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The State University of Amazonia as an intercultural scenario

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Graphical Abstract



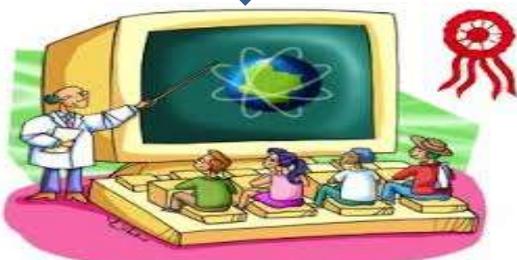
Ecuadorian amazon region



Students in the Ecuadorian Amazonian region



Need for universities in the amazon region



Need for virtual education

Abstract

Amazonian and indigenous Ecuadorian households have on average less access to basic public services, infrastructure and higher education. With the objective of evaluating intercultural access and practice at the Universidad Estatal Amazónica (UEA), through documentary analysis, the databases of the academic teaching system are studied to determine the evolution in ethnic self-identification in enrollment between the academic periods 2019-2019 to 2020-2021, two before the Covid-19 pandemic and two during it, and the specific guidelines proposed by Senescyt-Unesco for the mainstreaming of equality in Higher Education are compared with evidence of daily intercultural practices at UEA. The result indicates that enrollment by ethnic self-identification is strengthened in the first period of the pandemic and weakened in the last period elapsed, due to availabilities in virtual education. Also, UEA has met 27 of the 38 guidelines established by Senescyt & Unesco (2015), with greater approximation of compliance in the academic, research, linkage and management areas, while the training and administrative areas have lower performance. In the Amazonian territory, so diverse and rich in culture and nature, the Ecuadorian university has yet to find mechanisms to train and strengthen interculturality, despite the fact that public standards for the quality of higher education fail to incorporate mechanisms to recognize the wisdom of indigenous peoples.

Keywords: Access to higher education; decoloniality; knowledge management; mainstreaming equality in Higher Education.

Introduction

Indigenous peoples in Ecuador have less access to basic public services, infrastructure and higher education; they have experienced colonization and dispossession of land, resources and knowledge, while schooling has contributed to their assimilation into the dominant society, hindering the reproduction of indigenous ecological subjectivities and social practices (Rival, 2000). However, universities also have the potential to contribute to the empowerment of indigenous populations and help change unequal power relations by recognizing and supporting the knowledge they hold (Wilson, 2004). Although interculturality must recognize and accept cultural pluralism as a reality and contribute to the construction of societies in which equal rights are the banner (Escarbajal, 2011), the approach to interculturality, as a transitional scenario towards decolonization, does not escape the need to reinvent a new approach to interculturality, does not escape reinventing a new hegemony that takes advantage of the crisis of modernity, and is used in the discursive rhetoric of inclusion, weakening the concept-principle itself, assuming a simply functional connotation, an interculturalism lacking a clearly critical sense and a strategic positioning of decolonial character (Walsh, 2008).

The presence of the university in a territory dynamizes the access of the local population to its premises and provides facilities for students - who self-identify themselves as members of indigenous peoples and nationalities (PNI) - to access in a greater proportion to regional universities, therefore, it is necessary to analyze whether the trend in monocultural higher education prevents pluricultural perspectives or whether there are opportunities in intercultural practice in the Amazon State University. It is therefore necessary to evaluate access and intercultural practice in the Amazon State University (UEA) based on the analysis of data from the academic teaching system and the Senescyt proposal on the mainstreaming of equality in Higher Education. The results open a critical perspective of the intra-cultural power relations in force in society, which are reproduced in the university, contribute to the conceptual deconstruction of the coloniality of the higher education system and value the environment and knowledge accumulated in the interaction of diverse peoples in the Amazonian space, whom has wisdom from the daily living & preserving humid tropical forest.

Materials and Methods

Through documentary analysis of the databases of the academic teaching information system of the UEA, the evolution in ethnic self-identification in enrollment was determined between the academic periods 2019-2019 to 2020-2021, two before the Covid-19 pandemic and two during it, and the specific guidelines proposed by Senescyt-Unesco for the mainstreaming of equality in Higher Education (2015) were compared with the documentation and evidence of daily intercultural practices at UEA, in the substantive functions of teaching, research, services for communities and management, in the manner in which the methodology of the 2019 external evaluation model of universities and polytechnic schools for accreditation of universities, proposed by Caces, was applied to estimate percentages of compliance and determine weaknesses based on the insertion or non-insertion of pluricultural knowledge in the university structure that allows establishing it as intercultural and critical of inequalities.

Results and Discussion

The student population in the self-identified indigenous UEA decreases from 16.81 to 16.15% between the 2019-2019 to 2019-2020 terms; increases to 17.12% in the 2020-2020 regular academic term and drops to 14.64 in 2020-2021 (figure 1). It strengthens in the first period of the pandemic and weakens in the last elapsed period. During the first period of the pandemic the UEA granted internet connectivity

devices for continuation of classes in virtual education, not so in the 2020-2021 period. The drop in ethnic self-identification in the last period analyzed coincides with the drop in general enrollment and hardening of health conditions.

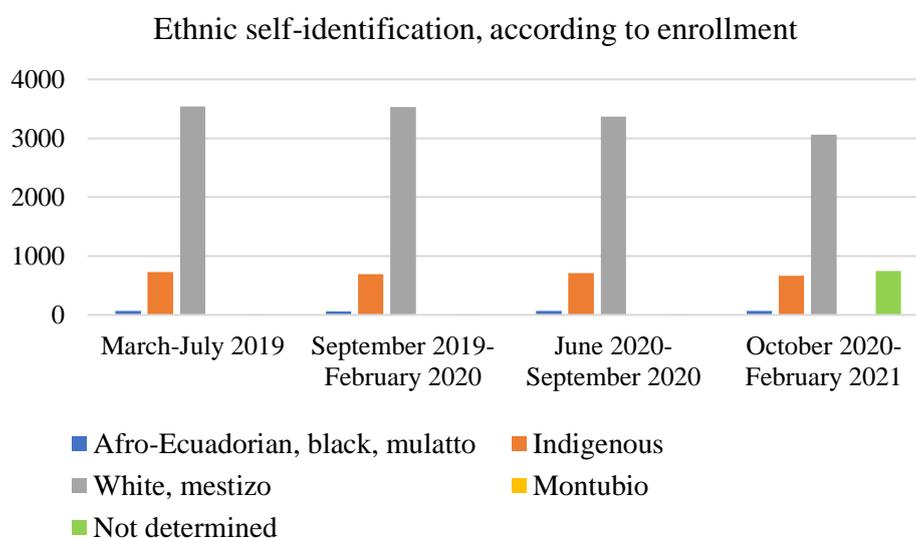


Figure 1. Evolution of registration by self-identification in the periods 2019-2019 to 2020-2021.

Regular academic periods (March-July & September-February), changed during Covid-19 pandemic period. Graphic shows less students during pandemic period and increases the number of not determined or students does not declare ethnic identification; no reason are explained, so it can be a signal to attend more in deep the interculturality.

Between the challenge of the intercultural perspective and the daily life of public institutions in the UEA, some specific guidelines proposed by Senescyt-Unesco (2015) for the mainstreaming of equality in Higher Education are compared in table 1.

Table 1. Equality mainstreaming in Higher Education in the UEA.

Specific guidelines (Senescyt-Unesco, 2015)	Main references for action in the UEA
<p>Research: Seven guidelines refer monitoring access permanence and graduation of PNI members, diagnosis inequalities, research intercultural knowledge, promotes monitoring and oversight processes for ethnic discrimination and equality, centers, recognition, knowledge and preservation of native languages through specialized institutes</p> <p>Formation: perspective of interculturality in programs, careers in intercultural bilingual teaching, and other careers that promote the integral development of PNI or contents related PNI, graduate programs, lines of research and linkages, curricula with contributions of PNI, optional subjects or seminars on the intercultural perspective, contents, pedagogically specialized teacher training and methodologies with intercultural competencies; basic and specialized learning of native languages.</p> <p>Connection with society: Education and research to incide in equitative policies; work like a system with other levels in education; ecology of knowledge perspective and PNI inter-knowledge projects.</p>	<p>Research: UEA has statistical information System (Siad), opportunity diagnosis, research around Plurinationality and Ancestral Knowledge, grants, some subjects in career and students maintain some cultural and mutual support each other in the collective named “Retomando Raíces” who works for inclusion, culture of peace and resilience.</p> <p>Formation: some subjects like Ancestral Knowledge, Indigenous Languages, Biodiversity and Conservation in a few careers those are relevant to the Amazonian environment and some interesting events but no continuous. UEA does not have specialized learning of native languages or educational careers. Also the standard of quality show criteria that no always can compliance indigenous professor because they did not have opportunities to get a high academic standard.</p> <p>Connection with society: Projects like Ecocultural Pluralism, understanding how to respect and implement the principles of eco-cultural diversity and sumak kawsay (good living) in university.</p>

Institutional management: Statues, regulations, codes, commission or responsible and promote activities or plan for the implementation of policies for mainstreaming the equality axis of PNI and interculturality; mechanisms that ensure the budget, resources and actors for the execution of the ethnic equality and interculturality policy; PNI professors, prepare mechanisms for equitable distribution of resources to ensure compliance with equality and interculturality standards, among other.

Institutional management: UEA has regulations, codes, commission or responsible for the implementation of policies for mainstreaming the equality axis of PNI and interculturality, either another equalities; promote grants to indigenous students but has 3% of professors are indigenous; to enroll more professors there are laws that UEA has to accomplish over other considerations, per example, some professors has a titles that no consider regulations created by universities auditors.

Source: Extracted from Senescyt-Unesco (2015) versus UEA compilation of institutional information.

The comparison in table 1 does not escape the critical analysis of functional interculturality, as long as it does not have a strategic positioning of decolonial character that brings together the living social forces in their difference and diversity, with other ways of conceiving and building, not only what is indigenous, but also what is (pluri)national, and assumes in real practice, the principle and the bet of interculturality leading, from its wisdom and millenary insurgency, a new political and social order for all (Conaie, cited by Walsh, 2008), since it depends on concrete practices that are generated with a horizon that potentiates other ways of relating, in an experiential socio-ecological system, which transcends the structure and is built with the sum of experiences and other knowledge (Hernández, 2018; Tubino, 2019), and involve the entire social and academic fabric, in which, the teaching task, the relationship in the classroom and outside it and in the work environment, are key pieces of the process. As indicated by Krainer et al, (2016), the pedagogical model seeks to include: a) respect for different learning rhythms; b) consideration of psycho-social aspects; c) creative capacity; d) ancestral knowledge; and e) the incorporation of other knowledge that contributes to harmonious human and environmental development.

Conclusions

Self-identification in enrollment processes is not enough to determine interculturality; a critical perspective is required, so that intra-cultural power relations are not hidden, active and reactive discrimination is made visible and deconstructed.

The UEA presents an approach to compliance with the mainstreaming of equality in Higher Education in the academic, research, liaison and management areas, while the training and administrative areas have lower performance. The main weakness is that there is no mechanism for the insertion of inter-knowledge in the pedagogical structure that involves a break at the curricular level and therefore a truly intercultural structure.

In the Amazonian territory, so diverse and rich in culture and nature, the Ecuadorian university has yet to find mechanisms to train and strengthen interculturality, despite the fact that public standards for the quality of higher education fail to incorporate mechanisms to recognize the wisdom of indigenous peoples, including some academic titles that indigenous professors have but is not recognized to work in third level of education.

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