabled the implementing institution (CIESAS) to accumulate an expertise and a rich store of information that must be thoroughly systematised and analysed.⁶

- The Support Programme for Indigenous Students at Higher Education Institutions (PAEIIES) was launched in 2001 on the initiative of the Ford Foundation, which also provided funding. One of its main aims was to increase the number of indigenous students who attend and graduate from university. To achieve this, a number of academic support units were set up at public universities around the country which expressed an interest in the programme. Students were not awarded fellowships directly, but were instead given individual tutoring, remedial courses and medical and psychological support (Didou & Remedi, 2006; Badillo, 2011). When the funding of the Ford Foundation stopped in 2009, the scheme was being run at 24 universities for more than 11,000 students (Gómez Torres, 2010). Between 2002 and 2009 the scheme helped nearly 3,000 indigenous students study for a degree, 1,281 of whom graduated (Didou, 2011). In 2010 and 2011, the scheme received complementary funding from the World Bank, and in 2012, each university took on the responsibility of running its own indigenous student support unit.⁷
- In 2001, the federal government announced an ambitious higher education project, which envisaged the setting-up of public-funded intercultural universities. Since 2004 eleven of these universities have been set up in areas of the country with a high indigenous population density, making them more readily accessible than conventional universities. During the 2015-2016 school year, a total of 14,007 students were enrolled at these universities, most of them

6 The documentary “Sowing the seeds of future roots” (Bendersky and Navarrete, 2013) is one of the first products aiming at meeting this goal.

7 For a recent, annotated list of the various academic evaluations and studies that have been carried out on the PAEIIES see Mateos, Mendoza, and Dietz (2013).

of indigenous origin (CGEIB, 2015).⁸ These universities aim to get students to: forge a commitment to social, economic and cultural development, particularly of indigenous peoples, when exercising their professions; re-evaluate the understanding of indigenous peoples; and create a space in which to promote the development of their language and culture. They offer an alternative model of education, delivering new content, curricula and teaching methods geared towards recovering, reinforcing and applying the knowledge of indigenous peoples, which will allow them to deal with the problems that affect them (Casillas & Santini, 2009). This university sub-system has been one of the Mexican government's leading initiatives of recent years in promoting the inclusion of indigenous students at university, as well as one of the most successful in incorporating an intercultural element into Mexico's higher education system.

- The Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), Mexico's largest university, introduced a support scheme in the end of 2004 for indigenous students enrolled on different courses across its different campuses. As with the other programmes mentioned, it aims to foment the education of indigenous university students so that they can contribute to Mexican society (Mendizábal, 2013). To encourage students to complete their degree, the university provides complementary financial support and academic tutoring. Around 887 indigenous students benefited from the scheme between 2005 and 2015, the last year for which information was located.⁹

The current situation: challenges and progress

Let us look now at the current situation with respect to tackling the exclusion of indigenous communities in higher education. This will be done on the basis of the difficulties and progress inherent in the above-mentioned programmes. I point out a number of circumstances and areas of discussion that I believe to be of particular interest.

⁸ Mateos and Dietz (2013) offer the most recent and comprehensive scholarly discussion on the complex and diverse theoretical, pedagogical and institutional results and challenges of the intercultural universities. For a critical evaluation of intercultural education models in Mexico from an indigenous scholar viewpoint see Llanes (2009).

⁹ http://becas.planeacion.unam.mx/index2.php?ciclo_sel=20151&anio_sel=2015

Challenges

The necessary starting point of this examination is access. What has been achieved in this crucial area? The change that took place during the first decade of this century is both encouraging and of some concern.

As noted earlier, in 2000 3.7% of the indigenous population over the age of fifteen had obtained some form of higher education. This figure had risen to 5.2% by 2010, an increase of 1.5 percentage points. Something positive was behind this change, and the reasons for it need to be identified and capitalised upon. Any explanation of the increase should take into account the combined effect of the programmes mentioned above. Other measures should also be taken into account that were taken to increase access to higher education which, although not specifically targeted at the indigenous population, have gone some way to helping this particular segment. Here I refer to the Programa de Becas de Educación Superior (National Scholarship Programme for Higher Education, PRONABES), began in 2001,¹⁰ and the public technical colleges and polytechnics set up around the country since the late 1990s (Didou, 2011). A third variable worthy of consideration is that, broadly speaking, some indigenous individuals and communities are now giving greater importance to higher education as a means of personal and collective development.

On the flip side, the percentage of the total population over the age of fifteen that has obtained higher education increased from 11% to 16.5% between 2000 and 2010, an increase of 5.5 percentage points, meaning that the traditional gap between the indigenous population and the population as a whole increased from seven to eleven percentage points. Something not so good was behind this change, and the reasons for it need to be examined and the necessary changes made.

The enduring unequal access and low representation of Indigenous students in higher education is a complex phenomenon with many factors behind it, which cannot be simply explained away nor simplified. It is a matter that needs to be studied in detail. Meanwhile, we can make some recommendations. One significant factor that should be considered is the inflexible admission procedures of conventional universities –both public and private-, which receive the vast majority of students in Mexico. Dietz (2011) has rightly argued that entrance examinations are inappropriate as they put social-economic factors before quality and academic potential. The people who design and

¹⁰ Around 5% of the students supported by PRONABES are Indian (Miller 2012, 25).

administer the entrance examinations are well aware that most of the indigenous and rural population are not properly prepared to take them.

Another significant—this time external—factor that goes some way to explaining the enduring unequal access to higher education, is the effect that the prevailing economic model in Mexico has on vulnerable groups such as the indigenous population. Poverty and the exacerbation of social inequality have much to do with this model. It is worthwhile considering the impact that low incomes and rising informal employment and unemployment have on the majority of the working class, a consequence largely related to the economic policy and reforms implemented since the 1980s and which have been augmented in recent years. This makes it difficult for low-income families to send their children to university. In 2008, the *Encuesta Nacional de Ingresos y Gastos de los Hogares* (National Household Income and Expenses Survey) showed that access to university for young people in the highest income deciles is six times greater than those in the bottom decile, where most of the indigenous population finds itself. This situation has not significantly improved in recent years. Now let us turn our attention back to the programmes mentioned in the previous section.

The PAEIIES, the main programme supporting indigenous students at conventional universities, has become progressively less effective since external funding was withdrawn, which, in turn, has made it more difficult to introduce an intercultural agenda to these universities. According to the latest available figures, when the agreement with the World Bank ended in 2011, 13,007 students were enrolled on the programme and several academic support courses had been given (ANUIES, 2011). Nevertheless, most indigenous student support modules at these universities do not have the sufficient funds or institutional support to do what they are there to do. Although the programme is still running, it has lost its momentum and previous coordination, and lacks the necessary force to constitute a key incentive to promote the reform of the traditional higher education institutions.

The Intercultural Universities have had some success by providing university education in areas that have been historically marginalised and strengthening their ties with the social groups they are there to serve. In qualitative terms, they have fomented new forms of dialogue between western culture and native cultures. Progress has also been reported in the modifications to programme content and curricular design (Mateos & Dietz, 2013). However, these institutions still face a number of important challenges. A recent study commissioned by the Chamber of Deputies (Aguirre, 2015) states that

the coverage rates of several of these universities are far lower than anticipated, that many students are dropping out before graduating, and that there is not enough properly trained and qualified teaching staff. In common with other public institutions of higher education in the country, insufficient funding not only restricts the growth of these universities, but also means they fail to meet their operating needs.

As for the granting of postgraduate fellowships, the PROBEPI now runs smoothly, despite a complicated financial impasse and uncertainty it suffered in 2013 following the change in federal government in late 2012. The programme has secured funding until the end of the current administration, but not beyond. This highlights the restrictions and difficulties which these programmes face, as in spite of the need for them and their positive results, they remain vulnerable to changes in public administration; a difficulty that may only be overcome, theoretically at least, when they become part of a permanent public policy.

Moreover, no public or private mainstream university in Mexico has yet come up with an initiative or commitment to take specific measures to increase the representation of indigenous students in their postgraduate programmes, where socially exclusionary admission processes remain the norm. CIESAS itself lacks a policy of social inclusion in its postgraduate programmes. The UNAM has limited to the undergraduate level its scholarship programme for indigenous students. On the other hand, this remains the only permanent programme of its type at any of Mexico's major public universities, which speaks of the continued lack of awareness over the fact that social inclusion is a strategic resource for universities. Recent studies conducted in this area have shown that stereotyping of and discrimination against indigenous students are commonplace at many universities (Barrón, 2008; Chávez, 2008; Gómez Navarro, 2009; Ruiz, 2011), thus reflecting the general state of affairs in Mexican society as a whole.

Progress

On a more positive note, let us now bring attention to some outstanding achievements that have laid the foundations for a profound social analysis and public planning both now and in the next few years.

For the first time in its history, Mexico now has a set of options and institutional procedures in place to promote greater access and equity in higher education. Moreover, the educational and support programmes that have been mentioned have progressed far

beyond the experimental stage, producing experiences and results that may be used to improve the policies, investment and measures implemented to date.¹¹ The institutional capabilities, infrastructure, and human resources thus developed, are underpinned by inter-agency collaborations at local, national, and international levels. Didou (2013) rightly points out that the participation of the international cooperation agencies, private foundations, and other international institutions have promoted the institutionalization of the educational services and attention mechanisms of the indigenous groups, and that they have also helped to generate innovative pedagogical, research, and management capabilities.

These programmes have also produced a wealth of quantitative and qualitative information that, in contrast to what came before it, gives us the means to study and profile the segment of the indigenous population that has completed a university education. We need no longer rely on macro-statistical approximations made on the basis of census information or micro studies carried out on specific ethnic groups or communities, which although useful, are of limited use. Although as stated before, there is still a long way to go (e.g. broader and comparative research), the annotated bibliographies prepared by Mateos & Dietz (2013) and Mateos, Mendoza & Dietz (2013) about the intercultural and conventional universities clearly portray the increasing number of empirical studies that are being undertaken and the important advances achieved during the last years in both sub-systems of higher education.

Much has been learned about the geographical and institutional origins of indigenous students, their ethnic background, their sex and age, the subjects they hope to study, their educational background, interests, academic strengths and needs, and the job and reintegration opportunities awaiting them when they finish their studies (Navarrete & Leyva, 2017). This information is particularly useful when it comes, for example, to improving the recruitment strategy for applicants and fellowship recipients, strengthening the planning and content of advisory groups and collective remedial

¹¹ Giving continuity and at the same time expanding the type of institutional interventions examined here, in 2012 CONACYT established the Programa de Apoyos Complementarios a Mujeres Indígenas Becarias (PAC), and in 2013 the Programa de Incorporación de Mujeres Indígenas a Posgrados para el Fortalecimiento Regional (PI). The PAC provides complementary financial support to CONACYT female scholars to facilitate their studies and graduation (e.g. purchase of computer equipment and to undertake field work related to their thesis. Financial aid is also provided to carry out the procedures to obtain the degree). The objective of PI is to help indigenous women to gain access to high quality graduate programs in Mexico.

courses, and building on the various measures that aim to make sure they complete their education.

On a conceptual level, and in view of the ever-increasing quantities of information available and the work carried out with postgraduate fellowship students and undergraduate students, it is now clearly necessary to look again and move on from the simplified and all-encompassing term “indigenous”, a word coined in the 16th century whose meaning and use continues to condition the analyses drawn upon to design and run the programmes aimed at this sector of the Mexican population. This aspect has been improved in several areas, but we should not lose sight of its importance.

From the postgraduate fellowship programmes, we have also garnered key data on the quality and relevance of the postgraduate options on offer to indigenous students at Mexican and foreign conventional universities: since 2001 it has been worked together with more than one hundred Master’s degrees and PhD programmes in Mexico and the rest of Latin America, in Europe, and in the USA.

All these advances are not limited to Mexico. As stated at the beginning of this article, there is a strong level of interconnection between the state of affairs in Mexico and what happens in the rest of Latin America. Dialogue has opened up, with collaboration and the sharing of experiences between experts, government, students and representatives of the indigenous peoples in the region, and this dialogue has since been extended successfully to the USA and Europe. Not only is it extremely useful to know and understand the experiences of other countries, but the sharing of information has also allowed for a regional and transnational perspective of social inequality and the mechanisms that reproduce the asymmetrical relationships which affect ethnic groups in Mexico and Latin America, and to analyse the best way of dealing with these difficulties.

Final remarks

Higher Education is an essential long-term investment for addressing major social issues. Opening opportunities of high quality, relevant and pertinent education to members of the poorer sectors of society is one basis for social equity and advancement. However, successive Mexican governments have failed in their commitment to universalise higher education and guarantee the same opportunities for all. The segment of the population that has access to this facility is small, and disproportionately so as far

as the disadvantaged sectors of society are concerned, particularly the indigenous groups.

Despite several steps having been taken in recent years, the system is still far too inflexible to be able to deal efficiently with students who come from socially disadvantaged groups. The institutions and programmes set up *ex profeso* for these types of students still have a long way to go to deal with the complex and increased demands of students from these backgrounds.

Amid this complex reality, progress has been made in important areas. In addition to provide new facilities and grant fellowships, specific procedures have been introduced to expand and reform the educational system. Intercultural universities and unconventional scholarship programmes are leading the provision of education and related support services that take into account the interests and particular needs of indigenous students. Significant epistemological and pedagogical advances have been achieved, and relevant institutional capacities haven been developed.

Given the magnitude and complexity of the problem at hand, it is necessary to advance in bridge-building between intercultural and conventional education. These two different types of education should be seen as complementary, rather than as contradictory or mutually exclusive. Intercultural universities account for less than 1% of university enrolments nationwide, and yet it is at these institutions that the crisis and limitations of the dominant Western model are examined and tackled. At the same time, the interculturalization of conventional higher education institutions is necessary if we are to meet the demands presented by multiculturalism.

Last but not least, the inclusion of marginalized groups must be framed in such a way that it encourages them to play a role in creating, managing and transforming exclusive social practices both at universities and away from them. In other words, inclusion should not just be understood only as a problem of access, but also of quality, belonging, and participation.

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