

**Integration of ancestral knowledge into university curricula: Challenges and opportunities for intercultural higher education**

Integración de los saberes ancestrales en los currículos universitarios: Desafíos y oportunidades para la educación superior intercultural

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**ABSTRACT**

This research addresses the need to incorporate ancestral knowledge into university curricula as part of the process of building intercultural higher education in Ecuador, recognizing its contribution to cultural identity and academic enrichment. The objective was to analyze the challenges and opportunities of integrating ancestral knowledge into university programs by identifying student and faculty perceptions. Surveys were administered to 150 students, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 faculty members from public universities. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative analysis. The results show that 62% of students consider the inclusion of ancestral knowledge relevant, although only 28% perceive it as being effectively applied. Faculty highlighted limitations, including insufficient materials and a lack of training. In conclusion, while the integration of ancestral knowledge is valued, it faces institutional and methodological obstacles.

**Palabras Clave:** Ancestral knowledge; Intercultural higher education; University curricula.

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## RESUMEN

Esta investigación aborda la necesidad de incorporar los saberes ancestrales en los currículos universitarios como parte del proceso de construcción de una educación superior intercultural en el Ecuador, reconociendo su contribución a la identidad cultural y al enriquecimiento académico. El objetivo fue analizar los desafíos y las oportunidades de integrar los saberes ancestrales en los programas universitarios, a partir de la identificación de las percepciones de estudiantes y docentes. Se aplicaron encuestas a 150 estudiantes y se realizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas a 20 docentes de universidades públicas. El estudio empleó un enfoque metodológico mixto, que combinó el análisis cuantitativo y cualitativo. Los resultados evidencian que el 62 % de los estudiantes considera relevante la inclusión de los saberes ancestrales; sin embargo, solo el 28 % percibe que estos se aplican de manera efectiva. Por su parte, el profesorado señaló limitaciones relacionadas con la insuficiencia de materiales y la falta de formación especializada. En conclusión, aunque la integración de los saberes ancestrales es valorada positivamente, su implementación enfrenta obstáculos de carácter institucional y metodológico.

**Palabras clave:** saberes ancestrales; educación superior intercultural; currículos universitarios.

## INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, higher education has undergone a profound transformation in response to the need to build more inclusive, relevant, and sustainable academic systems. According to Cancio et al. (2024), the integration of ancestral knowledge emerges as a fundamental axis for recognizing the cultural and epistemic diversity that characterizes Latin American countries, especially those with a strong presence of Indigenous peoples (Zidny et al, 2020).

The contemporary university thus faces the challenge of moving beyond traditional models based exclusively on Western science towards curricula that actively engage with Indigenous knowledge, practices, and worldviews. This imperative responds not only to ethical and social demands but also to the need to enrich educational paradigms. The integration of these historical, communal, and ecological perspectives broadens our understanding of the world and strengthens the foundations of genuinely intercultural higher education (Arévalo, 2024).

Globally, Núñez (2024) argues that educational systems are undergoing a transformation aimed at recognizing cultural diversity as an essential component of sustainable development. International organizations such as UNESCO promote interculturality as a guiding principle for strengthening inclusive societies that respect epistemic plurality (UNESCO, 2025). In Latin America, Krainer and Chaves (2021) note that this trend is particularly relevant due to the profound presence of Indigenous traditions and worldviews and their millennia-old knowledge, which has historically been undervalued or excluded from formal higher education systems.

The integration of ancestral knowledge into university curricula thus emerges as a necessary response to democratize knowledge, foster educational equity, and promote a more integrated and humanistic vision of learning.

In the Latin American context, universities face the challenge of rethinking their curricular models to incorporate and legitimize the ancestral knowledge of Indigenous peoples such as the Kichwa, Shuar, Achuar, Mapuche, and Aymara, among others (Minga, 2025; Calderón, 2018). According to Quintero et al. (2024), this integration implies not only pedagogical adjustments but also institutional ones, including internal intercultural policies, relevant faculty training, community engagement, and mechanisms for dialogue between academic science and traditional knowledge. The challenge, as explained by De Souza (1997), lies in building bridges between different ways of understanding reality, overcoming the hierarchical view that has historically positioned Western science as the only valid source of knowledge. Consequently, the inclusion of this knowledge represents an opportunity to develop curricula that are more relevant, contextualized, and socially committed.

In this context, Belduma and Jara (2022) argue that the integration of ancestral knowledge materializes in the daily experience of students, faculty, and communities. This entails reviewing courses, teaching strategies, classroom practices, and learning projects that allow for genuine intercultural dialogue. In practice, López et al. (2025) find that many academic departments lack the tools to integrate this knowledge in a rigorous and respectful manner, while students perceive a lack of representation of their cultural identities. Similarly, Cancio et al. (2024) note that communities demand active participation in the construction of knowledge, contributing their experience, worldviews, and traditional ways of interpreting nature and social life. Understanding these dynamics is essential for identifying the real challenges and concrete opportunities for a truly intercultural university curriculum.

### **Integration of Ancestral Knowledge**

The integration of ancestral knowledge refers to the process through which universities incorporate traditional knowledge, cultural practices, and worldviews from Indigenous peoples into their curricula and programs. This integration entails recognizing Indigenous wisdom as a legitimate and distinct source of knowledge, with its own epistemological value and a deep relationship with the natural and social environment. It is not merely about adding isolated content but about building epistemological bridges that allow for horizontal dialogue between different systems of knowledge production (Uribe, 2019).

Furthermore, this process encompasses the adaptation of teaching methodologies that value traditional forms of learning, such as oral transmission, direct observation, community practice, and intergenerational dialogue. Integration must involve the active participation of elders, community leaders, and knowledge bearers, who contribute not only information but also a comprehensive cultural perspective (Enioluwa et al, 2025). This demands curricular reforms that allow for

the inclusion of this content in a cross-cutting or disciplinary manner, according to the nature of each degree program (Bello & Molina, 2023).

Finally, this integration has an ethical and socio-political dimension, as it seeks to redress centuries of exclusion and discrimination against Indigenous peoples. The recognition of their knowledge within the university community can help guarantee the preservation of cultural heritage, promote respect for diversity, and strengthen the identity of students who belong to these communities. At the same time, it opens the door to more sustainable academic practices that are harmonious with the environment, as this knowledge contains key teachings about ecological balance, community health, and social coexistence (Cancio et al., 2024).

### **Intercultural Higher Education**

Intercultural higher education is defined as an educational approach that recognizes, values, and articulates cultural diversity within university institutions, promoting epistemic equity and meaningful dialogue among different knowledge systems. An intercultural university is not limited to admitting students from diverse backgrounds but transforms its structures, policies, and practices to ensure respectful coexistence between different ways of thinking and learning (Krainer, 2023).

This approach requires rethinking teaching, research, and community engagement from an inclusive perspective. Intercultural education focuses on eliminating barriers that have historically marginalized certain groups, promoting collaborative learning methodologies, contextualized assessment, and sustainable practices based on community values. Furthermore, it encourages the creation of spaces for dialogue where academic knowledge can be contrasted with traditional knowledge, without hierarchies or impositions (Quintero et al., 2024).

Lastly, intercultural higher education aims to train professionals capable of responding to local and global needs from a deep sense of cultural identity. This implies that graduates not only master scientific theories but also understand the cultural dynamics of their territories and can apply contextualized solutions. Consequently, interculturality in the university becomes a key strategy for social justice, innovation, and educational sustainability (Núñez, 2024).

### **Problem Statement**

Despite advances in policy and discourse surrounding interculturality, universities continue to experience difficulties in effectively integrating ancestral knowledge into their curricula. Educational models based on Western epistemologies remain predominant, a dynamic that systematically marginalizes Indigenous knowledge. The lack of faculty training, limited community participation, and the absence of clear curricular guidelines create a gap between institutional discourse and educational practice.

### Research Question

How is ancestral knowledge currently integrated into university curricula, and what are the main challenges and opportunities for consolidating intercultural higher education?

### General Objective

To analyze the integration of ancestral knowledge into university curricula to identify the challenges and opportunities for strengthening intercultural higher education.

### METHODOLOGY

This research is based on a mixed-methods approach, which combines quantitative and qualitative procedures to offer a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon studied. Following Maldonado et al. (2025), these approaches are complementary for understanding complex social realities. The mixed-methods approach allows for the analysis of the integration of ancestral knowledge both through measurable perceptions and through an in-depth interpretation of the experiences and meanings that actors assign to the educational process. In practical terms, this approach was operationalized through the simultaneous collection of quantitative data via surveys and qualitative data obtained from interviews, focus groups, and document analysis.

The study adopts a descriptive-interpretive character, articulating the descriptive precision of the quantitative component with the interpretive depth of the qualitative one. Vizcaíno et al. (2023) point out that in socio-educational research, description is essential for understanding patterns, which then allows for the interpretation of underlying meanings. The quantitative component describes trends in how students and faculty value ancestral knowledge, while the qualitative component interprets the discourses that explain such perceptions.

The methodological design corresponds to a convergent mixed-methods design, which is appropriate for analyzing quantitative and qualitative data in a parallel and complementary manner (Maldonado et al., 2025). In this design, both types of data are collected and analyzed separately before being integrated and contrasted.

To collect quantitative data, a structured survey was administered to 150 students, designed to measure the perceived value of ancestral knowledge, its perceived degree of incorporation, and identified barriers. The use of this instrument is supported by Vizcaíno et al. (2023). The surveys included Likert-scale items and closed-ended questions.

The qualitative component was developed through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and document analysis (Maldonado et al., 2025). Interviews were conducted with 20 faculty members involved in curricular processes. Focus groups were held with students, and document analysis examined graduate profiles and curricular plans.

Data processing involved parallel analysis and subsequent integration. Descriptive statistics were applied to the quantitative data. The qualitative data

underwent thematic analysis, a technique involving coding and categorizing units of meaning (Vizcaíno et al., 2023). Triangulation linked numerical findings with qualitative explanations.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling (Vizcaíno et al., 2023). Students were selected from programs declaring intercultural principles. Faculty and authorities were selected for their relevant perspectives.

The research adhered to high ethical standards, including cultural respect, informed consent, and the non-appropriation of ancestral knowledge, in line with warnings from Maldonado et al. (2025) regarding extractivist practices. Confidentiality was guaranteed, permissions were obtained, and a commitment was made to share results with involved communities.

## RESULTS

The results are derived from a thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and a review of curricular documents. The presentation is organized into three dimensions: (1) Institutional Recognition of Ancestral Knowledge, (2) Intercultural Pedagogical Practices, and (3) Student Perception and Participation.

**Table 1:**  
Summary of Qualitative Results by Dimension

Dimension	Central Findings	Evidence/Quotes	Emerging Categories
<b>Institutional Recognition</b>	Formal discourse exists, but curricular inclusion is superficial.	"On paper we include it, but in practice we haven't managed to implement it." (Faculty 3)	Gap between discourse and practice; Declarative interculturality
<b>Pedagogical Practices</b>	Faculty lack training; efforts are isolated.	"We do what we can, but no one has trained us to work on these topics." (Faculty 1)	Voluntary interculturality; Lack of faculty training
<b>Student Perception</b>	Students perceive cultural invisibility and scarce community participation.	"We've never had workshops with knowledge bearers, even though they say the university is intercultural." (Student 4)	Invisibilized identities; Limited community participation

### Dimension: Institutional Recognition of Ancestral Knowledge

Analysis of the curricula shows formal recognition of interculturality in graduate profiles and principles. However, this recognition remains largely declarative. Authorities acknowledged this gap: "We have the intention, but we need to operationalize it" (Authority 2). Document analysis reveals that Indigenous content

is often supplementary or elective, leading to the category "gap between institutional discourse and practice."

**Dimension: Intercultural Pedagogical Practices**

Faculty reported that integration depends on personal initiatives due to a lack of official guidelines. Some have incorporated case studies or external guests, but these efforts are isolated. One faculty member stated, "We don't know if we're doing it right because there's no institutional guide for this" (Faculty 5). The significant lack of training led to the category "voluntary interculturality."

**Dimension: Student Perception and Participation**

Students from Indigenous communities reported that their knowledge and practices are not reflected in the curriculum and that there are no systematic spaces for community participation. One student noted, "You hardly see anything here of what we learned in the community" (Student 7). This fostered the categories "invisibilized student identities" and "limited community participation."

As shown in Table 2, the dimension Intercultural Curricular Relevance shows limited progress (40% agreement, 34% disagreement, 26% neutral). The dimension Attitudes and Perceptions towards Interculturality is highly favorable (86% agreement, 6% disagreement). In contrast, Faculty Training and Pedagogical Resources presents the greatest barrier (32% agreement, 38% disagreement). Community Participation and Engagement shows a divided scenario (43% agreement, 34% disagreement).

**Table 2:**  
Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Results

Dimension	Quantitative Result	Qualitative Findings	Emerging Categories
1. Curricular Relevance	Agreement: 40% Neutral: 26% Disagreement: 34%	Superficial, declarative incorporation.	Gap between discourse and practice
2. Attitudes/Perceptions	Agreement: 86% Disagreement: 6%	High valuation, no significant resistance.	Positive disposition; Potential for change
3. Faculty Training	Agreement: 32% Disagreement: 38%	Lack of training and clear guidelines.	Voluntary interculturality; Lack of training
4. Community Participation	Agreement: 43% Disagreement: 34%	Actions are isolated, not systematic.	Limited participation;

Dimension	Quantitative Result	Qualitative Findings	Emerging Categories
			Invisibilized identities

The analysis reveals a clear trend: positive social disposition exists, but structural and training limitations hinder effective implementation.

### CONCLUSIONS

The results obtained show that interculturality within the institutional curriculum remains mainly at a declarative level. Although explicit mentions are acknowledged in official documents, the real incorporation of ancestral knowledge into content and pedagogical practices is limited and superficial. This situation reveals a significant gap between institutional discourse and effective implementation in the classroom, which affects the cultural relevance of the training process.

Despite these curricular limitations, the educational community shows a highly favorable attitude towards the integration of ancestral knowledge and the intercultural approach. Both faculty and students value cultural diversity and consider its incorporation into professional training relevant, constituting a positive element that facilitates potential transformations. The absence of significant resistance suggests an institutional environment conducive to moving towards more inclusive and culturally contextualized educational processes.

However, the findings also show that the lack of faculty training and the scarcity of specialized pedagogical resources represent one of the main barriers to implementing interculturality. Faculty acknowledge not having clear guidelines or adequate training, leading to improvised practices or efforts limited to individual initiatives. This reflects the urgent need to strengthen continuing education and methodological support within the institution.

Similarly, it is identified that community participation and engagement with Indigenous peoples, although existing, occur in an isolated manner and without sustained planning. Interaction activities with Indigenous communities tend to be sporadic and are not integrated as a structural part of the educational process, which diminishes their formative impact and contributes to the persistence of cultural invisibilization dynamics.

In summary, the research reveals that the institution has significant potential to consolidate a stronger intercultural approach, supported by the positive attitudes of its academic community. However, to achieve effective and sustainable implementation, it is essential to make structural adjustments to the curriculum, strengthen faculty training, and establish systematic mechanisms for community engagement that allow for the coherent, relevant, and transversal integration of ancestral knowledge.

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