



Transforming university education

Intra- and interculturality in higher education in Latin America

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Higher education in Latin America contains a contradiction: although universities and countries in general have a population of mixed cultural background, the curriculum content only encompasses the modern western view. **Agruco at the San Simon Municipal University (UMSS) in Cochabamba, Bolivia, is transforming university education, now basing it on two fundamental pillars: western scientific knowledge and the wisdom of the native people. In this way Agruco aims to produce professionals with the skills necessary to further the endogenous development process of the increasingly impoverished population.**

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the population grew from 166 million people in 1950 to 513 million in 2000, and is expected to increase to over 800 million by 2050. The majority of this popu-

lation is from indigenous and mestizo, or mixed-race, cultural background. Bolivia, Guatemala and Peru are the countries with the highest population of indigenous natives. In addition to

Spanish and Portuguese, a range of languages and dialects are spoken, such as Quechua and Aymara in the Andes, the Mayan languages in Central America, Mapuche (Chile) and Guarani (Amazon region).

Latin America is one of the regions of the world with the worst distribution of income: 5% of the population get 25% of the national income - in contrast to 16% in South-East Asia or 13% in developed countries. The poorest 20% in Latin America receive only 4.5% of the national income. Twenty million Latin Americans live outside their country of origin and, of these, 15 million reside in the US. While funding is being reduced, the number of students in public universities is increasing. In the state university of San Simon (UMSS) in Cochabamba, student numbers have now reached 55,000. Of these students, 65% come from medium-sized towns and 35% from rural areas.

The public university crisis

In Latin America the globalisation development model, which has prioritised the rapid accumulation of capital without an equitable redistribution, is in crisis. The indigenous population in particular is experiencing increased material poverty. At the same time within the system of higher education a fundamental contradiction exists:



Bolivia needs professionals with the skills necessary to further the process of endogenous development of the increasingly impoverished population. These skills include being able to do joint action research together with farmers, based on local resources and local knowledge and - where necessary and appropriate - complement these with resources from outside.

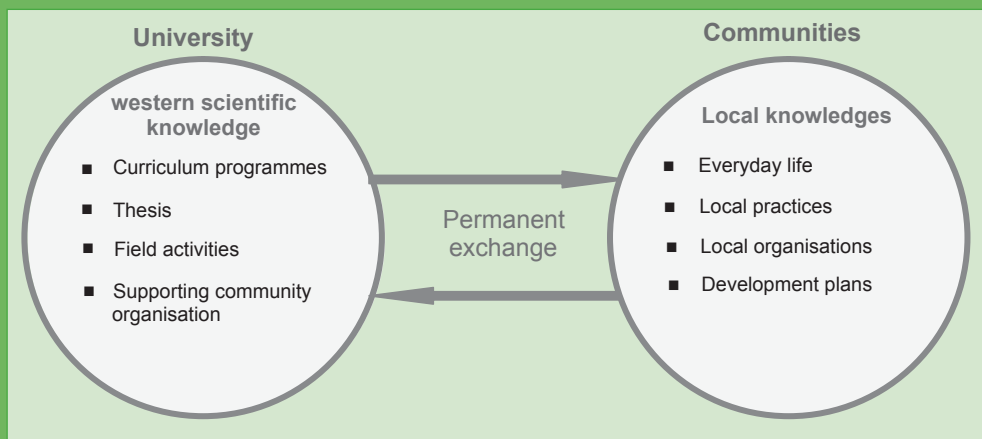


Figure 1
Complementarity between university and communities in intra- and intercultural higher education.

although public universities in Latin America, and in Bolivia in particular, have a multicultural population, their strategies, objectives and curriculum content are based on the globalisation development model. This implies a marginalisation of intra- and intercultural aspects within the curriculum.

Consequently, the knowledge generated in the university is limited by the exclusion of knowledge inherent in native cultures. There is an excessive specialisation in areas which are not strategic within the Latin American context. The university gives priority to the market economy and business-university links, reducing openness towards universal knowledge and agricultural diversity. Interculturality is limited to North-South exchanges, with the South being the recipient of western culture.

Education has thus become internationalised, with programmes in which the content is removed from the reality of the majority of the local population. It is obvious that the present poverty crisis cannot be resolved through a university-business paradigm, nor by means of a conceptual model which prioritises the market economy.

Intra- and intercultural education

In the UMSS, and since the formation of AGRUCO, the principal objective is 'to identify and implement actions for change within Latin American public universities, which rebuild the educative process through the inclusion of a new paradigm - re-evaluating the cultures of the native peoples and the dialogue between the knowledge systems involved (South-South, South-North), from an intra- and intercultural and trans-disciplinary perspective'.

In this process the concept *intraculturality* is conceived of as 'the re-evaluation of local knowledge systems, especially the wisdom of native indigenous peoples which have maintained a humane and sustainable way of life'. It is considered the first indispensable step in the process of strengthening

cultural identity, and transforming the knowledge system within the university. *Interculturality* implies an exchange between knowledge systems, of which modern western knowledge is but one among others. It refers above all to the attitudes and social relationships between different cultural groups within society.

Trans-disciplinarity is understood as 'a process of education and applied research based on the complexity of every situation, which transcends the knowledge of individual disciplines by using a range of methodologies'. It is the most advanced stage of interdisciplinarity. It provides insights for social and societal learning. It transcends the individual disciplines without rejecting them, in order to enrich understanding and seek permanent synergy in which the disciplines strengthen the applied research for development actions.

Fundamental aspects

Adopting intra- and intercultural education within the university implies an internal process of reflection. For this process it is essential to consider the following three aspects: (1) the re-evaluation of local native knowledge; (2) autonomy and self-determination in the education of the individual and the

community; and (3) dialogue between knowledge systems - between the wisdom of the indigenous peoples and western scientific knowledge.

Figure 1 illustrates the University, the social elements and people in its surroundings, each with their own roles, contributions and complementarities. The dialogue between these elements aims to transform the knowledge systems and sciences, in order to further endogenous development and eradicate material, social and spiritual poverty.

The UMSS experience

The San Simon Municipal University (UMSS) in Cochabamba, principally through the faculty of agriculture and AGRUCO, has developed an education system which includes a continuous interaction between the university and the various social elements around it. This includes, for example, joint undertakings with the Cochabamba peasant workers trade union, with 44 town councils within Cochabamba department, as well as small businesses, neighbourhood councils and the Cochabamba federation of private businessmen.

Based on this interaction - and with the co-operation of universities from

Box 1 Forms of inter- and intracultural education

The objective of the education within the UMSS, principally through Agruco is to train students to have an interdisciplinary understanding and interpretation of the rural situation, in order to support solutions which improve the quality of life within the framework of sustainable development. This process includes three major elements:

- **Understand the situation:** carry out field studies, which include the vision of development from the perspective of the farmers. Analyse the technologies and customs of the community and its members in everyday life - with its material, social and spiritual elements - as seen from within the community itself.
- **Strengthen and rebuild local knowledge** by means of participatory documentation: produce records of 'The Re-evaluation of Local Knowledge for Sustainable Development' which may then be returned to the community and passed on to other communities and organisations.
- **Formulate projects** based on the technologies compiled, for the sustainable management of natural resources and the revitalisation of local knowledge. The projects elaborated in conjunction with the communities are submitted to municipal programmes for financing their execution.



Europe and North America - pilot projects have been developed, including undergraduate training programmes, programmes of research and development, and postgraduate projects, all linked to integrated community development. These projects have been generated in areas such as agroecology, agroforestry, fodder and forest crops, agricultural mechanisation, protected areas, interculturality, municipal administration and government processes (Agruco, Sefo-CIF, Cifema, Basfor, Centro Aguas Agroquímico, Alimentos, Aguas, Ceplag).

The research and social interaction have generated important lessons, which in turn have transformed undergraduate academic education. In this way between 1990 and 2004, 4500 students trained in AGRUCO; and 65 post-graduate professionals were trained in agroecology, culture and sustainable development between 1998 and 2005.

Advances in methodology

In relation to the methodological concepts of the education process from an intra/intercultural and transdisciplinary perspective, the following points should be emphasised (see Box 1, previous page). Firstly: the research work is active and participatory, with emphasis on methodologies from different scientific disciplines. The transdisciplinary character of the research emphasises qualitative methodologies and process analysis.

Secondly, the methodology is building on the relationship between education and the community: requests for research and integrated development arise from participatory community studies. The outcomes of these studies make a significant contribution to municipal development plans. In this way, research priorities are based on the needs of the communities, of the region and of the country as a whole.

Actions for change

In the UMSS we believe that the institutional development of the public uni-

versities depends fundamentally on their willingness to accept a greater participation by civil society. The universities must offer programmes which satisfy the needs and desires of society as a whole. From this perspective the reform of the universities must include changes in their organic structure and decision-making bodies.

For example, the Honourable University Council (HCU) presently upholds the principles of autonomy and joint-government, with the participation of student and staff representatives. Subsequently it is proposed to create a People's Participation Council, which will be responsible for proposing policies and strategies which will allow the social, cultural, economic and political needs of society to be met. Participants in this council will include representatives of the peasant workers organisations, the federation of private business, and the regional government.

Likewise it is proposed to create a 'Council of the Wise', who will advise on the development of university programmes for education, scientific research and social interaction. Participants in this council will be worthy individuals from civil society, including leaders from native indigenous peoples and intellectual circles, of national and international standing.

The University is establishing research and social interaction centres with functions in the areas of postgraduate courses, scientific research and social interaction. Their role is to actively promote greater participation by the general population

A new research fund

The UMSS experience of transforming education is producing attractive examples for universities within Bolivia as well as other Latin American countries. An agreement has been reached between the UMSS and the Ministry of Agriculture for the creation of a new research fund. This fund aims 'to propose general guidelines for an intracultural, intercultural and transdisciplinary

reform in the public universities of Bolivia and Latin America'. International co-operating partners from Switzerland and the Netherlands (including Compas) are supporting these efforts.

The fund aims to promote active, participatory, transdisciplinary and intra- and intercultural research in the different faculties of the UMSS. It also aims at the establishment of intra- and intercultural training programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate level (diploma, masters and doctorate). Furthermore, 300 lecturers will specialise in participatory, transdisciplinary and intra- and intercultural research. Undergraduate and postgraduate training programmes will be modified with flexible curriculum matrices which encompass both modern western scientific knowledge and the wisdom of the native peoples.

In this way the San Simon University (UMSS) is working to change itself in the next few years, fulfilling its mission to be a multicultural and multilingual public university at the service of all the whole Bolivian population. We hope that this will support the population of Bolivia to strengthen their cultural identity, and overcome their situation of poverty and marginalisation.

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