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Return migration and cultural diversity in university students of a public Higher Education Institution

Migración en retorno y diversidad cultural en estudiantes universitarios de una Institución de Educación Superior pública

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: migrant students returning to Mexico face various structural, economic, cultural and educational barriers. Their identity, formed in the United States, conflicts with the Mexican school system, which does not consider cultural and linguistic diversity. Young people face difficulties to integrate due to lack of resources, lack of knowledge of academic Spanish and lack of intercultural pedagogical strategies. In addition, they face social barriers such as isolation and discrimination. To achieve their integration, an inclusive educational system that involves the entire school community, promoting empowerment, is crucial. **Objective:** to identify the conditions of returning migrant and cultural diversity in university students of a public Higher Education Institution.

Method: quantitative approach of exploratory, observational and transversal type, the instrument called “Questionnaire to identify the student population in conditions of vulnerability” designed by the Vice-Rector and Academic Secretariat of the Veracruz Region of the Universidad Veracruzana, was applied in August and September 2024 to 2 363 students from various academic areas in the Veracruz Region.

Results: 1,18 % reported having lived in another country, 28,57 % stated that it was a voluntary return, 17,86 % were forced by working conditions, 3,57 % due to situations of discrimination and 50 % reported others.

Conclusions: this study provides a social panorama that should be addressed in a timely and efficient manner, promoting equity in education, addressing the specific needs of each student and ensuring that the entire university community efficiently concludes their studies and does not fall into a situation of educational lag or dropout.

Keywords: Cultural Diversity; University Students; Higher Education Institution; Migration.

RESUMEN

Introducción: los estudiantes migrantes de retorno a México enfrentan diversas barreras estructurales, económicas, culturales y educativas. Su identidad, formada en Estados Unidos, entra en conflicto con el sistema escolar mexicano, que no considera: diversidad cultural y lingüística. Los jóvenes enfrentan

dificultades para integrarse debido a falta de recursos, desconocimiento del español académico y falta de estrategias pedagógicas interculturales. Además, se enfrentan a barreras sociales como el aislamiento y la discriminación. Para lograr su integración, es crucial un sistema educativo inclusivo que involucre a toda la comunidad escolar, promoviendo la capacitación.

Objetivo: identificar la condición de migrante en retorno y diversidad cultural en estudiantes universitarios de una Institución de Educación Superior pública.

Método: enfoque cuantitativo de tipo exploratorio, observacional y transversal, el instrumento denominado “Cuestionario para identificar a la población estudiantil en condiciones de vulnerabilidad” diseñado por Vicerrectoría y Secretaría Académica de la Región Veracruz de la Universidad Veracruzana, se aplicó en agosto y septiembre de 2024 a 2 363 estudiantes de diversas áreas académicas en la Región Veracruz.

Resultados: el 1,18 % reportó haber vivido en otro país, 28,57 % manifestó que fue un regreso voluntario, 17,86 % fue forzado por condiciones laborales, 3,57 % debido a situaciones de discriminación y 50 % reportaron otras.

Conclusiones: este estudio brinda un panorama social que debe ser atendido de manera oportuna y eficiente, promoviendo la equidad en la educación, atendiendo las necesidades puntuales de cada estudiante y logrando que toda la comunidad universitaria concluya eficientemente sus estudios y no caigan en una situación de rezago o deserción educativa.

Palabras clave: Diversidad Cultural; Estudiantes Universitarios; Institución de Educación Superior; Migración.

INTRODUCTION

Generations of migrants are defined by their place of origin, age and stage of life at the time of their arrival in the United States. In the case of return migrant students, it mentions that they arrived in the United States in middle childhood and school age; most of their elementary and high school education was done in that country, therefore, their identity has been constructed in that culture (understanding that different countries, ethnicities, cultures and customs intervene in this construction) and they identify themselves as Americans.⁽¹⁾

The structural barriers that these students may go through are characterized by economic, administrative, educational and cultural issues, which are related to lack of access to educational institutions because they do not have identity documents or school records in Mexico, difficulty to enter an educational environment, lack of strategies for academic leveling and disorientation received about the admission processes, often combined with lack of economic resources.

This problem is closely related to the Mexican school model, which does not respond to today's society, that is, it does not consider the prevailing diversity or the multicultural and multilingual background of this type of students, therefore, these young people face language (reading and writing) and identity challenges as well as learning challenges, since many times it is not meaningful for them.⁽¹⁾

In addition to the above, cultural barriers play a crucial role, related to the difficulties in the handling of academic Spanish by transnational students, sociocultural differences in school contexts or in curricular content between the U.S. and Mexican systems, scarce bilingualism of educational personnel, and the fact that most teachers do not have an intercultural pedagogy to integrate them into their educational experiences.

These characteristics are related to the migratory identity that students have, since it is changing and flexible because it is a dynamic process, they (the students) are living “dual lives” and therefore experience a convergence in various spaces, causing tensions to integrate their individual and collective identity.⁽¹⁾

It is important to note that people's linguistic capital is part of their cultural identity, is formed at an early age and results from patterns of thought, reinforced in homes and schools; in other words, it is understood as a resource determined by parental skills, aspirations, cultural practices, parenting styles and the influence of social groups.⁽²⁾

The acquisition of multiple languages can occur at various stages of life depending on social exposure and duration of formal education. Linguistic adaptation is part of the acculturation of migrants in host societies. The goal would be this (linguistic integration), which is understood as the acquisition of competencies to achieve successful trajectories of structural integration in the destination, without losing that of origin.

In the case of transnational students in Mexico, linguistic integration would mean acquiring Spanish skills useful for success in school while using and developing English language skills.⁽²⁾ Finally, the social barriers faced by returning students are characterized as family separation, lack of social networks in schools, school dispersion of migrant students, since sometimes (migrant) children isolate themselves and prefer to remain invisible for fear of being discriminated against because of the way they speak or dress, Given this situation,

it is necessary for the Mexican educational system to be more flexible to help students to be incorporated and it is imperative to have an inclusive education, to achieve this it will be necessary to involve the entire university community from officials, teachers and administrators with training on current regulations on migration issues.⁽¹⁾

Now, as far as cultural diversity is concerned, according to the census of the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), in 2010 there were 117 221 speakers of original languages, which represents less than 3 % of the total population. The educational trajectories of indigenous youth (comparable communities) in Mexico, as opposed to those of non-indigenous youth, allow us to understand the role played by inequality, social and political inequity in access to basic education.⁽³⁾

These gaps, little by little, are increasing in the access to secondary and higher education, as can be confirmed in the illiteracy rate of the population between 6 and 14 years of age speaking an indigenous language, which is five times higher than in the non-indigenous population. Data from the National Institute for Educational Evaluation, the average schooling of a non-indigenous youth is 9,4 years, while that of an indigenous youth is only 6,6 years, only 33 % of people over 24 years of age who speak an original language managed to complete their primary education, of that percentage, 5 % finished high school and only 2 % could access a level of vocational training.⁽³⁾

Beyond the institutional positions or ethnic community vindication, there are the positions of those indigenous youth, who are in a stage of life whose conditions and expectations are added to this complex and tense panorama of intercultural education, people of ethnic origin schooled at a higher level are young and, as such, are plural, dynamic and complex actors, who are inscribed in multiple experiences and who live simultaneously in different contexts where these experiences are re-signified⁽³⁾ and their meanings of life are portrayed in daily practices, in values, beliefs, meanings, generational cultural symbols that they reproduce and, at the same time, transform.⁽³⁾

In addition to the above, there must be an intercultural approach that contemplates not only comparable communities, but also Afro-descendant, mestizo and/or foreign students, since an education with such an approach will seek to promote and support mutual understanding, respect, appreciation and integration among different cultural origins, emphasizing the importance of recognizing diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, language and between cultures. This movement seeks to foster unity while celebrating the distinctive characteristics of individuals.^(4,5)

As a backdrop, it is recognized through a terrain of symbolic, semantic, political disputes, ethnic and cultural visibility, but also personal visibility, specifically on the part of young people. The intercultural model should raise interest in the multiple networks of meaning of the present, resignifying the contextual and historical changes that transform the family, community, diversification of labor markets, influence of the media, social inequalities, new interests and forms of social and political participation, all of which are determined by globalization.⁽³⁾

In this sense, it is necessary to identify and characterize those students at an educational disadvantage due to their condition, whether due to family or personal situations, adaptation to the educational system, characteristics of their identity, among other factors, since this is the first step for a subsequent intervention with strategies pertinent to their condition, thus combating school failure and/or dropout, as well as contributing to a more equitable education.

By identifying the specific characteristics and requirements of these students, educational institutions will be able to allocate resources in an efficient and targeted manner to meet their needs. This may involve everything from economic support programs to academic and psychological counseling services that are culturally congruent and adapted to the students' circumstances. Therefore, the objective is to identify the condition of returning migrants and cultural diversity in university students of a public institution of higher education.

METHOD

This research was conducted from an exploratory, observational and transversal quantitative approach⁽⁶⁾; for data collection, an instrument called "Questionnaire to identify the student population in conditions of vulnerability" designed by the Vice Rectory and Academic Secretariat of the Veracruz Region of the Veracruz University was constructed, it has 42 questions distributed in dimensions; in addition to a privacy notice and informed consent, it was validated through a round of experts.

This instrument was applied in August and September 2024 to a population of 2,463 incoming students in the various academic areas in the Veracruz Region, of which 100 did not agree to participate, leaving a sample of 2,363 participants, for data processing descriptive statistics were used (frequency and percentages), with analysis in the Excel statistical program.

It is important to mention that this research is part of a macroproject and was carried out in compliance with the ethical considerations established by the Declaration of Helsinki.⁽⁷⁾

RESULTS

Table 1. Students who reported being return migrants

Return migrant	n	%
Yes	28	1,18
No	2335	98,82
Source: n= frequency, %= percentage.		

Regarding the identification of return migrants, table 1 shows that 28 (1,18 %) of the students reported having lived in another country.

Table 2. Years lived in another country

Years	n	%
1 a 2	13	46,43
3 a 4	2	7,14
5 years or more	13	46,43
Source: n= frequency, %= percentage.		

Of the 28 students who reported returning migrant status, table 2 shows that 13 (42,85 %) spent 1 to 2 years or 5 years or more, respectively, and 2 (7,14 %) between 3 and 4 years.

Table 3. Reasons for return to Mexico

Reasons	n	%
Voluntary	8	28,57
Forced by working conditions	5	17,86
Discrimination	1	3,57
Other reasons	14	50,00
Source: n= frequency, %= percentage.		

Regarding the reasons for their return to Mexico, 8(28,57 %) stated that it was a voluntary return, 5(17,86 %) were forced by working conditions, 1(3,57 %) due to situations of discrimination and 14(50,00 %) reported others, table 3.

Table 4. Cultural identity of the students

Cultural identity	n	%
Afro-descendant	20	0,84
Mestizo	48	2,04
Mexican (a)	2257	95,52
Equivalent communities	25	1,05
Foreign	13	0,55
Source: n= frequency, %= percentage.		

Regarding cultural identity, table 4 shows that 20 (0,84 %) of the students considered themselves to be of African descent, 48 (2,04 %) reported being mestizos, 2,257 (95,52 %) Mexicans, 25 (1,05 %) reported belonging to similar communities and 13 (0,55 %) were foreigners.

Table 5. Mexican languages spoken by students		
Mexican languages	n	%
Tzotzil	2	0,08
Mixtec	1	0,04
Nahuatl	5	0,21
Zapotec	5	0,21
Chinantec	1	0,04
Totonaca	1	0,04
Mixe	1	0,04
Mazatec	1	0,04
Tepehua	1	0,04
Zoque	1	0,04
Does not speak Mexican language	2 344	99,38
Source: n=frequency, %=percentage.		

Table 5 highlights that 19 students reported speaking Mexican languages, 1 (0,04 %) Mixteco, Chinanteco, Totonaca, Mixe, Mazateco, Tepehua and Zoque, respectively, 2(0,08 %) reported Tzotzil and equality was found with 5(0,21 %) for Nahuatl and Zapoteco. The rest (99,38 %) only spoke Spanish.

CONCLUSIONS

One of the functions of Higher Education Institutions in Mexico is to receive all those who want to be part of them and continue with their university studies, however, due to different conditions such as cultural, economic and/or social conditions, there are limiting situations for those students who are in a condition of returning migrants or who identify themselves in a culture different from the Mexican one.

In this sense, this research provides a social panorama that must be addressed in a timely and efficient manner, it is essential that Higher Education Institutions recognize this diversity by promoting equity in education, meeting the specific needs of each student, encouraging activities that facilitate mutual learning and integration of these with others in order to ensure that the entire university community efficiently complete their studies and do not fall into a situation of educational lag or dropout due to personal characteristics.

For this reason, identifying these students is a fundamental first approach that will help strengthen the university community, to facilitate their integration and contribution in the academic and social environment. Higher Education Institutions will be able to prepare their young people for a more globalized and intercultural world.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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