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INDI AGE –INDIGENOUS STUDIES: BRAZILIAN INDIGENOUS
STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CORDOBA

Blas Segovia-Aguilar (a), Silvia Abad-Merino (a)*, Sonia García-Segura (a), Marcondy
Mauricio de Sousa (b)
*Corresponding author

(a) University of Cordoba (Spain) *Email: silvia.abad.merino@uco.es
(b) Federal University of Sao Carlos (Brazil)

Abstract

This contribution consists of the first case study involving the research project INDI-AGE – Indigenous Studies: Curriculum Innovation, Internationalization of Brazilian Universities and Strengthening of National and International Indigenous Researchers which has been funded by the Brazilian Ministry of Education, and involves the participation of the University of Cordoba (Spain) and the Federal University of Sao Carlos (Brazil). The main objective of the project is to analyze the academic, organizational, and cultural factors that contribute to the success of visiting undergraduate indigenous students at the University of Córdoba, and to identify possible barriers that would hinder their progress. We also aim to identify the benefits that Brazilian indigenous students bring to the University of Córdoba, and how the singularity of this institution affects the life experiences and academic trajectories of the indigenous students. We used critical communicative methodology based on the results of the Workaló Project (CREA, 2001-2004) which demonstrated that this perspective of analysis provides effective solutions to overcome inequalities and exclusion beyond ethnocentric and relativistic approaches. Accordingly, indigenous students were part of the research team and participated in all research phases. We collected data using interviews with key informants and life histories from the Brazilian indigenous students. Firstly, we identified personal and context factors that influenced the success and academic empowerment of the indigenous students. Secondly, we examined possible barriers for inclusion that will be considered in the implementation of adequate measures to improve the international experiences of future indigenous students at the University of Cordoba.

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Keywords: affirmative action, Brazilian indigenous students, case study, higher education, internationalization, participatory action research.



1. Introduction

Since the late 1960s, the focus of the demands by indigenous peoples and social agents who are allies of the indigenous movement have been on overcoming assimilationist positions favoring the preservation of indigenous identities and cultures (Vieira & Quack, 2016).

The approval of the Federal Constitution of Brazil of 1988 was a major milestone in the recognition of Brazilian indigenous cultures and their right to self-determination. Consequently, the recognition of the country as a multicultural nation has given rise to the development of measures that seek to preserve indigenous cultures while providing its members with the necessary tools to thrive in a globalized world.

Since the National Education and Guidelines Law in 1996, a series of affirmative action measures were initiated to favor the access of indigenous minorities to higher education and their permanence in universities. These strategies include the implementation of a distinct and selective process of indigenous access to higher education institutions; the creation of special educational programs for the training of indigenous teachers; and the reservation of places in courses offered by Brazilian universities; among others.

Specifically, the Federal University of Sao Carlos (UFSCar) has reserved additional places for indigenous students in all its courses, having increased by more than eleven times the number of indigenous students since 2009 (222 at present time). This measure has been reinforced through the creation of policies, spaces and programs that include: the decentralization of access exams; the promotion of indigenous cultures; the guarantee of participation of indigenous students; and the design of specialized pedagogical evaluations in the area of indigenous reality (Mello, de Sousa & Palomino, 2018).

2. Problem Statement

The question of our project is to analyze how the University of Cordoba (Spain) manages the inclusion of students belonging to ethnic minorities of indigenous origin in internationalization programs.

3. Research Questions

An important part of the project is the international experience of six undergraduate students of the Federal University of Sao Carlos at the University of Cordoba. During three consecutive academic years, two different students will stay at UCO and enroll in subjects of their respective degrees that they are studying at UFSCar. During their stay at UCO, we seek to strengthen their academic leadership through this experience of internationalization.

Research objectives include:

1. To analyze the academic, organizational and cultural factors that favor the inclusion and academic success of Brazilian indigenous students at the University of Córdoba.
2. To identify the barriers that hinder their participation in university life and their academic progress.
3. To implement transformative actions that improve inclusion mechanism of Brazilian indigenous students in the next phase of the project.

4. Purpose of the Study

At present, *Indigenous Studies: curricular innovation, internationalization of the Brazilian university and strengthening of national and international cadres of indigenous researchers* (INDI AGE) is a transnational cooperation project between UFSCar and the University of Córdoba (UCO), which allows indigenous students to take courses related to their study areas within an intercultural higher education project.

5. Research Methods

The equal positioning between researchers and sample individuals under investigation creates a space of enriched knowledge and experiences (Macías & Redondo, 2012). Accordingly, we used qualitative methodology to learn directly from participants as active protagonists in all phases of the research process which allowed us to understand their reality beyond the consideration of them as external actors. Additionally, the present research focuses on a methodological approach that is situated in the critical communicative perspective. Several studies based on the Workaló Project showed how this perspective brings novel alternatives to overcome inequalities and reduce discrimination by overcoming relativist and ethnocentric approaches (Gómez, Latorre & Flecha, 2006; Aiello, Mondeja & Pulido, 2013).

Furthermore, we used Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology enabling both qualitative perspective and knowledge focused on participants and their context. This method allowed us to broaden the description of structures that surround the subjects of study. Specifically, we used a dynamic and interactive approach to build and reconstruct the reality of individuals as active actors who become researchers of their own practice with the aim of social transformation (Ortiz & Borjas, 2008).

5.1. Data Collection

The process of data collection included the life histories provided by the Brazilian indigenous students. Life histories is a qualitative tool that permitted us understanding the reality of our participants from their own perspective in different situations which were continuously defined and interpreted (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). This instrument integrated both the initial trajectory that had led the Brazilian indigenous students to make the decision to undertake advanced training in a European university, and the processes of adaptation and inclusion in a specific university context.

In addition, we conducted a series of semi-structured interviews to different members of the University of Córdoba that directly or indirectly contributed to this formative process. Specifically, we interviewed key informants suggested by the indigenous students including different administrators responsible for the management of internationalization at UCO (Vice-Chancellor, two Vice-Deans of the Schools where the students were enrolled, and an Administrative Officer of the Office of International Relations); faculty that lectured in our students' degrees –Medicine and Biochemistry; and classmates. Consistent with the objectives of our research, this data contributed to detect the aspects that favored the academic success of the indigenous students, as well as the barriers that hindered the process.

5.2. Data Analysis

According to communication methodology (Gómez, Puigvert & Flecha, 2011), we analyzed the data collected in this first stage of our research project (1st two students during their academic year visit) from a double perspective: (a) identifying transforming elements that favored the inclusion and academic progress of these students; and (b) detecting excluding conditions and barriers that hinder the inclusion of these students from their presence to their participation and progress (Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 2006).

Following this approach, we elaborated the following analysis categories:

1. Structural aspects of the receiving university. We included aspects of the academic and organizational culture of the receiving university that affected the stay and academic life of the students (e.g. academics and administrators responsible for internationalization programs; curricular organization of the subjects in which the students were enrolled; and academic results).

2. Inclusive strategies. This category included communication with teachers; access to academic tutoring and personal attention; and access to course materials and resources. We also considered accompanying actions designed to facilitate the inclusion of the indigenous students in their respective faculties, and to overcome linguistic barriers.

These categories were obtained from the inductive analysis of the data, and agreed by the research team which included the indigenous students.

6. Findings

The limited presence of ethnic minority students in Brazilian and Spanish universities have common elements related to the barriers that historically have determined their exclusion of compulsory stages of education. Structural exclusion has led to restricted access of ethnic minorities to university studies being only achieved in isolated cases.

Recently, corrective mechanisms and affirmative action policy in Brazil have made possible the presence of students from indigenous communities in universities such as UFSCar (Mello, de Sousa & Palomino, 2018; Amado Cardoso, Cosentino & Rocha dos Santos, 2016). The success of these measures has favored the development of projects such as Indigenous Studies: curricular innovation, internationalization of the Brazilian university and strengthening of national and international cadres of indigenous researchers (INDI AGE) which take a giant step enabling indigenous students to make contact with other university systems and experience the European higher education space. The achievement of the outlined objectives in the project and the success of the academic visit of each of these students at UCO has a multiplying positive effect as it enhances the acquisition of professional skills which in turn will increase their academic and research leadership development in the Brazilian context. Furthermore, these outcomes give potential evidence to Brazilian academic authorities and to other indigenous university students and their own communities that the historical barriers that excluded them from access to higher education can be eliminated. Nevertheless, the hosting university needs to establish mechanisms that enable a real and effective inclusion of the indigenous visiting students. This was actually the main objective of the first phase of our project which required the evaluation of organizational structures; factors that favor or hinder inclusion; and participation of all agents involved. Consequently, we analyzed the results from

the double perspective of considering transforming elements that favored the participation and progress of Brazilian indigenous students, and exclusion elements and barriers that hindered their success.

6.1. Transforming Elements

Motivations of the receiving university. As a determining element, it denotes the innovative interest of incorporating the perspective of an "Inclusive University" as a factor of excellence in the development of the institution itself. These motivations were highlighted in the observations made by the Vice-Dean of Internationalization when she stated that:

La presencia de estudiantes internacionales en nuestras aulas es siempre un elemento positivo para el alumnado que comparte con ellos asignaturas y docencia. Es lo que se llama "internacionalización en casa" y las Universidades, y desde luego la UCO, tratan de fomentarlo. Un ambiente internacional en las aulas, entre el profesorado y entre el PAS, es sin duda enriquecedor para la Universidad como tal (Provost 1).

Quality of the project. Institutional support of the receiving university was influenced by the quality of the project in its definition and the strategies designed for its implementation. Specifically, highly regarded measures included the implementation of a mentoring unit, student guidance practices, and the effective coordination between UFSCar and UCO teams, being emphasized that,

parte de su éxito se debe a que es un programa muy bien definido y estructurado, con unos objetivos claros, medios para intentar llevarlos a la práctica y un equipo de gente plenamente involucrado. También se han involucrado las distintas instancias de la Universidad (por ejemplo, los centros de la UCO donde se ha recibido al alumnado, que no necesariamente ha sido la Facultad de Ciencias de la Educación) y su apoyo ha sido también fundamental para el éxito del mismo (Provost 1).

Diversity and inclusion as excellence factors in the university. Positive assessment of a cultural and ethnically diverse student body with high possibilities of increasing knowledge and mutual enrichment was consistent with the sensitivity and involvement showed by the hosting institution which facilitated the procedures and interuniversity relations between UCO and UFSCar.

En el caso de este proyecto, además, es doblemente enriquecedor puesto que el alumnado internacional pertenece a un grupo minoritario y a comunidades indígenas. Al ser realidades menos frecuentes y poco conocidas por nuestra comunidad universitaria, las posibilidades de aprendizaje y enriquecimiento mutuo se incrementan. El resultado, en última instancia, es una Universidad más inclusiva y más diversa (Provost 1).

Introducing inclusion in university policy as a factor of improvement and excellence is still a novel element in the Spanish and Andalusian context. This approach has been progressively consolidated at UCO as a factor of quality.

Relations between professors and students. Organization of the class, low number of students, and applied methodology favored the recognition of the specificity of Brazilian indigenous students. Small groups dynamics facilitated participation and improved the relations with students, as one of the professors of student 1 asserted:

Ha asistido..., quiero recordar de forma habitual a las clases, alguna que otra sí que me parece que no fue. Me doy cuenta de ello, no porque pase lista en clase, sino porque esta es una asignatura en la que había un número relativamente pequeño de alumnos, llegaría a ocho o diez alumnos en total, pues es fácil para nosotros hacernos una idea de posibles huecos, [...] Y sí que recuerdo algún que otro día que ha faltado, pero normalmente, a partir del momento en que él empezó a ir a clase, normalmente ha asistido (Faculty 2).

Al dar las prácticas, son grupos más reducidos y al ser una sesión en el laboratorio da más pie a hablar más veces. Además, había unos tiempos de espera en los que podías hablar, entonces él me lo dijo, que venía de Brasil, que es un proyecto del gobierno de Brasil, y demás cosas (Faculty 2).

Questioning ethnocentrism. From an academic perspective, faculty valued the opportunity of introducing a debate on the theoretical contents from an international perspective, and commented:

Yo creo que es enriquecedor para la clase porque, bueno, no solamente permite justificar la importancia de los temas que estamos tratando, sino que al resto de la clase le da una visión de otros mundos, de otros intereses, porque por ejemplo la biotecnología es un área multidisciplinar y multiobjetivos, [...] y se ve cómo dependiendo del país, de la climatología, de los recursos, del nivel de desarrollo, pues existen diferentes intereses, diferentes líneas prioritarias que los gobiernos correspondientes promueven, [...] y en este caso Brasil, que es de donde proviene este alumno, pues lógicamente, como es bien conocido, tiene una riqueza enormemente importante en recursos naturales que son especialmente útiles, especialmente interesantes para aprovechamientos biotecnológicos (Faculty 2).

Even encouraging critical debate on realities of knowledge influenced by dominant economic and scientific models:

Al resto de la clase también les ha venido muy bien porque era una visión muy diferente...la defensa de sus chamanes, de sus cosas, que no se las roben desde occidente (Faculty 3).

Al principio de curso hicieron una sesión de bioindicadores económicos y cuando yo estuve revisando el trabajo, no pude estar en la exposición, sí puso el matiz de allí, la verdad que en comparación con los compañeros fue bastante enriquecedor (Faculty 1).

Relation with classmates. Integration with classmates is an important element to maximize the opportunities of visiting foreign students. Learning about the academic culture of the hosting university, broadening networks of people, and giving the possibility of sharing experiences with other students outside the classroom provided experiences for personal growth. Our interests included the examination of how the presence of students from an ethnic minority and a different cosmovision can benefit the students of the receiving university. From the professors' perspective, the difference is valued as an enriching element. In this regard, he comments: "Al resto de la clase también les ha venido muy bien porque era una visión muy diferente...la defensa de sus chamanes, de sus cosas, que no se las roben desde occidente (Faculty 3)". Another interviewee agreed:

La verdad es que la movilidad enriquece mucho porque comparas muchas cosas y te hace ver a veces visiones que no tienes desde tu punto de vista, en este sentido para el alumno y también para el profesorado es más enriquecedor (Faculty 1).

Inclusive approach and organization within the classroom context can be a facilitating instrument to drive from an integration situation to one of inclusion in a more intercultural scenario. This was stated by one of the professors:

No he visto ningún problema, todo lo contrario, veía que al terminar la clase charlaban mucho, se integraba bien, no se suponía ninguna persona extraña dentro del grupo, rápidamente se ha integrado dentro del grupo (Faculty 3).

6.2. Excluding Elements

In parallel, we identified some of the barriers that hindered the effective inclusion and progress of students including the following:

There was little diffusion and knowledge of the project among faculty and students at UCO and in the society of Cordoba. We observed unequal knowledge of the project among students and faculty which potentially reduced the impact of the project within the hosting university. As commented by several interviewees:

Uno de los aspectos que debemos trabajar más en el proyecto es el de su difusión, tanto en el ámbito universitario como en el ámbito local y social. Por un lado, creo que sería bueno emprender acciones para dar a conocer el proyecto en los diferentes centros de la Universidad, más allá de la Facultad de Ciencias de la Educación [...] habría que hacer un esfuerzo por dar a conocer el proyecto a la sociedad cordobesa, a través de su (mayor) difusión en los medios de comunicación (Gestor 1).

The necessary efforts for the diffusion of the project are considered by different key informants:

Yo no sabía que estaba el proyecto este, ... solo sabía que venía uno de Brasil, pero no sabía que existía un proyecto ni nada de nada... Sería importante antes de que llegue un alumno a la Facultad presentarlo, introducirlo a través del Decanato en los currículos suyos, para saber del proyecto, los objetivos suyos porque si no lo sabes llega nuevo, tú lo acoges, pero no sabes lo que está haciendo aquí (Profesor 3).

Linguistic barriers. There were linguistic barriers that indigenous students had to endure. The provided training in Spanish before arriving at UCO was insufficient to master the language which represented a barrier for class follow-up despite having continued their linguistic training during their visit. Consideration must also be given to the fact that students of indigenous communities speak minority languages, and have to master Portuguese (the official language in Brazil) before doing their access exam to Brazilian universities. Professors expressed their concerns:

Le pregunté si tenía un dominio mínimo del español como para seguir sin problema las clases, me dijo que sí, pues no obstante durante el desarrollo del curso yo intenté si cabe llevar un ritmo y una articulación del lenguaje un poco más clara de manera que a él le fuera más fácil el seguimiento de las clases. (Profesor 2).

Positive results of the learning process and in final exams are indicators of the progress made by the indigenous students regarding this matter:

En el examen final de enero sí recuerdo que fue uno de los últimos en terminar...y me decía que le costaba un poco más expresarlo, pero al final en el día a día no hubo problema (Profesor 1).

In any case, developing a good command of Spanish and the initiating students in English language were priority objectives of the project.

Unawareness of the origin of the students. Professors indicated that it was easy to confuse Brazilian indigenous students with other international students from other internationalization programs such as Erasmus, UCO Global, ... especially in initial lectures when communication was not very effective:

Yo eso no tenía ni idea, yo lo único que sabía es que era un alumno brasileño. Ahora, si provenía de una minoría..., eso para mí, es la primera información que a través de vuestro correo y de esta charla estoy teniendo. (Profesor 2)..

Hay un gran desconocimiento de la cultura brasileña...por eso es bueno esto para los de aquí, los estudiantes de Córdoba (Profesor 3).

Previous knowledge on the subjects of the courses. Brazilian students agreed that there were different methodological approaches between the ways of developing the curriculum in Brazil and at UCO:

...um dos pontos que percebi uma grande diferença foi, por exemplo, nas aulas práticas, em que algumas, não eram em laboratórios por exemplo, no caso eram resoluções de exercícios, em sala de aulas comuns, em conjunto com os professores que ministram a disciplina, isso era pouco realizado nas disciplinas que realizei no Brasil [...] a grande diferença foi que pude observar e aprender de uma maneira diferente do que já tinha visto, principalmente as aulas práticas em laboratório que pude aprender alguns métodos e técnicas diferentes. (Estudiante 1).

Recuerdo que una vez con la resolución de un problema si tenía más problemas y nos quedamos un poco más, unos veinte minutos, y me comentó que su base era un poco distinta a la nuestra, a parte eran problemas muy numéricos, que ya de por sí al resto del alumnado ya les cuesta, entonces si le falta un poco más de bagaje por decirlo así, de conocimientos, pues sí le descompensa un poco más (Profesor 1).

Alternatively, we also considered this circumstance as an opportunity to expand the experiences of indigenous students and local professors and improve their training. Furthermore, students and professors agreed on this consideration.

7. Conclusion

Implementation of inclusive policies in high education is a key challenge that must be prioritized for the modernization of university education. Effective inclusion strategies foster greater social cohesion in dialogical societies which brings undoubted benefits for universities themselves and society in general.

Inclusive policy development should involve both social equity and academic success of historically disadvantaged ethnic minorities in higher education. The Indi Age project is a pioneering experience that fosters this progress providing indigenous students of UFSCar with the opportunity to improve their training

in a European university. This internationalization experience aims to strengthen the students' academic and research leadership, and to establish new goals in the development policies of affirmative action that were initiated at UFSCar in 2007 (Amado Cardoso, Cosentino & Rocha dos Santos, 2016). Furthermore, the receiving university (UCO) benefits from nourishing debates about the inclusion of disadvantaged ethnic minorities in the university space in an open dialogue between students and professors who have participated in the implementation of inclusive educational policies in culturally diverse societies. Additionally, this process facilitates knowledge and continuous innovation to effectively address the exclusion of other minorities in our context (e.g. the Gypsy community).

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