

Full Length Research Paper

Favouring new indigenous leadership: Indigenous students attending higher education in Mexico

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The opportunities to attend higher education in Mexico have traditionally been offered to the middle class population since around 30% of students who finish high school are able to attend higher education. The main reason for this low attendance is the poverty in which much of the population lives and the lack of higher education institutions in rural areas. Low attendance to higher education is accentuated in marginalised indigenous groups. Migration from the rural areas to the cities over the years has enabled that recently, some indigenous students pursue higher education as a way to improve their social and economic opportunities. Indigenous students attending higher education in urban areas have to face additional challenges given that they speak their own native language, they come from a different culture, usually have a history of poor academic achievement, and face discrimination. In the Autonomous University of Ciudad Juarez (UACJ), an urban university on the Mexico-US border, was implemented a programme to support indigenous students attending the UACJ to favour their academic success. This programme also aims to increase the number of indigenous students attending the UACJ to develop them as professionals and leaders to impact positively their communities. This paper presents the findings of a qualitative study using participant observation and semi-structured interviews as the data collection methods to explore the implementation of the programme. Findings of collected data were grouped in two main themes: *progresses* and *challenges* of this programme.

Key words: Indigenous leadership, higher education, Mexico.

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous peoples of Mexico constitute about 11% of the country's population (Hall and Patrinos 2005), and it is the largest in Latin America representing a third of the continent's total indigenous population (Rivera-Salgado, 2014). Indigenous people in Mexico are poorer than non-

indigenous peoples since 80% of indigenous peoples live in poverty, while only half of non-indigenous people live below the official poverty line (Ramirez, 2006). This reality has limited the access to higher education for indigenous peoples in Mexico. However, in recent years,

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the access to higher education for students of indigenous groups is an aspect that is being addressed by institutions offering higher education. Several universities across the country have established programmes to favour the access and academic success of this type of population, and in some states, have been created intercultural universities to serve the indigenous population. Educational policy also mandates that their inclusion to higher education should respect their cultural practices and traditions.

The UACJ implemented a programme aiming to increase the number of indigenous students attending the university, and offer them the needed support for their success as university students. Likewise, the university intends to have more connection with the indigenous communities living in Ciudad Juarez to favour their social and economic development. The university created an initiative in 2015 to increase the number of these students attending the university, and offer support for those already registered in different academic programmes. The aim of this programme is to develop the first generations of lawyers, doctors, teachers, scientists, engineers, or other indigenous professionals whom in the long run would develop their leadership potential and become leaders in their communities. The approach adopted for their leadership development is gradual in which they develop professionally in their academic programme, and strengthen their individual indigenous identity. Parallel to their academic programmes these students will take a practical and theoretical two-semester course in leadership that the university is designing specifically for them. This course will be offered to these students with the assumption that they will be the first generation of indigenous professionals who could set an example for younger generations, and it is also expected that they assume leadership roles within their communities. Besides, this programme pursues to coordinate the isolated efforts being done by specific academic programmes or researchers currently working with indigenous communities, and to have a deeper connection with the migrant indigenous community established in Ciudad Juarez. The UACJ senior administration commissioned the department of social sciences of the Institute of Administration and Social Sciences (ICSA) to create this initiative. This paper presents the findings of qualitative research on the creation, progresses and challenges of the programme to support students from indigenous origin and their communities in Ciudad Juarez.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Indigenous communities in Ciudad Juarez

Ciudad Juarez is a city of nearly 1.5 million inhabitants

located in the north of Mexico in the state of Chihuahua just across El Paso in Texas. Over the past three decades, the city has based its economic development by its strategic position offering low-wage labour to attract manufacturing enterprises worldwide. The growth of the manufacturing industry as well as displacement from the land and a decrease in livelihood opportunities in rural areas of other parts of Mexico particularly in the southern states has helped drive migration among indigenous communities to the city (Grant, 2015). This researcher also found that this has driven rapid urban growth and led to a diversity of minority groups, with different ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious backgrounds. The National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Informatics (INEGI) reported in 2012 based on the population and housing census that approximately 14,606 people from several indigenous groups are living in Ciudad Juarez representing a 74% increase over the 2000's census. According to the INEGI, 42 indigenous languages are spoken in Ciudad Juarez, being the most important, the Chinameca, Nahuatl, Raramuri, Mixteca, Zapoteca, Popoluca, Huave, Huichol, and Tzotzil. In the case of the Raramuri tribe, the only group native of the state, its migration to Ciudad Juarez has increased steadily since the 1990s and spiked between 2010 and early 2015 with a 30% increase in the population, driven in part by poverty and environmental disasters such as the drought of 2014 and 2015 and an exceptionally cold winter of 2014 (Grant, 2015). The difficult reality for indigenous people living in urban areas as in Ciudad Juarez can be identified in many different aspects. For instance, Yanes (2007) in his research reported the social reality of indigenous groups living in urban areas in which illiteracy rates among the urban indigenous population are four times higher than non-indigenous city-dwellers. Furthermore, indigenous people living in cities have been found to drop out of school to seek employment earlier than their non-indigenous counterparts which leads to a pattern of working in poorly paid, low-skilled jobs. And finally, that urban indigenous generally live in lower quality housing, with more than one-third of indigenous homes having only one room.

Indigenous people and formal education

In Mexico, the opportunities for indigenous people to participate in formal education have historically been low. For instance, adults in municipalities composed mostly by indigenous population have completed on average 3 years of schooling while adults in municipalities composed mainly by non-indigenous people have completed 8 years of schooling (Jacob et al., 2015). In the case of compulsory education, indigenous pupils tend to score lower on reading and mathematics than non-indigenous pupils. This reality was first exposed in 2003

by an achievement test administered by the National Institute for Assessment of Education (INEE) aiming to measure competency levels on reading and mathematics. In non-indigenous schools 45 and 15% of the sixth graders achieved satisfactory competency levels for reading and mathematics, respectively; while for indigenous students in the same test the satisfactory level was only achieved by 12 and 4%. In more recent published data by the ministry of education (SEP) in 2015 in the National Plan (exam) for Learning Assessment (PLANEA) measured students in language and communication and in mathematics. In the case of indigenous students 80% obtained an unsatisfactory level of competency for language and communication, and also 83% of them got an unsatisfactory level for mathematics. This put them at a disadvantage academically when they emigrate to the cities and need to compete for a space in further levels of education because acceptance and entrance to the better public high schools and universities is based on an entrance exam.

In higher education, the attendance to this level is low not only for minority and disadvantaged groups but also for mainstream population, since only 3 out of every 10 people between the ages of 19 and 23 are able to attend higher education. According to the ministry of education, the general coverage in 2013 had attained a level of 29.2% (SEP, 2013). However, for indigenous population the under representation in higher education is much more evident due to the poverty in which rural and urban indigenous live, and also specifically for the rural indigenous communities due to the isolation and dispersion of these communities. The National Council for the Prevention of Discrimination (CONAPRED) reported that in 2010 just 3% of individuals between the ages of 15 and 29 who are part of an indigenous group attended higher education. In more recent data, Schmelkes (2013) confirmed that the percentage of indigenous people enrolled in Mexican higher education institutions remain between 1 to 3% being the lowest in the rural areas. The main cause is the poverty in which indigenous population live since 80% of them live below the poverty line.

Leadership development

The literatures on leadership points out that leaders set a direction, align people, motivate and inspire (Kotter, 2001). "Leadership reflect the assumption that it involves a process whereby intentional influence is exerted by one person over other people to guide, structure and facilitate and relationships in a group or organisation" (Yukl, 2002, p. 2). Effective leaders are open-minded, ready to learn, flexible and persistent, and their success depends on their ability to apply leadership practices appropriately in their context (NCLSCS, 2009). Leadership practice has

been evolving and there has been a shift to more democratic and participative approaches as distributed leadership (Gronn, 2002; Spillane et al., 2004), shared leadership (Lambert, 2002), democratic leadership (Starratt, 2001; Moller, 2002). This has enabled an evolution in the conceptualisation of leadership from the charismatic leader portrayed as super talented individual with exceptional gifts that transform groups as solo performer to alternative and shared approaches to face current demands in organisations or groups. It is expected that these students develop their identity as leaders for their community as a new generation of young indigenous. The development of a leader identity and leadership learning is a gradual process. To enact the characteristics expected of a leader, it first has to come the strengthening of their indigenous identity and an awareness of their role in their community as professional indigenous.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews and the methodology of participant observation. There were interviewed two university professors members of the planning team, four indigenous students, and three community leaders. In the case of participant observation, the researcher is part of the planning team so that it was possible to observe the progression of this initiative proposed aiming to increase the enrolment of indigenous students to the UACJ, their academic success, and the connection with the migrant indigenous communities living in Ciudad Juarez. This methodology enabled to document the social interaction of the planning team consisting of ten indigenous students, six teaching faculty, five indigenous community leaders, and in some meetings, the senior administration of the university. The observations were recorded using the meetings' minutes and notes that taken of all relevant activities, conversations and the environment and context that they occurred in. Thematic analysis was used to process the data originated from the semi-structured interviews, the notes, and from the meetings' minutes. Each transcript, meeting minute, and note taken was read in detail while using a marker to highlight main points, phrases, patterns and common terms. In the margins of the printed documents were coded the emergent themes. The emergent themes were discussed with participants individually for their feedback, recommendations, and validation. Seven overarching themes were generated divided in two main categories: progresses and challenges. The research was carried out to the highest ethical standards in educational research with anonymity, confidentiality, consent, and respect for the participants observed at all times.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Data collected from the semi-structured interviews, observations, and the meetings' minutes enabled to identify four emerging *progresses* and two main *challenges*: institutional awareness, potential economic support, culturally collaborative planning, latent deeper connection with the indigenous community, operational, and academic support, respectively. The emerging themes

will be presented and analysed individually with illustrative quotations from the participants.

Progresses

Institutional awareness

The intention to create a programme to give attention and support to indigenous students was originated when in a meeting at state level with the ministry of education the UACJ officials were asked about what the university was doing to address the attention to indigenous population. The university had not established an initiative yet to address this aspect. The university was doing some isolated efforts but not systematically coordinated. For instance, there existed a fellowship specifically for this type of students that enabled them not to pay tuition fees although, not much disseminated and well known. Furthermore, previous to the creation of the programme, there were already few indigenous students attending the university. To create the programme, the UACJ senior administration commissioned the department of social sciences of the Institute of Administration and Social Sciences (ICSA) to design an initiative aiming to increase the number of indigenous students attending the UACJ, offer them the needed support for their success as university students, and to have more connection with the migrant indigenous community living in Ciudad Juarez to favour their social and economic development. The department of social sciences identified key professors across other departments in the institute and the university that had contact, interest, conducted research or activities with indigenous populations. The initiative was welcomed and the team enthusiastically designed the programme and an action plan to submit it to the university council, the governing body of the University for its Approval.

After its approval, the team responsible for the creation of the proposal had two meetings with the university president and his staff to present the programme and ask for their support to implement it. These two meetings were special in the sense that the senior administration was informed of the projects and actions proposed with the intention to obtain the needed resources and support for the programme operation. This first category of analysis is called institutional awareness because, throughout the meetings with the team responsible to design the programme, the members of the university council, and the senior leadership staff of the university celebrated and received with enthusiasm the proposal. There seems to be acknowledgment and awareness in the University of the Social Responsibility of higher educational institutions in contributing that the members of socially excluded communities obtain professional preparation to be leaders in their communities. The

following comment expressed by a university professor during an interview makes evident this institutional enthusiasm: Universities and higher education institutions have a historical debt with the indigenous groups. Higher education in Mexico has been a privilege only for non-indigenous people. I am really happy that the university administration is offering all the needed support for these students to succeed, and that we as institution are truly committing with a population that has not economic means and has been denied the access to this kind of education (University Professor).

Potential economic support

Often a limitation for indigenous communities to access high levels of education has been the accentuated poverty in which they live. Another observed progress has been the existence of economic support in the form of specific fellowships for indigenous students and also other fellowships offered to all students by the university and the local and federal governments. In the case of the specific support, the university had established, previously to the implementation of the support programme, a fellowship called *beca compartir* (share fellowship) that exempt the payment of tuition fees for indigenous students. However, this fellowship is not well known since some indigenous students already attending the university at an advanced stage in their academic programme mentioned that they did not know that such a fellowship existed. Other problem identified with this fellowship is the paperwork burden for students since each semester they have to present a letter of identity issued by the local, state, or federal government in which it is indicated that they belong to an indigenous community. There have been students that do not get their letter on time and they have to pay full tuition. In the case of this specific fellowship to avoid these problems the committee has advised to present this letter of identity only one time when the student register for the first time at the university and do not require this letter in the subsequent semesters. There are also other fellowships that the university offer to general students and that indigenous students could benefit from them.

An example of these fellowships is the *beca trabajo* (job fellowship) in which students are offered a formal job within the university to be carried out during their free time assigning them usually administrative tasks or assisting researchers within the university. Other fellowships offered by the federal government for students coming from a disadvantaged social background such as the *Pronabes* fellowship. In addition, the university has the opportunity to apply for federal funding that is available for higher educational institutions that address the professional preparation of indigenous population. As mentioned in the beginning of this theme,

usually an issue for the existence of few indigenous professionals has been the poverty in which these communities live. There seems that this university has the conditions to overcome these problems since a combination of fellowships could enable that indigenous students have all the economic support needed to be in better economic conditions during their time as university students. A comment shared by a university professor makes evident this point:

I see positive that the university has implemented several mechanisms to support financially its students in need in the form of fellowships. Indigenous students do not pay tuition fees and can also benefit from other fellowships that the university has established (University Professor).

Culturally collaborative planning

Usually there have been complaints in Mexico from minority populations, that someone else decides for them what they need for their progress. This has usually been the traditional approach of governmental agencies when designing projects to implement with indigenous communities. The commission tried to avoid designing a programme based just on the vision of university professors of what indigenous university students need during their courses and what the indigenous communities living in Ciudad Juarez also need to improve their social condition. During the planning stage, the committee invited some of the indigenous students already attending the university to consider their experiences and perspectives. In the meetings were invited ten students representing four different ethnic groups and enrolled in six different undergraduate programmes. They also come from three provinces or states Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Chihuahua. Another important indigenous voice was a university professor of the university who is recognised in the state to be the first indigenous with a doctoral degree. In the planning stage emerged the following aspects as key to enable better support for indigenous students attending the UACJ: the academic, economic, personal, community linkage, and inclusion aspects. In each aspect there were designed specific actions to give attention to the concerns and needs raised in each of them. To design the possible interventions and linkage with the community, contact, visits, and meetings were also conducted with the indigenous communities to take into consideration their perspective. Visits and meetings were conducted with the Raramuri community, the most numerous ethnic group living in Ciudad Juarez. In the case of other groups, leaders of these communities were contacted. This perspective enabled a co-creation of this programme between the indigenous students, the community and the university. The following opinion of a

student points out the importance of their participation:

It is satisfactory the university invited us to participate in these sessions. A project of this kind to be successful needs the insights and perspectives of all involved. The university is creating a project for us as indigenous students so that it is necessary our vision (Indigenous Student).

Latent deeper connection with the indigenous community

The fundamental goal of preparing professional indigenous is the impact in the wider community to enable its social development. This category of analysis is called latent connection with the migrant indigenous community because there have also been previous efforts usually by university professors doing research and social projects in the community. The university has been present in the community and this is an advantage because it will enable faster and deeper partnership to identify more prospective students and also to contribute in solving the community's problems. This presence also favoured the previous mentioned collaborative planning and the creation of a programme that includes the indigenous vision. Some university professors have already developed ties with leaders of the communities, which facilitates cooperation. Another important aspect to mention here is that the university has infrastructure, knowledge, social services, professional internships, cultural events, research projects and expertise in different areas and fields of knowledge that could be implemented and shared by the university with the indigenous community. This does not mean that the university has to focus and redirect all its research and teaching activities to the indigenous communities. However, there are academic programmes with close relevance for these communities such as education, nutrition, medicine, law, and others, and a closer work with the indigenous communities would be beneficial for the university in the form of generation and application of knowledge and also for these communities. The already presence of the university in some communities could be strengthened more. This is why this research identified this presence as a strength and progress because it will enable a deeper connection and cooperation with the indigenous communities. The view expressed by a community leader shows the benefits of this cooperation:

The university is visiting us much more often. They conducted a meeting with us last week and as a result there was an agreement to conduct a workshop on healthy diet and growing vegetables at small scale, a campaign for dental health, and also the creation a food bank (Raramuri Community Leader).

Challenges

Implementation

A first identified challenge has been the operation of the programme. Initially, the department of social sciences was just asked to coordinate the proposal of the programme. The department assumed the coordination responsibility for getting approval from the university council to later pass the responsibility of implementation to another area of the university. A first difficulty was that the planning and approval of the proposal took two semesters. This discouraged some members of the team responsible to generate the proposal because much of time was used for planning with seemingly a slow progress in the implementation. A seemingly reason for this slow progress in planning was that most members of the committee representing the university sometimes missed meetings for the difficulty to establish a common timetable in which all the committee members could attend due to their research and teaching responsibilities. In the case of the delay in the implementation a possible reason for this was that the team did not feel total ownership of the project given that they knew from the beginning that they were just responsible to create the programme but not implement it. Another situation that delayed the initiation of the programme was the initial design of the organisational and implementation structures. The planning team took as base the already existing organisational structures, projects and programmes of the university and assigned the responsibilities and inserted specific activities pertaining to indigenous students throughout these structures. A problem with this model was that people responsible from different areas were not contributing much with the actions and petitions required and needed for the proper implementation of the programme. The planning team recently recognised that the project was not progressing as expected so that the team started to carry out the first activities planned.

These activities were a first meeting of indigenous students already attending the university, a competition of indigenous poetry, invitation for a talk with a recognised international researcher currently doing a project in the state of Oaxaca with indigenous populations. Currently, the team is organising the invitation for a talk of an indigenous origin politician of the O'oba group of Chihuahua and a young native American of the Mescalero Apaches of New Mexico, and also the team is doing the needed paperwork to get a physical space to locate the programme's office and to get administrative staff and also designing a logo and website. The main challenge for implementation and operation seems to be the ownership of the project. The planning team has enthusiastically participated in the creation of the initiative, and the senior administration of the university

show interests in offering the best conditions for indigenous students to thrive as university students. The university has to decide how the programme should be implemented and operated. The possibilities to do so are the following: the planning team assumes the responsibility, the programme is disseminated and included in the already existing organisational university structures, specific staff is designated to operate the programme, or a combination of the mentioned possibilities. The following opinion expressed by a university professor shows one of the problems described: An issue we have identified is the slow progress in the implementation of the actions proposed. I believe an important reason is our academic load because our teaching and research responsibilities do not allow that we directly operate the programme (University Professor).

Academic support

Another challenge to truly advance towards equity and equality of indigenous students attending the university is the academic aspect. Indigenous communities come from the most remote and isolated rural areas of the country. This has favoured their historical abandonment from the governmental agencies responsible to offer public services to put them in equal conditions as the non-indigenous communities. Education is not the exception; for instance, in compulsory education indigenous students usually obtain the lowest academic achievement when compared with nonindigenous students. These communities usually lack of teachers for several months because newly graduated teachers do not want to teach in these communities for the lack of services and the transportation distances. Teachers in these communities usually have just high school preparation and a two-month induction course for teaching compared with the four years of professional preparation of teachers attending non-indigenous communities. In very small communities, the government do not appoint a teacher graduated from a university or a teachers' preparation school, and also, teachers that have graduated from a four year programme usually do not want teach in these communities. Another aspect limiting their achievement in receiving classes in Spanish is because most teachers do not speak the native language of the community. Indigenous students gradually lose their language and cultural heritage through the formal educational system, even though the efforts to, offer bilingual education. In addition, the small proportion that continue to high school experience a similar situation of low quality education since their education is mostly offered under the model of distance education through the *telebachillerato*, a television based model.

This academic background of the few indigenous

students that make it to higher education from preschool to high school put them in disadvantage academically. The UACJ does not condition the entrance to the university based on social, economic, religious, political, origin, or any other reasons. However, students must compete for a space in all the programmes based on an entrance exam. The educational reality of indigenous students described in the previous paragraph put them in disadvantage with non-indigenous students when competing for a space within the university. The planning team has intervened in favour of indigenous students that have been denied a space in an academic programme in the university because they did not get the required score in the entrance exam. Entrance to the university is a first challenge they have to overcome; however, their struggles and difficulties usually continue throughout their academic programmes in their first and second semesters. As manifested by the indigenous students attending the planning meetings, they have struggled with the use of technology and specialised software, advanced mathematics, foreign language, and academic writing given that the university do not spend much time in classes acquiring this knowledge or mastering these skills. It is assumed that students already bring this knowledge and skills from the previous educational levels. Another issue is that there seems to be academic programmes traditionally denied to indigenous students such as the case of medicine and engineering related degrees. These programmes usually require entrance deep knowledge in subjects as science and mathematics, and it has been already pointed out the limitations of the previous educational levels. This denial in entrance to such programmes contributes with institutional discrimination as manifested by one of the participants in this research.

The UACJ advancing truly for the inclusion of indigenous origin students to higher education needs to address the realities described. In the case of the academic support required for these students, the commission has proposed the creation of specific mentoring and advising programme. In the university already exists a general mentoring programme; however, the proposed by the commission is more specific, has much more contact with the students and offers them more feedback and support. To address the manifested academic problems it has been proposed an introductory remedial course in the areas that the new students have more deficiencies. Another action proposed by the commission to advance for a genuine inclusion is the incorporation of indigenous cultures in the contents and courses of academic programmes of the university. There are departments that have indicated the intention to redesign their curriculum. For instance, the law department wants to offer a compulsory course in indigenous laws. Other acknowledged initiative is to teach the native languages of the state in the language centre of the

university that traditionally teaches foreign languages. The advancement towards making the academic programmes more inclusive and addressing the needs of minority groups as the indigenous community is a slow process. The positive aspect in this regard is the willingness of some departments to make changes in their academic programmes to include topics and courses that address the multicultural reality of Mexico. The following comment expressed by a student addresses some of the points described: I wanted to pursue my degree in medicine; however, I did not pass the entrance exam, so I waited another semester to apply again but this time I did it for a degree on education. I have made my point clear in the meetings of this programme of support: In the university there is institutional discrimination given that we as indigenous students compete for a space in unequal conditions. Education for urban students is much better than education for rural communities (Indigenous Student).

Conclusion

Education seems to be a powerful catalysis for indigenous communities to improve their social and economic difficult realities. Education will enable that the indigenous community take ownership of their own development. Previous to the UACJ launched this programme there were several indigenous students already enrolled at the university developing themselves professionally as a new generation of indigenous leaders despite the obstacles they had to overcome to attend higher education. This make evident that in these communities, it is also well regarded as the role of education. The university is contributing greatly to improving the conditions in the long run of these communities by making more accessible higher education in a supportive environment for populations that have been traditionally denied this level of education, and also by strengthening the university presence in the indigenous community. This paper presented the findings of a participant observation research and identified progresses and challenges of a programme implemented in the university aiming to support indigenous students already attending the university, increase their number, and strengthen the presence of the university in these communities. The university has the potential by means of economic resources, organisational structures, projects, willingness by the senior leadership administration, and professors with experience working in indigenous communities that could favour the success of this programme even though so far one of the limitations has been the total implementation of the programme. Once the university overcomes the limitation of the total implementation, the programme will be a meaningful benefit for the indigenous students attending the university and for their

communities.

Conflict of interest

The author has not declared any conflict of interest.

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