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Decoloniality and Critical Interculturality in Higher Education: Experiences and Challenges in Ecuadorian Amazonia

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Abstract The struggles for decolonisation involve problems of coloniality of knowledge that persist in postcolonial states and shape their national educational programmes. In Ecuador, the request to decolonise education has been part of the agenda of Indigenous organisations for decades, and has successfully led to the formulation of programmes of intercultural bilingual education. In its radical acceptance, intercultural education theoretically aims to represent and revitalise knowledges and languages that have been for long under processes of invisibility and erasure. Moreover, the offer of culturally pertinent education would shorten the epistemic distance that plays a role in the access and retention of Indigenous students, especially in higher education. In line with these principles, this study analyses the situation of higher education programmes in the Amazonia region, with a focus on the Universidad Estatal Amazonica (UEA), who claims to integrate ancestral knowledges in its study programmes. The research aims to see how the study contents and pedagogical approaches respect the pluriversal worlds of the Amazonian region. Using official reports, observations and interviews, the study reveals, on the one hand, a persistence of approaches that deny the validity of intercultural education, and on the other hand, a growing presence of decolonial spaces claimed by the students as a reaction to the coloniality of knowledge within the UEA.

Keywords: higher education; intercultural education; Indigenous people; decoloniality; Amazonia; Ecuador

Introduction

Ecuador is a country characterised by high cultural diversity, hosting a multitude of ethnic groups, including Indigenous peoples, *montubios*, Afro-Ecuadorian and white-*mestizos*. The Indigenous population includes 15 Indigenous nationalities (Shuar, Achuar, Kichwa, Shiwiar, Andwa, Waorani, Sapara, Quijos, A’I Cofán, Siona, Secoya, Épera, Tsáchila, Awá, Chachi) and 18 Indigenous peoples recognised in Ecuador (Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (CONAIE, 2022)). While the term ‘nationality’ has been adopted to indicate a consistent original

national group characterised by specific territorialities on lands, ancestral knowledges, languages and histories, ‘Indigenous peoples’ is assigned to those groups located in different contexts, fragmented and mixed with other ethnicities (Dávalos, 2002). In this article, we refer mostly to Indigenous nationalities that are based in Pastaza province, located in the middle portion of the Amazonia region; and more specifically, to their educational and epistemic marginalisation.

Official statistics have calculated that 6.87 per cent of the Ecuadorian population are recognised as Indigenous people; but only 1.5 per cent of the Ecuadorian population holding a university degree are Indigenous. The numbers also define a gender gap with a ratio of 1.1 per cent of Indigenous graduated women versus 1.9 per cent of Indigenous graduated men (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos, INEC, 2010). The education gap that hits these communities is part of an overall condition of social marginalisation and poverty due to low distribution of basic infrastructures and services in the Indigenous territories, to the proletarianisation of many Indigenous families and to the patriarchal culture persisting in the society (Arsel et al, 2019; Méndez Torres, 2009; Perreault, 2003).

Among the claims made by Indigenous peoples of Latin America, together with the fundamental one on land restitution, there is the right to intercultural bilingual education (IBE) against the hispanisation and cultural assimilation that have condemned ancestral cultures to extinction (Paladino and Garcia, 2011). As stated by Mignolo and Walsh (2018), national standardised programmes have contributed to distancing children and youths from territorialities and knowledges that sustain the self-recognition of Indigenous identities and the very protection of their land. The modernity/rationality project (Quijano, 2007) of the republican states has disempowered Indigenous forms of knowledge, depicting them as primitive. It has also involved the extraction of natural resources that has caused social and ecological disruptions in the Indigenous territories (Hohenthal and Minoia, 2022). To contrast these processes, educational programmes should support identity recognition and territorial emplacement of Indigenous people, thus offering decolonial alternatives for sustainable transformative futures and socio-ecological justice (Kerr and Andreotti, 2018; Nakata et al., 2012).

IBE programmes have been negotiated in many countries with different strengths of state control: from state-led programmes to shared governance, until full autonomy of programmes led by Indigenous organisations. The principle of Indigenous peoples’ autonomy in the elaboration of culturally pertinent education programmes has been recognised by the ILO Convention n. 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (1989) and by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) under the principle of free determination. However, nowadays many Indigenous communities still struggle for their autonomy in education, at the same time asking that it would not be taken by the national governments as an excuse for financial de-responsibilisation and abandonment of social investments and politics of redistributive justice. While IBE would be necessary in all parts of multi-cultural nations, in fact, IBE institutes are mostly placed in marginal areas. They lack public funding and

interest, despite official claims of their importance, e.g. in the framework of Plurinational states like Bolivia and Ecuador (Cruz Rodriguez, 2013).

The general disinvestment in IBEs is reflected in the lack of teachers having knowledge of Indigenous languages or intercultural education, and in the poor quality of pedagogical materials. This problem has been partly addressed by international cooperation programmes. Among them, we could recall the project EIBAMAZ (Educación Intercultural Bilingüe para la Amazonía) funded by UNICEF and Finland for Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru, which has produced textbooks for primary grades and other pedagogical materials, and has supported University curricula in Intercultural education for teachers and for researchers (UNICEF, 2012). Since the end of the project, old printed copies of EIBAMAZ textbooks are still in use in some IBE units, not substituted by any reprints or new publications. These basic handbooks have limited capacity to nurture cultures, cosmologies and living practices among Indigenous students, as their content presents some words and selected information disconnected from deeper views on land-based ancestral practices, ecological cycles, human–non-human relations, spiritual connections with the forest, etc. (Arias and Minoia, 2023). As for Mexico, Gnade-Muñoz (2010) in her analysis of IBE textbooks has reported the presence of many stereotypes, reducing Indigenous cultures as folkloristic and non-scientific. This experience shows the limits of some intercultural education programmes in supporting decolonial pathways.

The achievement of interculturality becomes more challenging in upper levels of education, as curricula are more strictly oriented to the formation of professional skills to be integrated in modern capitalist productions and urban lifestyles, or to prepare students for the admission in higher education career that follow standardized programmes. In light of these goals, the passage to adulthood of youths seems to require the abandonment of knowledges that are considered as non-functional and thus, redundant.

Very few universities in Latin America propose intercultural programmes, after long-term requests by Indigenous peoples and social movements. Their relationships with the state are uneasy and their degrees often lack legal recognition to enter professional careers. In Mexico, a strong social demand expressed by the Zapatista movement led to the creation the autonomous *Universidad de la Tierra* en Oaxaca, Chiapas, en 2002, based on the pedagogical thought of Ivan Illich (Carlin, 2014; Zaldivar, 2009); while between 2004 and 2015 the State approved new intercultural universities offering new courses (e.g. on Indigenous languages and cultures), but mostly relying on Western academic pedagogies (Ávila-Romero and Ávila-Romero, 2015). In Ecuador, the intercultural university Amawtay Wasi opened in 2004 organised by CONAIE and the Instituto Científico de Culturas Indígenas (ICCI), and legally recognised as a state university. However, an official academic evaluation that Sarango Macas (2019) recognises as an act of *epistemic apartheid* by the *colonial state*, determined its closure in 2013. The recent reopening has occurred with restricted funding and course programmes offered online.

As a consequence of the State control of the higher education sector, most academic formation of Indigenous youths occurs in non-intercultural Academies, even when their premises are located in Indigenous territories. Hence, their formation follows what Quijano (2007) defines as the Euro-centric colonial matrix of knowledge. However, localisation should count in shaping the teaching and learning practices in educational institutions. Localisation in Indigenous territories, proximity with Indigenous communities, and daily relations with students of various origins create needs that cannot be ignored and that call for responses.

Our study intends to analyse the complexity of these relations occurring at the Universidad Estatal Amazonica (UEA), a State university located in the town of Puyo and other decentralised campuses in the Amazonian region. The University has a very diverse community of students from various ethnicities and geographical areas of the country, in some cases very remote. It has the highest presence of Indigenous students compared to other public universities, although they are still a minority compared to the majority formed by *mestizos* students. This diverse coexistence and the debate on intercultural education led by the Indigenous organisations are not ignored, neither have they induced explicit institutional strategies of pluriversalisation or decolonisation of knowledge, so far. However, spaces of interculturalisation can be recognised in spaces and practices lived by staff and especially by students. Our study has intended to observe them and recognise them as spaces and practices of decoloniality: in terms of revitalisation of ancestral cultures, empowerment of Indigenous students and reversing the current hierarchy of knowledge in the Academy.

The following section of the article will recall some fundamental literature exploring decoloniality, interculturality and the importance of pedagogies of care. We will then describe the context of our study and the methodology we have adopted for our observations. The presentation of the results and further discussion will help us expand the very conceptualisation of critical interculturality, and the possibilities that pedagogies of care offer to the creation of spaces of relationality and agency, supporting the re-emergence of pluriversal knowledges.

Conceptualising interculturality, decoloniality and affectivity in education

This study addresses the question of coloniality of knowledge in education, and of interculturality as a tool for decolonising knowledge and the academy. According to Quijano (2011), coloniality is one of the elements of global capitalism, characterised by patterns of domination–exploitation intersected by ideas of ‘race’ and social classification; thus, it relates to the global conflict inherent in the modern/capitalist/European world-system. Yet Eurocentrism does not belong exclusively to Europeans, nor only to those who dominate world capitalism, but to all those educated under its hegemony, under a mode of knowledge adopted by the world order. For Quijano, the cultural hegemony of Europe inspired by the Enlightenment imposed philosophical

and scientific justifications (based on measurement, systematisation, and objectification) for a geopolitical order based on Eurocentrism and colonial exploitation of the world. This order defines centres as areas of accumulation, and peripheries as sites of extraction and dispossession (Harvey, 2009).

For Guerrero, coloniality operates in societies

on three key levels: the coloniality of power, for the structural domination and control of the economy, politics, culture, nature and life; the coloniality of knowledge that operates at the epistemic, philosophical and scientific levels, for the subalternation of languages and knowledge; and the coloniality of being for the domination of sexuality, subjectivities, sensibilities, imaginaries and bodies, which operate not separately but interrelated in order to achieve absolute control of life. (Guerrero, 2019, p. 125)

Walsh (2007) warns that the coloniality model of global capitalist power was based on the control of all subjective forms, culture and knowledge by Western hegemony. Thus, decoloniality is concerned with dignity, life and the survival of the planet in the face of racism, sexism and nature, with implications of depatriarchalising. It implies relationality (*vincularidad*) in relation-interdependence, in linkage-awareness, in conviviality, and not in competition, and with the awareness of the integral relations and interdependence of all living organisms with territory or land and the cosmos (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018).

Decoloniality thus allows for the construction of a different imaginary of society, via political-epistemic projects that include pedagogical practices (Walsh, 2007). The global debate on academic decolonisation has been very active, especially during the last decade, questioning the whiteness of curricula and of the teaching staff, and calling for a dismantling of racial structures in academic institutions (e.g.: Arday et al, 2021; Begun and Saini, 2019). Academic decolonisation means reversing the imposition of the colonial hierarchy of knowledge that serves the power (Bhambra et al., 2018). This hierarchy is shaped according to academic rankings validated by scientific standards created by a small group of Western academic elites (Shahjahan et al, 2017). Rankings are based on indicators of quality that have a global validation, and lead to the uniformisation of research and pedagogical practices into rigid matrices that value epistemic and technical skills inasmuch they are functional to the goals of the capitalist progress; and disposing all those knowledges considered primitive, incoherent and dysfunctional and thus, non-scientific (Richardson, 2018).

The need for an anti-racist education, reversing the minoritisation and humiliation of Indigenous peoples and afro-descendants and of their rich pluriversal worlds, regards all societal spaces starting from the classrooms (Krainer and Chaves, 2021; Walsh, 2008). Politics of interculturality would not only mean inclusion of minorities' cultures in hegemonic knowledge, but means co-creating knowledge in equality and safety for all, starting from the classrooms.

Building intercultural education is a political act that can respond to different views. Often, it is (mis)interpreted as a liberal policy of inclusion of certain cultures

in multi-cultural settings steered by the centres. Such discourses on inclusion may be seemingly emancipatory and intercultural, but are founded on premises of asymmetry, domination and patriarchy (Estermann, 2014). They use strategies of colonial re-appropriation of terms that cannot lead to decolonisation. Concepts like interculturality and decoloniality thus become disempowered ‘metaphors’ (Tuck and Yang, 2012). For Simpson (2017), decolonising means constructing Indigenous alternatives to the logics of the settler colonial state, and so, all education shall be land- and community-based, in safe settings allowing sharing knowledges based on practices, and that cannot be found in books or validated theories.

Walsh (2012, p. 63) recognises a fundamental difference between *functional* and *critical* interculturality. The neo-liberal model that recognises cultural diversity without challenging the foundations of global capitalist exploitation (Walsh, 2012) frames the first one, and is present in the discursive rhetoric on inclusive multi-cultural education (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018; Walsh, 2008). On the contrary, critical interculturality recognises the persistent culture of colonial and racial exploitation and operates for a societal reconstruction with equal rights, without annulment or subordination from either side (Albó and Anaya, 2004, Escarbajal, 2011, Ortiz, 2019; Walsh, 2014). Our study adopts the critical meanings of interculturality, in line with the struggles led by Indigenous movements for a radical societal transformation. The aim is not to substitute a cultural hegemony with another one, but for creating a new political and social order based on convivial coexistence.

Critical interculturality is thus a political, epistemic and existence-based project, and a tool of decoloniality’s praxis (Mignolo, and Walsh, 2018, p. 64) that requires new pedagogies. The cultural relationships with the land, forests and more-than-nature cosmologies of Indigenous communities require land-based learning as a practice of resistance. Simpson (2017) indicates the importance of storytelling, to fill the interstitial spaces between land and learners with sounds, recognition, generative energies and open hearts. Escobar (2014) expresses the attitude of *sentipensar* (feeling-thinking) as necessary for the study of the *pluriverse*, an assemblage of many ontologies, that can be experienced with emotional and political engagement for land and territorial rights.

These types of pedagogical approaches are only limitedly known; some literature reports examples of teaching practices that counteract epistemic erasures and reinforce activism: e.g. *Nishnaabeg intelligence* on land storytelling (Simpson, 2014); *pedagogias da mata* (pedagogies of woodland) of Tuxá teachers (Durazzo, 2022); Freirean ecopedagogy in Costa Rica (Korsant, 2022) or camp-pedagogies of Palestinian refugees (El Masri, 2022). These studies have shown the importance of knowledge revitalisation through experiential learning and relationality.

The importance of such pedagogical practices makes us consider the need to also focus on the role of educators, and to address the colonial legacy of teacher professionalism, in the way it perpetuates both the coloniality of knowledge, and the coloniality of being (Tikly et al., 2022). Motta and Bennett (2018) have shown how this

combination of knowledge and pluriversal recreation requires pedagogies of care. Affectivity supports the expression and recognition of the epistemological contributions of subjects from non-traditional backgrounds that in formal classroom settings are normally invisibilised, devalued and denigrated. These feminist relational spaces react to the common ‘hegemonic careless masculinities’ based on meritocratic framings, usually dominant in academic spaces (Motta and Bennett, 2018, p. 632).

Contextualisation of the study

This study has questioned in particular the position of the Universidad Estatal Amazonica (UEA), a public university based in the Amazonian region of Ecuador, in the debate and praxis of interculturality. In other words, to what extent and in what practices does UEA respond to its location and proximity with Indigenous communities, and thus, produce interculturality; or on the contrary, reproduce coloniality of knowledge?

The presence of a public university in the Amazonian territory is very important for an area of extraordinary richness in biodiversity and cultures that would shape investigation and learning through diverse methods of knowing, connecting and preserving. The spatial proximity of educational opportunities is part of a dimension of socio-cultural justice (Hohenthal and Minoia, 2022), fundamental for a region that is otherwise extremely poor, also compared to the rest of the country, and an overall reduced presence of infrastructures and services (INEC, 2010) and an overall reduced presence of infrastructures and services. This situation contrasts with its high contribution to the State budgets deriving from the taxation of oil exploitation.

According to the 2010 census, the Amazonian population include 33.4 per cent of people who self-identify as Indigenous. However, this figure is probably underestimated as a state strategy of minimisation and control of the population; moreover, the rise of ethnic politics committed to fighting discrimination and in the re-appropriation of native roots is also increasing self-identifications as Indigenous (Martinez-Novo, 2014). Anyway, the large number of mestizos living in the Amazonian region has its origin in mid-twentieth century, when governmental policies promoted the migration of settlers from the densely populated highland and coastal regions to the Amazon, dispossessing the Indigenous peoples from much of their traditional lands. Indigenous groups live fragmented in remote rural areas, while fast-growing towns contribute to the uniformisation of languages and cultures despite ethnic segregation (Bilsborrow et al., 2004).

In the early 1960s, a movement striving for cultural and social rights began to emerge among Indigenous peoples. The most visible and influential Indigenous organisation is the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities (Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador: CONAIE), and from the beginning, education has been an issue high up on its agenda (Perreault, 2003). In 1989, the Ministry of Education signed an agreement with CONAIE, placing the responsibility of

bilingual intercultural education on this Indigenous organisation, so that Indigenous communities could gain control over their children's schooling in order to have their cultural and linguistic rights recognised (Lipka and Stairs, 1994). A National Directorate of Bilingual Intercultural Education (Dirección Nacional de Educación Intercultural Bilingüe: DINEIB) was created, and in 1993 the curricular model (Modelo del Sistema de Educación Intercultural Bilingüe: MOSEIB) was made official. However, since 2008, the political relations between the Government and CONAIE deteriorated, and this played a negative influence in the application of the programme of intercultural education. Declaring that CONAIE had made education too politicised and ideological, the Ministry of Education decreased its influence over the EIB and put the programme under its own direct mandate (Martínez Novo and de la Torre, 2010). A new law on intercultural education (Ley Orgánica de Educación Intercultural (LOEI 2011): Asamblea Nacional, 2011) stated that interculturality remained a priority; hence, by locating EIB under the Ministry of Education as a separate educational system, it disempowered the very essence of intercultural education (Martínez Novo, 2014). A new version of the MOSEIB model, in 2013 decreased the ambitious goals outlined in 1993 (Katz and Chumpi Nantip, 2014; Martínez Novo and de la Torre, 2010; Oviedo and Wildemeersch, 2008). EIB schools lack resources, either for teachers, equipment, books or other educational materials written in the Indigenous languages; while in the same time, since 2007, the government embarked in the Millennium Schools project (*Unidades Educativas del Milenio*: UEM), with the aim to improve education quality through infrastructural modernisation and internationalisation (Ministerio de Educación, 2012).

Moreover, the reform (LOEI 2011) ended university-level education for IBE teachers and led to the closure of several universities that did not fulfil the evaluation criteria set by the government based on Western canons of excellence and academic competitiveness (Rubaii and Lima Bandeira, 2018). Among them, the government interrupted the academic programmes of the Intercultural University of Indigenous Peoples and Nations '*Amawtay Wasi*' (meaning: 'house of knowledge' in kichwa), while at the same time, opened four new universities, aligned with the Millennium model for higher education (Rodríguez Cruz, 2018). One of them is the Regional Amazonia University Ikiam (meaning: 'forest' in shuar), specialised in environmental sciences and is also based in the Amazonian region. The continuous cycles of evaluation and accreditation posed to the public universities challenge their possibility to innovate or transform their curricula.

As for now, there are 13 institutions of higher education in the Amazonia region: nine State-funded including three universities and six technical professional institutes, and four privately funded (Secretaría de Educación Superior, Ciencia, Tecnología e Innovación – SENESCYT, 2022). The three public universities are relatively young: the first one, UEA in Pastaza province, opened in 2002, followed by Ikiam,

in Napo Province, and by two regional branches, in Orellana and Morona Santiago Provinces, of the Escuela Superior Politécnica de Chimborazo.

Research methodology

This study has taken place in the framework of a collaborative research project on eco-cultural pluralism in quality education in Ecuadorian Amazonia that started in 2018. The research was based on a formal agreement and focused on opportunities and challenges for Indigenous youths to access culturally pertinent education inspired by the principles of interculturality in education. We understand that interculturality is not limited to the relation of equity between the *mestizo* majority and the Indigenous students, since students from other ethnicities study at UEA. However, the relation of the proximity of UEA and the Indigenous peoples of Pastaza has influenced our specific focus.

The methods involved participant observations, interviews and seminars held at the UEA aiming at promoting public discussions on critical interculturality. Moreover, we consulted course programmes and graduation essays with research based on the communities of origin of the candidate students. In our observations, the fundamental question was whether the studies support the students' connection with their homeland, through their own languages and spiritualities, and in appreciation of their traditions and community agencies.

Semi-structured interviews at the UEA involved eight professors and lecturers, ten students and ten graduates, to determine their perceptions of the intercultural sphere at the university and possible weaknesses or lack of insertion of pluriversal knowledges in the study programmes and in extra-curricular activities. Observations and interviews became virtual during the outbreak of COVID-19, in 2020 and 2021. We also discussed the issues with non-academic persons, especially from the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon (CONFENIAE), which has its headquarters in Union Base, near Puyo, and that has a branch of activities on intercultural education. We held many informal discussions with youth representatives and members in charge of intercultural education on issues of interculturality, political negotiations, activities for teachers, and more.

The research group involved in the broader research project also connected with other two universities, based in Quito, to hold seminars with university staff, and to create virtual networks of peer support among students during the period of the pandemic (Pinto et al., 2023).

The different positioning of the researchers in relation to the context of the study, as one is a UEA staff member, while the other one is a foreign scholar, has influenced the research methodology. In particular, it has involved self-ethnography beyond the time span of the research project. During the time of the research agreement, the authority of the university signed an informed consent to allow the staff member to participate in the study. Professors and students were orally informed about the purpose of the study and had the possibility to refuse to participate.

In consideration of the ethical principles in research, we understand that different subjects in the case study construct their own reality, and that positions and commitments differ over the questions of critical interculturality and decolonisation of the Academy. Also, to respect anonymity, we decided to exclude any information that would be directly related to specific persons.

Moreover, we consulted official databases reporting statistics on the access and retention of Indigenous students. In particular, we consulted regional data from the Ecuadorian Secretariat of Superior Education, Research and Innovation (SENESCYT, 2020; 2022). Information on student intake at the UEA was collected for the years 2017–2021. For each academic period, UEA collects enrolment sheets with data on gender, ethnicity and place of residence of students. Some information is also available for lecturers, from the time of their initial employment. Both datasets are kept by the Academic Secretariat and provided under authorisation. Other information could be taken from the public website of the university. As said, the research time also included two academic periods in which the University only worked virtually because of COVID-19.

Results: recognising spaces of coloniality and spaces of decoloniality at the UEA

Our analysis has covered specific topics that could qualify UEA's education offer as either culturally pertinent for Indigenous peoples, or as another space that annihilates diverse knowledges and deepens the coloniality of knowing and being. Our question was whether its study programmes and pedagogies support students' connections with their own native lands, appreciating the use of languages and ancestral knowledges as means to revitalise their cultures and cosmologies; or if, on the contrary, they follow Western academic hierarchies that do not recognise ancestral knowledges as valid knowledge, nor give space to different ontologies of being. We understand that it would not be possible to have straight binary answers on these topics, since academic life is not only informed by institutional decisions – that, as we have seen, are influenced by rigid canons of the state evaluation – but also hosts spaces of creativity and resistance.

Therefore, to respond to this main question, we divided the area of observation into three main themes. A preliminary analysis of the enrolments in UEA has provided some basic information on the effective access to higher education for students from situations of socio-economic distress, considering that the majority of Indigenous students are part of it. Then, the analysis of UEA's curricular study programmes could inform on their engagement with ancestral knowledges or, on the contrary, on the persistence of Western and capitalist rationality in the study of cultures and natural resources. Finally, we found important extra-curricular activities and spaces of intercultural caring and commoning, and looked at their work in liberating students from the lived stigma of the coloniality of being.

Accessibility and retention of poor and Indigenous students in UEA study programmes.

UEA is the first public university to be established in the Ecuadorian Amazonia, and many UEA students constitute the first generation that have accessed higher education in their communities. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that many factors challenge their educational careers, especially related to conditions of poverty and the distance of the new location, in the town of Puyo, from their families and communities.

Official statistics for the admissions period of June–September 2020 show that 58.33 per cent of the students admitted in UEA come from poor socio-economic conditions: 22.57 per cent are positioned in quintile 1 (bottom 20 per cent) and 35.76 per cent in quintile 2 (second lowest 20 per cent) (SENESCYT, 2020). These figures tell that many of the UEA students, no matter their ethnicity, are in special needs and require various types of support, both in their studies and their basic survival.

Conversations on this topic clarified the structural nature of poverty that does not only hit specific individuals or households, but has deepened due to a general deprivation of basic infrastructures and services in remote villages. Many students come from those underserved communities, lacking schooling, health services, or transport. Students from rural areas that get to access upper levels of education, in most cases study in IBE units of very low quality, which compromise their capability to reach the minimum grades for entering higher studies. Students that are finally accepted in university degrees are then required to pass levelling (*nivelación*) courses to achieve the preparation required by the study programmes; some previous educational gaps, especially in maths, make the tasks particularly difficult, and cause dropouts. In addition, among poor students there is higher risk of discontinuity in studies, as they are also supposed to help in family economies, e.g. in the *chakra* (farm), or for girls, in domestic chores that include caring of younger siblings. Early pregnancy is another cause of abandonment of studies. Moreover, for those who cannot afford living in Puyo town, transports connecting the university with the village are often perilous and expensive. Furthermore, the new life in the city, far from familiar places, languages and habits, and in competitive classrooms, brings manifold cultural challenges, feelings of isolation and psychological anxiety. Finally, the recent transfer of classes into online teaching due to the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the problems, especially because of a digital divide hitting rural communities who lack electricity and internet connectivity, that cause a breakdown of communication with the teachers, and the loss of students' peer support (Pinto et al., 2023; Veintie et al., 2022).

Statistics provided by UEA have also shown that Covid-19 has caused a dramatic decrease of Indigenous students' enrolment. While the trend was increasing before the pandemic, and Indigenous students constituted the 19.57 per cent of all enrolled students during the semester March 2017–July 2018, it decreased to 14.64 per cent during the semester October 2020–February 2021. This trend is a direct consequence of situations of social injustice affecting the region. Communities of the Amazon region ask

for redistributive policies to compensate their losses due to the invasion of heavy extractive industries. With the breakout of the pandemic, the government responded with the promise of an acceleration of the regional plan for the Amazonia that would have extended the provision of services, including the internet coverage of the region. However, the approval of the plan was delayed to 2021 (Secretaría Técnica de la Circunscripción Territorial Especial Amazónica, 2021), and among other needs that remained unattended, a large number of youths lost two years of education.

So far, between 2009 (first cohort of graduated students) until March 2021, UEA has graduated 1848 students, out of which 17.5 per cent self-identify as Indigenous people. This indicates a good retention of Indigenous students enrolled in academic periods before Covid-19, and who could finalise their studies during the pandemic time.

Curricular studies: do they engage in ancestral knowledge?

The fact that UEA responds to principles of national standards is clear from the Vision expressed in its homepage, indicating that UEA

Promotes the sustainable development of the Amazon in such a way that it is revalued as a fundamental element and resource of the State. It has inserted ancestral knowledge in the characteristics and economic potentials to forge culture and achieve national unity. (Universidad Estatal Amazonica, 2022)

This statement clarifies its positionality very clearly; nevertheless, it will be important to see how the mentioned ancestral knowledge is eventually integrated into the study plans.

UEA has seven study programmes: Agriculture and livestock, Agro-industry, Forestry, Biology, Environment, Communication, and Tourism, besides four new ones offered online. The focus of these curricula corresponds to building professional skills that could develop the economic potential of the region.

Five of them present a common block of curricular subjects (formed by maths and natural sciences) followed by technological specialisations for the needs of productive chains. For instance, the programme on agricultural and livestock includes agricultural mechanisation, agrochemicals, zootechnology, phytotechnology, fertilisation, etc.; while the programme on agro-industry includes agro-processing, food chemistry, computer-assisted drawing, agro-industrial mechanisation and equipment; and other specialised courses. These study plans do not present any explicit course titles referring to traditional productions or ancestral Amazonian techniques, despite the rich local knowledge existing on agroecological farming, livestock breeding, fishing, herbal collection, food processing, etc.

Also for study programmes that are not directly technological, such as forestry, biology, and environment, the curriculum is oriented towards productive uses of the

natural resources, or risk assessments and remediation, rather than on fields of research for conservation. Also for these curricula, there are no traces of course programmes clearly presenting ancestral knowledge, while intercultural learning would enrich dramatically the possibilities of learning natural science. For instance, the ecology of the Amazonian region could be studied in terms of *Cuencas sagradas* (Sacred Watersheds) that Indigenous peoples of Ecuador and Peru are proposing for community-based conservation of biodiversity. Ethnobotany would study plants using ancestral recognition of species and their properties for human health and environmental remediation. Furthermore, spiritual ontologies of the forest could offer important points of conceiving human–non-human relations, following for instance the example of *Kawsak Sacha* (Living Forest) cosmology of the people of Sarayaku, informing *planes de vida* (life plans) as planning tools against environmental degradation caused by extractivism.

The study plans on tourism and communication seem to be more open to cultural diversity. Although tourism studies are clearly organized to create professionalities in the service industry, this study programme involves many Indigenous students aiming at working in their communities, and includes Indigenous languages and anthropology with a focus on local cultures. Other courses of this career offer instruction on flora, fauna, gastronomic culture of Ecuador, and cultural heritage, but mainly as areas of tourist management. This reductionist view could cause risks, as it would change the relationships between Indigenous students and their territories and cosmologies. It would produce commodification of cultures, reducing their internal complexity, ancestral meanings, and sacredness, into elements of marketable folklore.

Finally, the study programme on communication appears to be more open to social innovations in relationship to local communities. The study presentation involves terms as ‘*buen vivir*’, ‘community communication’, ‘support to research lines on plurinationality and ancestral knowledges’; and some course titles resonate with principles of critical pedagogy, like ‘storytelling’, ‘discourse analysis’, or ‘right to communication and information’.

Interesting enough, all careers have in common one course, named ‘*Realidad Nacional*’ (National Reality) that seems in contrast with the principles of the plurinational state affirmed by the Ecuadorian constitution, but expresses the alignment with the nation seen from the capital city. Conversations with some teachers confirm that the plurinational approach is functional to include all ethnicities in a national union of *ciudadanos*.

Interviewed teachers have confirmed that the fundamental instruction has to be ‘universal’ rather than ‘pluriversal’, both in class and in the choice of handbooks. A minority would also integrate the lectures with some examples from ancestral knowledges and local practices, especially in studies on biodiversity. It is important to consider also the effort done by the students during the courses, and in their final graduation works. Some lecture courses include students’ presentation of final essays on local products, local ecologies or cultures. Final essays on cultural traditions

are reported, for instance, in the course named '*Prácticas de Servicio Comunitario*' (practices of community service); however, the essays are mostly composed in class and are not based on lived experiences of relationality with human, non-human or more-than-human beings. According to some interviewed teachers, observations remain descriptive and lack discussions from decolonial perspectives.

Our research also involved a survey of final theses presented during the period 2009–2020, catalogued as '*educación intercultural bilingüe*', '*interculturalidad*', and '*etnoeducación*', meaning that for UEA, their topics are culturally relevant for native communities. From the titles, locations and abstracts, we could find 66 works in Tourism, 46 in Environmental engineering and 10 in Agriculture and livestock that engage with field work in local communities. We have not considered here any final works on agro-industrial engineering because the approach is based only on laboratory methods. The majority of the final works present an approach that values technological solutions, e.g. for the creation of productive economic chains and their potential intensification, sometimes in bioeconomy cycles or other sustainable chains. Theses on tourism in Indigenous areas generally represent conventional studies that describe cultural and natural characteristics of Indigenous communities and propose designs of tourist products. However, we found some interesting theses that offered new perspectives. For instance, one work authored by two students addressed critically the problem of the epistemic division between hospitality practices offered by Indigenous communities and 'the scientific vision offered by the curriculum in tourism of the UEA' (Galarza and Grefa, 2018, p. 5). They claimed that understanding Indigenous cultures through the explanatory matrices offered by tourism studies could generate negative effects: 'Education can become a deterritorializing force preventing local potentials to be expressed in tourism development, and generating a divorce between local professionals and their territory' (Galarza and Grefa, 2018, p. 4). This statement and the intellectual approach supporting it show promising changes and new possibilities for decolonising academic knowledge.

As for now, limits to deeper engagement with local knowledges are also due to the fact that the majority of the teachers are *mestizos* and not aware of the importance of ontological reflections and intercultural approaches to researching and teaching/learning. Some interviewees believe that it will be very hard to open the minds to Indigenous cosmovisions of teachers who have been educated solely within the canons of the Western science. For now, they constitute the majority within the academic world, and for others it is still difficult to express other forms of knowledge. Occasional acts of mockery and discrimination have been reported, against colleagues or students who had expressed some information from ancestral knowledges.

Only 3 per cent of the teachers self-identify as Indigenous people. The reason is that until recently, Indigenous peoples were only admitted to Master of intercultural education, and those degrees do not entitle them to teach any other disciplines than Indigenous languages or arts (Consejo de Educación Superior, 2022, p. 94). Therefore,

the presence of teachers possibly representing alternative visions is still reduced and not sufficiently strong to express freely. Indigenous teachers do not even use their languages outside their teaching hours, nor do they engage in any debates on possible intercultural reforms for the study programmes at the UEA. As for now, these types of discussions happen outside the institutional spaces. We could organise a seminar on intercultural education for teaching staff ('How can you interculturalize your teaching?') in 2019 because it was presented as an academic activity supported by an international project and with the intervention of a recognized scholar from a well-established university (FLACSO) based in Quito. The seminar was important but did not produce any direct impact. Instead, the political debate around intercultural education happens externally, promoted by CONFENIAE and CONAIE who continue on their original struggles. For them, all levels of education should make ancestral knowledges compulsory and taught by community members chosen for their expertise, no matter their university degrees.

Spaces of care in extra-curricular activities

Now, what is the problem that is sought to be solved, is that monocultural education tends to break people's ties with their environment, decontextualizing them, which gives rise to these people, when they leave the university, they no longer manage to insert themselves in their territory, but often the typical migration is generated, because they do not find the possibility of undertaking and innovating despite having natural and cultural resources in their own communities. Therefore, what we want to determine is to what extent the university is strengthening the dialogue of ancestral knowledge, so that students have the proper empowerment and support to face and achieve success in their environment. (Galarza and Grefa, 2018, pp. 5–6)

The students question the problems of interculturality inside UEA. Given the impossibility to refer to ancestral knowledges in their academic studies, at least they claim the right to organise extra-curricular activities that could help them heal from the stress caused by the imposed alienation from their cultural origins. In 2015, a group of Amazonian students founded the collective *Retomando Raíces* (Retaking Roots), with the aim to reconnect with their cultures that are under processes of erasure, and to promote an anti-racist culture. Shortly, the group expanded including students from other origins. Then, they built a *choza* (wooden hut) inside the campus and created their music (Figure 1).

And the purpose was fulfilled: the collective Retomando Raíces opens a space to connect with the cultures of our peoples and nationalities. Telling who we are allows us to identify ourselves and assume those experiences. Dressing up, telling anecdotes, filling ourselves with courage to overcome the fear of exposing ourselves, are elements that go beyond folklore, disguising ourselves to represent who we are. How beautiful would be an evening with the Waorani, Sápara, Shwiviar, Kichwa, Andoas, Shuar, Achuar

Figure 1: *Nadie puede al mundo decirme que yo soy menos menos que el* (Nobody in the world can tell me that I am less less than him). Colectivo Retomando Raíces, 2018 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eStBs1IV0Go>



nationalities. What I recognize, I love and value; and Ecuador is megadiverse, original, unique. (Facebook post, 24 May 2018)

Come to re-value the culture of your towns and communities. Be part of the legacy of grandparents and ancestors (...). You also have your history and it is good to socialize it. Be part of the Collective and REvalue your identity in the university context. You Are part of us! (Facebook post, 24 May 2018)

Various students, thanks to the collective, have declared to have overcome a shaming block, and have found pride in declaring their own Indigenous identity. In addition, *mestizo* students started self-identifying as ethnicity, criticising the universality of whiteness and the ‘othering’ of non-white ethnic groups. Moreover, the collective recognises and addresses other forms of oppressions derived from gender and other intersectionalities.

As a collective operating in the university, one of the addressed themes refers to the relationship between Western science and Indigenous cosmologies. Given the nature of these issues, the collective made requested to be recognised as a scientific association inside UEA, but their applications were denied, and their status is only as a student group for cultural activities and social support.

The main activity is the *guayusa upina*, or *toma de guayusa*, a ritual that takes place around 3–4 am, to start the day with the sacred tea (from *guayusa*, and Amazonian plant) that purifies the soul and the body. During the ritual, they share ancestral stories and knowledge from different nationalities, poems and dramatisations.

The collective also collaborate with Kimirina, an association operating outside the university and that sensitises young people on the risks of sexually transmitted diseases, drugs and alcohol addiction. *Retomando Raíces* works especially to connect

with the most vulnerable students, those newly arrived from remote areas and following the periods of *nivelación*. Finally, the collective organises reading seminars on fiction and poetry.

Other practices of care have found implementation within the UEA. In particular, a teacher psychologist created peer groups named *ruedas vinculantes*, an experience of integrative community therapy that provides collective support in situations of discomfort, stress, lack of self-confidence derived from the *colonialidad del ser* (i.e. sense of minoritisation for being Indigenous, Afro-descendant or from other ethnicities), or from trauma due to violence, especially gender-related. The practice has expanded and has involved new facilitators, including a former UEA student from the *kichwa* nationality who specialised in community healing (Gutierrez Valerio et al., 2023).

Concluding remarks: on struggles for convivial interculturality

This study has questioned the epistemic relation that UEA has established with the Indigenous territory in which it is positioned. The focus has been in particular on the epistemic negotiations between the academic institution and Indigenous peoples, although the Amazonian region is lived by a wider diversity of peoples, including afro-descendants and other groups having their valid knowledges and cosmologies.

The issue of epistemic relations also regards the UEA mission in the region: does UEA represent an extension of the central state or is it an autonomous institution willing to pluriversalise its knowledge? Is the aim of the academic presence an act of domination of the Amazonia considered as a resource-pool for national development; or is the intention to co-create knowledge with local inhabitants, respecting the rich biodiversity and their ancestral cultures?

The findings of this study demonstrate that UEA has not yet embarked on a path of interculturalisation of its curricula. The university substantially maintains a Eurocentric curriculum in every academic field, and does not engage with any contributions from non-Western cultures, with the justification that they are empirical, not validated through theories or models, and thus, academically inappropriate. Moreover, the expressed aims of the studies are the modernisation of productive processes for agriculture and livestock, agro-industry, biotechnologies, forestry and tourism, through technological and business models that are too distant from the local territorialities and community economies. The emplacement of new industries would need financial assets that are mostly unavailable, and a social reorganisation that would be detrimental to the local lifestyles and cosmologies.

The discrepancies of these epistemic worlds are more and more evident, especially to Indigenous students who stay put at the convergence of these conflicting world-views. Their desire to address these issues is not satisfied by the course curricula, but is becoming vocal, and cannot be ignored for long. Although Indigenous students

are a numerical minority in higher education, they constitute an innovative and engaging force reclaiming their epistemic rights in the university space.

This force manages to act in the interstitial spaces of the academic institution: not in the course programmes yet, but in some essays and final theses, and above all, in extra-curricular activities. In these latter, students have constituted spaces of resistance and negotiation for the right to express their cultural identities and to maintain alive their roots, languages and cosmologies. These spaces are co-created, also materially, in the form of a wooden *choza* that provides a sense of unity to the members of the collective *Retomando Raíces*, who gather under its roof. Resistance and reconnection events happen in non-academic times, in the evenings, and sometimes at 3 am, during the rituals of the *guayusa upina*. Students use storytelling as decolonial practices to share stories of their identities.

These spaces and times are marginal in comparison to those occupied by formal academic work, but constitute safe environments in which students can convivially share their food, sing, tell their stories, recite poetry and connect with their land, while engaging in free discussions on themes of important scientific value. There, students can vocalise their personal uncomfortable journeys and discuss many epistemic conflicts regarding for instance science, nature, culture and their position in the society. Scientific conflicts are perceived in the relationships between the analytical and technical skills they learn in the classrooms and the ancestral understanding and practices they have seen on their land. Regarding the conceptualisation of nature, they discuss how academic classifications and data-based explanations often respond to practical aims of extraction and product transformations, in contrast with Indigenous views considering land, river, trees, birds and other animals, as living beings related to the communities materially and spiritually (Gualinga, 2019). Another epistemic conflict regards the diverging conceptions of cultures, which the academic studies consider instrumental to the financial extraction of value. Studies on marketable folklore and business models reflecting Western standards of tourism hospitality contrast with the convivial hospitality that Indigenous communities would provide within daily expressions of eco-cultural identities. The richness of these debates would be extremely relevant for students and teachers, if they could be reflected in class, but course programmes still block the students' invitation to liberate science from the coloniality of knowledge. Students are not valued as co-creators of knowledge, their activities are considered as non-scientific, and in fact, the group *Retomando Raíces* is denied academic recognition and minimised as a social group.

Finally, Indigenous students confront their personal and societal aspirations with the structural limits caused by the colonial positioning of their ethnicity and the patriarchal oppressions that minoritise women and non-binary people. Overcoming these conditions requires intercultural and feminist relationality in spaces of sharing and caring: quite the opposite of the neo-liberal model proposed by the academy, based on individual endurance and competitive strength. For communities of students of

diverse ethnicities, peer support through the organisation of sessions of community therapy has become fundamental to overcome racial discrimination and gender violence. Thus, this experience shows that decolonising the academia also means subverting the coloniality of being.

The political importance of these spaces is evident since they counteract rigid closures from the institutions' side. Often, in this space, students of the collective *Reto-mando Raíces* invite other teachers and academic authorities, because they want to be heard. Many teachers participate in *guayusa upina* and other gatherings, and the university has nominated teaching staff acting as the institutional link that can help with some organisational and funding requests. However, UEA does not engage more strongly in the interculturalisation of its curricula, to avoid the risk of sanctions (or closure, as it happened with the *Amawtay Wasi* university) by the governmental educational levels that keep control on the academic offer and utilise Western standards to assess quality.

Given the situation of the structural block, it is important to open the struggles for decolonising the academy to the spaces of political negotiation led by the Indigenous organisations. Locally, the student collective of UEA relates to CONFENIAE youth representatives to organise feasts, exhibitions, dances and debates. At the national level, CONAIE especially continues the negotiation for the realisation of a critical intercultural education, which the government has promised for decades. The current political debate concerns the question of Indigenous peoples' autonomy in the elaboration of culturally pertinent education programmes, as it is recognised by UN international conventions under the principle of free determination. This principle would allow, in concrete, that Indigenous peoples have the right to integrate their curricula and academic staff with respect to the recognition of ancestral knowledges, as ways to counteract epistemic erasures and liberate pluriversal worlds from coloniality.

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