CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND INTERCULTURAL HIGHER EDUCATION. THE CASE OF THE UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA INDIGENA DE MEXICO

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ABSTRACT

Cultural diversity in Mexican higher education represents both a challenge and an opportunity to build inclusive, equitable, and culturally relevant academic environments. This study analyzes the case of the Autonomous Indigenous University of Mexico (UAIM) within the context of Mexico's Intercultural Universities Subsystem, using a qualitative approach and employing intercultural action research, interpretive ethnography, and participant observation. Twenty-three years after its founding, UAIM has 8,725 students, significantly exceeding the national average for the intercultural subsystem, which is 2,000–3,000 students. Its student body exhibits broad ethnic and linguistic representation in each academic unit, comprised of: the Los Mochis unit with 48 ethnic groups and 9 languages; the Mochicahui unit with 32 ethnic groups and 18 languages; and the Virtual unit with 29 ethnic groups and 11 languages. The Choix campus, with its 16 ethnic groups and 4 languages, presents an atypical profile due to its high proportion of non-formal education modalities (84% compared to the national average of 26.5%). It also offers 11 postgraduate programs, including master's and doctoral degrees, with 189 students. The Autonomous Indigenous University of Mexico (UAIM) has a faculty of 297, only 2% of whom are recognized as community elders. The results show that, while UAIM strengthens human capital development in culturally complex contexts, challenges persist in student integration due to linguistic barriers, academic differences, and the absence of systematic inclusion programs, as demonstrated by the limited effectiveness of the "Language Nests." The contrast with international experiences suggests that cultural diversity reaches its transformative potential only through deliberate institutional policies, comprehensive support programs, and strategies that foster intercultural dialogue. It is concluded that the effective management of diversity requires going beyond mere coexistence, promoting active and equitable participation that allows Mexican universities to train global, critical and socially committed citizens.

Keywords: Cultural diversity, Intercultural higher education, Academic integration, Coexistence and inclusion.

Diversidade cultural e educação superior intercultural: o caso da Universidade Autônoma Indígena do México
RESUMO

A diversidade cultural na educação superior mexicana representa tanto um desafio quanto uma oportunidade para a construção de ambientes acadêmicos inclusivos, equitativos e culturalmente pertinentes. Este estudo analisa o caso da Universidade Autônoma Indígena do México (UAIM) no contexto do Subsistema de Universidades Interculturais do México, com base em uma abordagem qualitativa, utilizando pesquisa-ação intercultural, etnografia interpretativa e observação participante. Após 23 anos de sua fundação, a UAIM conta com 8.725 estudantes, superando amplamente a média nacional do subsistema intercultural, que varia entre 2.000 e 3.000 estudantes. Sua matrícula apresenta ampla representação étnica e linguística em cada unidade acadêmica, sendo composta por: unidade Los Mochis, com 48 grupos étnicos e 9 línguas; unidade Mochicahui, com 32 grupos étnicos e 18 línguas; unidade Virtual, com 29 grupos étnicos e 11 línguas; e unidade Choix, com 16 grupos étnicos e 4 línguas, caracterizando-se como um perfil atípico devido à elevada proporção de modalidades não presenciais (84% frente aos 26,5% em nível nacional). Além disso, a universidade oferece 11 programas de pós-graduação, entre mestrados e doutorados, com um total de 189 estudantes. A Universidade Autônoma Indígena do México conta com um corpo docente de 297 professores, dos quais apenas 2% são reconhecidos como sábios comunitários. Os resultados evidenciam que, embora a UAIM fortaleça a formação de capital humano em contextos culturalmente complexos, persistem desafios na integração estudantil, decorrentes de barreiras linguísticas, diferenças acadêmicas e da ausência de programas sistemáticos de inclusão, conforme demonstrado pela eficácia limitada dos chamados "Ninhos de Línguas". A comparação com experiências

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internacionais sugere que a diversidade cultural alcança seu potencial transformador apenas por meio de políticas institucionais deliberadas, programas de apoio integrais e estratégias que promovam o diálogo intercultural. Conclui-se que a gestão eficaz da diversidade exige ir além da mera coexistência, promovendo uma participação ativa e equitativa que permita às universidades mexicanas formar cidadãos globais, críticos e socialmente comprometidos.
Palavras-chave: Diversidade cultural, educação superior intercultural, integração acadêmica, convivência e inclusão.

Diversidad Cultural y Educación Superior Intercultural. El caso de la Universidad Autónoma Indígena de México.
RESUMEN
La diversidad cultural en la educación superior mexicana representa tanto un reto como una oportunidad para construir entornos académicos inclusivos, equitativos y culturalmente pertinentes. Este estudio analiza el caso de la Universidad Autónoma Indígena de México (UAIM) en el contexto del Subsistema de Universidades Interculturales de México, con base en un enfoque cualitativo, empleando investigación acción intercultural, etnografía interpretativa y observación participante. A 23 años de su fundación, la UAIM cuenta con 8,725 estudiantes, superando ampliamente el promedio nacional del subsistema interculturales que es de (2000–3000) estudiantes. Su matrícula presenta una amplia representación étnica y lingüística en cada unidad académica ya que está conformada por: unidad Los Mochis 48 grupos étnicos y 9 lenguas; Unidad Mochicahui 32 grupos étnicos con 18 lenguas; unidad Virtual 29 grupos étnicos y 11 lenguas; Así como 16 grupos étnicos y 4 lenguas en Unidad Choix, un perfil atípico por su elevada proporción de modalidades no escolarizadas un (84 % frente al 26,5 % nacional). Además, ofrece 11 programas de posgrado entre maestrías y doctorados cuenta con 189 estudiantes. La Universidad Autónoma Indígena de México cuenta con una planta de 297 docentes, solo 2 % reconocidos como sabios comunitarios. Los resultados evidencian que, si bien la UAIM fortalece la formación de capital humano en contextos culturalmente complejos, persisten retos en la integración estudiantil, debido a barreras lingüísticas, diferencias académicas y ausencia de programas sistemáticos de inclusión, como demuestra la limitada efectividad de los "Nidos de Lenguas". El contraste con experiencias internacionales sugiere que la diversidad cultural alcanza su potencial transformador únicamente mediante políticas institucionales deliberadas, programas de apoyo integrales y estrategias que fomenten el diálogo intercultural. Se concluye que la gestión efectiva de la diversidad requiere ir más allá de la mera coexistencia, promoviendo una participación activa y equitativa que permita a las universidades mexicanas formar ciudadanos globales, críticos y socialmente comprometidos.
Palabras clave: Diversidad cultural, Educación superior intercultural, Integración académica, Convivencia e inclusión.

Introduction

In the current landscape of higher education, cultural diversity has emerged as an increasingly visible and decisive element in university dynamics. Classrooms serve as convergence spaces where students from diverse regions, ethnicities, languages, and traditions interact, generating a cultural fabric that enriches learning while simultaneously posing challenges for coexistence and inclusion. According to Banks (2019), intercultural education seeks not only to recognize the plurality of identities but also to ensure that all students participate under equal conditions, fostering mutual respect and social cohesion.

In this sense, the integration of students from diverse cultural backgrounds into the university environment involves complex processes influenced by academic, social, and emotional factors. Berry (2017) notes that adaptation to a new cultural environment is not automatic; rather, it requires a constant exchange between original cultural practices and the demands of the host context. This interaction can be a source of personal and collective growth, but it can also lead to tensions if differences are not managed appropriately.

In the case of Mexico, higher education unfolds within a country characterized by vast ethnic and linguistic diversity. According to the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI, 2022), there are more than 68 officially recognized indigenous peoples with over 300 linguistic variants. This cultural mosaic is reflected in universities, where students from urban and rural contexts, indigenous communities, Afro-descendant groups, and internal migrants converge. In recent decades, educational policies have sought to promote equity and inclusion, as noted by the Ministry of Public Education (SEP, 2021), through scholarship programs, tutoring, and affirmative actions catering to students of diverse origins.

However, the presence of cultural diversity in Mexican higher education institutions does not always translate into effective integration. Recent research (Niembro, Gutiérrez, Jiménez, and Tapia, 2021) warns that gaps in resource access, linguistic barriers, and prejudices persist, hindering the full participation of some students in university life. Given this scenario, the university—as a formative space for critical and committed citizens—has the responsibility to promote strategies that recognize diversity as a value rather than an obstacle. As Nieto and Bode (2018) assert, true inclusive education is not limited to tolerance; instead, it fosters the active participation of all students in academic and social life, dismantling barriers that limit their full development.

Based on these premises, this article analyzes the presence of cultural diversity in university classrooms and its influence on student integration processes within the Mexican context, aiming to provide insights into the dynamics that facilitate or hinder the construction of more inclusive academic communities.

Cultural Diversity

Cultural diversity refers to the coexistence of multiple cultural expressions within a society or community, resulting from the historical and contemporary interaction between groups with distinct traditions, values, beliefs, languages, and lifestyles. According to UNESCO (2002), cultural diversity constitutes a common heritage of humanity, and its recognition fosters dialogue, cooperation, and mutual respect. This diversity manifests in both tangible elements—such as arts, gastronomy, or clothing—and intangible dimensions, including worldviews, belief systems, and the social norms that guide community life.

Among the most relevant characteristics of cultural diversity is the plurality of identities, which implies the recognition that individuals can simultaneously belong to several cultural groups without this entailing contradiction or a loss of belonging (Hall, 1997). Furthermore, cultural diversity is dynamic, as cultures are constantly transformed through processes such as migration, globalization, and technological innovation. These generate exchanges that both enrich and challenge traditional ways of life (Appadurai, 1996). This characteristic of permanent change breaks away from the notion of cultures as static and closed systems, proposing instead an interconnected and evolutionary vision.

Another fundamental characteristic is its role in the construction of collective and individual identities. Cultural diversity offers individuals frames of reference to interpret the world and to develop a sense of belonging and social cohesion (Taylor, 1994). However, it can also generate tensions when the values or practices of one group conflict with those of another, highlighting the need to promote interculturality as an approach that prioritizes respect and dialogue. In fact, as Walsh (2009) points out, interculturality is not limited to passive coexistence; rather, it implies equitable and transformative relationships between cultures.

Cultural Diversity in the Mexican University Context

Discussing cultural diversity within Mexican universities entails recognizing a broad and complex phenomenon that integrates multiple capabilities, knowledges, and values, representing both a challenge and an opportunity for higher education. In a country characterized by its ethnic and linguistic richness, university classrooms become meeting spaces for students from vastly different cultural backgrounds—originating from indigenous peoples, rural zones, border cities, urban areas, and, in some cases, abroad. While this plurality enriches learning, it also poses significant challenges for social harmony and inclusion.

In a globalized world, cultural diversity has gained increased visibility through social movements and collectives seeking to reclaim identities and cultural rights. Aguilar Rivero (2011) highlights that this growing visibility has occurred alongside the strengthening of cultural studies, which are oriented toward recognizing and valuing a plurality of expressions and vindicating identity-based struggles. However, as Val Cubero (2017) notes, a precise definition remains a subject of debate, although etymologically, the term "diversity" stems from the Latin divertere ("to turn aside"), and its link to the word "culture" has evolved historically. The evidence of cultural diversity is not a recent discovery; as Salaverry (2010) points out, travelers since antiquity have recorded differences in languages, religions, and customs, albeit often through a descriptive and ethnocentric lens. In Latin America, this discussion gained momentum in the second half of the 20th century and particularly during the 1990s, when ethnic plurality was recognized in most countries, influencing public policy and, above all, the rights-based struggles of indigenous peoples (López, 2009; Walsh, 2009; Paz, 2001, cited in Comboni & Juárez, 2013).

Internationally, UNESCO has declared cultural diversity a common heritage of humanity, fostering policies for its preservation and promotion. Álvarez and Urbano (2013) state that this includes ethnic, linguistic, and religious differences, among others. Within the Mexican university context, these differences manifest in academic practices, communication styles, educational expectations, and ways of understanding knowledge. Pacheco Hernández (2013) distinguishes between "multiculturality"—referring to the coexistence of cultures within the same space—and "interculturality," which implies dialogue and negotiation, though not without tensions.

In indigenous communities, the recognition of cultural diversity takes on a particular nuance, especially when relations and conflicts occur entirely within the community itself (Gómez Isa, 2011). Furthermore, Lins Ribeiro (2014) warns that defending cultural diversity is also part of a resistance against globalizing,

homogenizing trends, and that even within the university sphere, educational discourses and practices must remain conscious of these tensions.

The preservation and promotion of cultural diversity, as stated by Kaluf (2005), are not only linked to identity and democracy but serve as a pillar of sustainable development. In Mexican universities, this implies generating conditions so that students from diverse backgrounds can participate fully in academic life, access resources with equal opportunity, and feel recognized in their cultural identities. Triandis (2000), cited by Durán and Parra (2014), expands this concept to include diversity in gender, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, age, and personal perspectives.

Sánchez Ruiz (2007) reminds us that in Latin America, media and cultural industries can contribute to making this plurality visible, while Descola (2005), cited by Sarrazín Jean (2018), warns that all cultural classification involves attributing meanings and behaviors, thereby influencing interpersonal relationships. For Sáez Alonso (2004), every culture is a unique expression of human creativity in a specific time and space—something that universities, as sites of knowledge production, must acknowledge.

In the educational field, Vivanco (2010), cited by Valenzuela and Vivanco (2022), emphasizes the importance of promoting the valuation of cultural diversity from early stages, an objective that translates into inclusive curricula, tutoring programs, and extracurricular activities in higher education. However, as Bourdieu (1996), cited by Matus Pineda (2016), points out, educational institutions have historically reproduced a "cultural arbitrariness" that renders expressions other than the dominant one invisible.

Buendía and Pino (2011) consider cultural diversity an undeniable feature of the modern world and argue that, in the Mexican case, its strengthening is key to reducing inequalities and favoring integration. Velasco (2005) notes that this is a central theme in contemporary political philosophy, with direct implications for building peaceful societies. In a changing world accelerated by technology, preserving cultural diversity in Mexican universities is not only an ethical duty but a necessary condition for training citizens capable of dialogue, cooperation, and building an inclusive future.

In this scenario, the presence of cultural diversity in Mexican universities is not solely a matter of recognition but of action. Its impact on university integration manifests in academic adaptation, social participation, a sense of belonging, and daily interaction between students of different origins. This interaction can generate significant learning and broaden the worldview of the university community; however, it can also lead to linguistic barriers, intercultural misunderstandings, or exclusion if not managed properly. Therefore, understanding cultural diversity from an inclusive perspective is an indispensable step toward designing strategies that favor the full integration of all students, thereby strengthening the university's role as a space for equity, respect, and dialogue.

Cultural Diversity and Its Impact on University Integration

Contemporary universities face the challenge of integrating students from diverse cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds within a globalized context characterized by increasing academic and social mobility. Cultural diversity in university environments not only reflects the plurality of modern society but also constitutes an educational resource capable of enriching coexistence, learning, and knowledge production. The presence of students with heterogeneous cultural experiences demands a reconsideration of traditional teaching models and the implementation of inclusive education policies that guarantee equity and participation (Schmelkes, 2013b; García Llamas, 2005).

In Latin America, intercultural education has emerged as a response to historical demands for social and political recognition from indigenous, Afro-descendant, and migrant communities within traditionally integrationist contexts (Sandoval, 2018). In Mexico, this approach was consolidated with the 1996 San Andrés Larráinzar Accords, through which the State recognized the autonomy and cultural rights of indigenous peoples, establishing a precedent for inclusive educational policies (De la Cruz & Pedraza, 2017). Intercultural education seeks to address those historically marginalized from educational access, promoting the valuation of cultural diversity and coexistence in academic settings.

However, limiting intercultural education to specific groups can generate exclusion or reinforce inequalities. Odina Aguado (2004) emphasizes that intercultural education must focus on the recognition of and respect for cultural diversity as an educational resource, integrating social plurality at all levels of learning. Williamson (2004) agrees, noting that interculturality should be applied universally, promoting equity, justice, and dialogue among all students without being restricted to specific groups.

Various authors have pointed out limitations in the implementation of intercultural programs. Gasché (2010) criticizes the superficiality of programs that incorporate cultural content in a purely theoretical manner, while Escarbajal Frutos (2011) underscores that authentic intercultural education fosters curiosity,

respect, and reflection on one's own cultural criteria, strengthening an identity understood as dynamic and flexible. Schmelkes (2013) adds that interculturality involves creating environments of respect and opportunities for interaction among students of different cultures and abilities, contributing to social cohesion and the development of intercultural competencies.

In the sphere of higher education, intercultural training seeks to offer culturally pertinent academic experiences, recognizing the ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity of students and overcoming historical limitations of educational exclusion (Bertely Busquets, 2011; Dietz, 2014). The integration of traditional knowledges and the participation of cultural bearers enrich university environments, promoting dialogue, mutual respect, and shared learning (Schmelkes, 2013b).

Furthermore, Granda Merchán (2009) maintains that interculturality should encompass the entire student population, fostering respect and harmony among students of different cultural origins. Complementarily, García Llamas (2005) emphasizes the need to include cultural references in curricula and establish a climate of dialogue so that diversity is perceived as a resource rather than an obstacle. Rego and Anxo (2017) highlight that university education must integrate intercultural values, promoting peaceful coexistence and inclusion. However, Osuna Nevado (2012) warns that attention to difference must not become a pretext for perpetuating inequalities; thus, a collective commitment is required to guarantee equitable access, respect for diversity, and the construction of inclusive knowledge.

The impact of cultural diversity on university integration manifests in several dimensions: social coexistence, by fostering dialogue and respect for differences; academic learning, through the exchange of knowledge from different cultural contexts that enriches curricular content; and ethical and critical training, by developing intercultural competencies, social sensitivity, and conflict resolution skills (Escarbajal, 2011; Odina, 2004).

Intercultural university education in Mexico and Latin America seeks to serve both students from original peoples and youth from urban and mestizo contexts. Nevertheless, effective integration is not achieved solely through the physical diversity of enrollment, but through strategies that recognize and value cultural plurality, avoiding practices of domination or forced acculturation (Williamson, 2004; Gasché, 2010). The university must become a space where differences serve as a pedagogical resource, not a social or academic barrier.

From a critical perspective, Epistemologies of the South offer a conceptual framework that conceives cultural diversity as a transformative factor in the university. These epistemologies recognize multiple ways of learning and teaching based on experience, historical memory, and community knowledge (Gutiérrez, 2011). Thus, university integration transcends formal inclusion and promotes active participation, mutual respect, and the collective construction of knowledge, favoring dialogue and the expansion of academic and cultural perspectives.

The positive impact of cultural diversity is also reflected in the formation of global citizens capable of interacting in intercultural contexts with ethics, tolerance, and respect. University integration based on diversity strengthens social cohesion, equity, and justice—fundamental pillars for truly intercultural education (Sandoval, 2018). For this impact to be fully realized, institutions must transcend formal inclusion by building horizontal educational models that are respectful of traditional knowledge and student autonomy, capable of transforming the university experience into a space of equity, respect, and the generation of critical and emancipatory knowledge.

Methodology

This research was conducted using a qualitative approach, which Vasilachis de Gialdino (2006) defines as the study of people's lives, their stories, and behaviors, as well as organizational and social dynamics. It incorporated Intercultural Action Research (IAI), which, according to Sandoval (2018), integrates the researcher into the community to foster collective transformation through dialogue and the exchange of knowledges (diálogo de saberes). Additionally, interpretative ethnography was applied, conceived by Geertz (2003) and cited by Betancurth-Loaiza and Peñaranda Correa (2018) as a "thick description" of human meanings and actions, alongside participant observation, understood by Guber (2006) as systematic observation and direct participation.

Results

This section analyzes the role of the Autonomous Indigenous University of Mexico (UAIM) within the context of Mexico's Subsystem of Intercultural Universities, based on enrollment indicators, educational modalities, academic offerings, and sociocultural composition. Twenty-three years after its creation, UAIM

is distinguished by a coverage significantly higher than the national average, as well as an academic and organizational structure that reflects its commitment to cultural and linguistic diversity. The results evidence not only the breadth and heterogeneity of its student community but also the opportunities and challenges the institution faces in guaranteeing effective inclusion, academic guidance, and the full utilization of interculturality as a formative resource. This characterization allows for an understanding of the scope and limitations of the intercultural educational model while providing elements for the design of institutional strategies that are more equitable, participatory, and culturally pertinent.

Twenty-three years after its founding, UAIM has consolidated its position as one of the institutions with the highest coverage within the Subsystem of Intercultural Universities in Mexico. With 8,725 students in the 2023–2024 school cycle, UAIM significantly exceeds the average enrollment reported by other intercultural universities, which typically ranges between 2,000 and 3,000 students (ANUIES, 2023). This figure positions it as a benchmark institution in the intercultural field. Currently, the UAIM student body converges within the following categories:

Table 1. Relationship between ethnic groups and speakers in each unit

Unit	Ethnic groups	Languages
Virtual	29	11
Choix	16	4
Mochicahui	32	18
Mochis	48	9

Note: Data obtained from the school administration, May 2024.

Regarding enrollment distribution by modality, UAIM presents an atypical profile compared to the national pattern of the subsystem. According to data from the Ministry of Public Education (SEP, 2024b), the collective of intercultural universities records 26.5% of students in non-traditional modalities (distance or blended). In contrast, at UAIM, this proportion rises to 84%, a result of the strong presence of blended (46.7%) and virtual (37.4%) modalities. This data suggests an institutional commitment to territorial and temporal flexibility, facilitating access for students located in high-dispersion geographical areas, although it also poses the challenge of ensuring quality and academic guidance in non-face-to-face environments.

In the field of graduate studies, UAIM offers 11 educational programs (6 Master's and 5 Doctoral) with 189 students—a significant figure when compared to the low participation at this educational level within the intercultural subsystem (SEP, 2024). This graduate development not only expands academic opportunities for UAIM's communities of influence but also strengthens the formation of specialized human capital in intercultural management, applied research, and community development.

In relation to the teaching staff, UAIM has 297 professors, of whom 15% hold a doctoral degree, 25% hold a master's, and 58% a bachelor's degree; additionally, 2% are recognized as community sages (UAIM, 2024). While the percentage of doctors aligns with historical trends in the subsystem (Lloyd, 2019), it is lower than that of conventional state universities, indicating an area for improvement in academic consolidation. Nonetheless, the inclusion of community sages is a strength that responds to the Intercultural Educational Model (CGEIB, 2004), which promotes the dialogue of knowledges and the recognition of ancestral wisdom.

In terms of cultural diversity, UAIM's enrollment includes a broad ethnic and linguistic representation: 48 ethnic groups and 9 languages at the Los Mochis unit; 32 ethnic groups and 18 languages at the Mochicahui unit; 29 ethnic groups and 11 languages at the Virtual unit; and 16 ethnic groups and 4 languages at the Choix unit. These data align UAIM with other intercultural universities, such as the Veracruzana Intercultural University (UVI) and the Intercultural University of Chiapas (UNICH), which also operate with decentralized territorial structures and multilingual services (Dietz, 2014).

In this sense, as Fornet-Betancourt (1998) points out, intercultural education does not only constitute a response to diversity but an opportunity to transform educational practices toward more inclusive and equitable models. The experience of UAIM confirms that diversity, when integrated in a planned manner, enriches learning and strengthens the training of professionals capable of operating in culturally complex contexts.

The integration of students from diverse cultural backgrounds is considered essential for building inclusive and enriching learning environments in higher education. Cultural diversity provides multiple perspectives and experiences that benefit both local and international students, fostering intercultural competencies, empathy, tolerance, and mutual respect—essential skills in a globalized world (Deardorff, 2015).

Student well-being and academic performance are closely linked to their perception of acceptance and inclusion. Institutions that implement support programs—such as tutoring, study groups, and extracurricular activities—facilitate student adaptation and active participation in university life, promoting more cohesive and dynamic communities (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). These findings reflect the importance of inclusive policies and deliberate institutional strategies to ensure that cultural diversity translates into a tangible educational value.

However, cultural integration faces significant hurdles. At the Autonomous Indigenous University of Mexico (UAIM), for instance, students from diverse backgrounds experience linguistic barriers, differences in academic expectations, and the need to adapt to new social norms. One student recounted:

"In reality, for those of us coming from another culture, it is a struggle to integrate and be integrated into the group... in my case, I found that my group spoke only Spanish, so as they gave me an opening, I began to integrate" (Maya 1, personal interview, March 11, 2023).

These findings coincide with international literature. Smith and Khawaja (2011) note that international students must navigate complex cultural and academic adaptations, but specific support programs improve their experience and enrich the university community:

"Orientation and specific support programs for international students not only improve their university experience but also enrich the educational community in general by fostering a more diverse and inclusive environment" (p. 702).

Similar studies in university contexts across Latin America and Europe have evidenced that, without adequate support structures, students from diverse cultures tend to experience isolation, communication barriers, and academic adaptation difficulties (Leask, 2009). This aligns with the testimonies of UAIM students, who point out the limited effectiveness of existing programs such as the "Language Nests" *(Nidos de Lenguas)*, which fail to promote intercultural interaction and, in some cases, reinforce self-exclusion:

"The institution has no program for student integration... everyone stays in their own closed little groups; they don't engage in dialogue with other cultures or languages" (Maya 2, personal interview, March 11, 2023).

In contrast, universities that implement comprehensive support strategies and cultural inclusion programs succeed not only in improving student adaptation and academic performance but also in generating more cohesive, innovative, and diverse communities (Gurin et al., 2002). The findings from UAIM evidence that, without adequate institutional strategies, cultural diversity fails to reach its transformative potential, underlining the need for inclusive policies that recognize and leverage cultural plurality as both an educational and social resource.

Conclusions

Cultural diversity constitutes a fundamental resource for higher education by providing multiple perspectives, experiences, and knowledges that enrich learning, foster intercultural competencies, and strengthen coexistence based on respect, empathy, and tolerance. In the Mexican university context, diversity not only reflects the country's ethnic, linguistic, and social plurality but also represents an opportunity to transform educational practices toward more inclusive and equitable models.

The experience of the Autonomous Indigenous University of Mexico (UAIM) evidences both the benefits and the challenges of managing cultural diversity in higher education. On one hand, the broad ethnic and linguistic representation of its enrollment, the offering of diversified academic programs, and the incorporation of community knowledge show significant potential for training competent professionals in culturally complex contexts. On the other hand, the absence of systematic intercultural integration programs and the limited effectiveness of existing initiatives, such as the "Language Nests," reflect persistent barriers to adaptation, communication, and participation that can lead to student self-exclusion and isolation.

The contrast with international and Latin American studies demonstrates that cultural diversity achieves its transformative potential only when accompanied by deliberate institutional policies, inclusive strategies, and comprehensive support programs. As noted by Smith and Khawaja (2011), Andrade (2006), and Campbell & Li (2008), initiatives that encourage interaction, dialogue, and active student participation not only improve adaptation and academic performance but also enrich the university community as a whole, promoting social cohesion, innovation, and equity.

Consequently, ensuring effective management of cultural diversity in Mexican universities requires going beyond the mere presence of a diverse student body. It is necessary to implement structured intercultural integration programs, strengthen teacher training in intercultural competencies, and generate spaces for dialogue and collaboration among students of different backgrounds. Only then can diversity become a transformative educational resource capable of consolidating equity, respect, and the collective construction of knowledge, contributing to the formation of global, critical, and ethically responsible citizens.

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