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Higher education is back on the agenda in international development after decades of emphasis on primary education and basic skills. This return to favour amongst development agencies has manifested itself in the inclusion within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of a target for expanding access to higher education, and also an acknowledgement of the role of universities in promoting all of the other goals (Boni et al. 2016). Nevertheless, despite a range of new initiatives from multilateral and bilateral agencies (not to mention governments themselves), the prevailing approach in low and middle-income countries appears to be one of rolling out 'affordable' higher education to a greater proportion of the population, with little attention to the quality or appropriateness of the provision. In particular, there are significant contradictions between marketisation and promotion of no-frills courses (disjointed from research and community engagement) and the public benefit role proposed in the SDGs (McCowan 2016). Research is urgently needed into the forms of university that might fulfil this role.

The intercultural universities (IUs) in Mexico represent a promising innovation in this regard. Despite the significant indigenous population (approximately 20% nationally [CDI 2016]) there are low levels of access to higher education for this group, and little incorporation of indigenous knowledge traditions and social realities within the curriculum. From 2003, a system of twelve of these institutions has been created in different states in Mexico, along with five others generated by private institutions, community initiatives or NGOs (Mateos Cortés & Dietz, 2016; Rojas, 2016). These universities are not exclusive for the indigenous population (Schmelkes, 2009), but in contrast with the urban-centric and classist university tradition in the country, they are located in indigenous regions, in cultural settings characterized by high economic exclusion and infrastructural marginalization (Mateos Cortés & Dietz, 2016; Salmerón Castro, 2013). By being situated in such regions the main purposes of these universities are to increase the proportion of indigenous students in higher education, to educate professionals engaged with regional development and to form links with the communities in which they are located (Oyarzun Morel et al. forthcoming; Schmelkes, 2008). More broadly, the institutions aim to enhance access to bilingual and culturally pertinent education and develop better national knowledge and appreciation of indigenous culture.

This paper explores the role of the intercultural universities through an in-depth analysis of one of these institutions, the Universidad Intercultural Veracruzana (UVI), created in 2005. The institution has four regional campuses across the state and offers two BA programmes, one in cultural leadership/management, with four different orientations: communication,

sustainability, rights and health; and one on law with an approach in legal pluralism. While there is some existing research on the intercultural universities in general and UVI specifically, much of it has focused on focusing on indigenous identity (e.g. Re, 2013), meanings of interculturality (Dietz, 2012) and the intercultural curricular model (e.g. Ávila & Cortés 2008, Mendoza 2013, Olivera 2017), rather than the broader impact of the universities in their local contexts.

This study aims to understand the impact of the universities through the frame of the SDGs. These include diverse areas such as poverty reduction, nutrition, environmental protection, health, gender equality and jobs, but also influence on the lower levels of education, vocational training and lifelong learning. In adopting the explicitly global framework of the SDGs, rather than an indigenous conceptualisation, it must be acknowledged that this is a predominantly 'etic' rather than 'emic' analysis (although it does also document local understandings of the phenomena).

The design of this research is that of a case study, drawing primarily on interviews with senior management, researchers, lecturers, students, alumni and community members (25 in total), and three focus groups, as well as analysis of documentary sources and statistical evidence held at national and institutional levels. The research involved fieldwork carried out in Xalapa (the central location of the university), and in one of its rural campuses, in the municipality of Tequila.

Initial findings indicate that the universities have had a transformatory effect on their host communities in rural areas and on the lives of their graduates, most of whom would have otherwise struggled to gain access to higher education. There has been a particular increase in female enrolment. In contrast to traditional universities, the institutions have developed strong relationships with their local towns and villages with extensive outreach work. The data indicates that these institutions have to a large extent bucked the trend of those conventional programmes that are largely irrelevant to indigenous students, have promoted sustainable livelihoods and avoided encouraging their outmigration from their communities of origin.

Nevertheless, the university has only managed to reach a small number of students - in 2016, 342 students were enrolled and from 2009 to 2015 there have been 632 graduates – and it is not clear how much scope for expansion exists. Furthermore, there is as yet limited scope for students to engage in the full range of academic and professional areas, in particular natural sciences, health sciences and engineering.

The study also reflects on the potential of the SDGs to function as a hegemonic regime, despite its positive intentions, through determining the contours of what counts as legitimate development, and how we might measure and assess it (Santos 2015). Alternative conceptualisations of well-being and development from the indigenous communities are discussed as a counterpoint and potential challenge to the universalist discourses of the United Nations.

Finally, implications are drawn out for other contexts, with an assessment of the potential lessons that can be learned elsewhere. While Mexico has a number of distinctive elements

in terms of its indigenous communities, political settlement and education policy, there are a number of insights from the intercultural university experience that can be drawn on elsewhere in Latin America and in other regions.

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