Strategy for the Integration of the Intercultural Axis in Higher Education Institutions. Case Study State University of Bolívar - Ecuador

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Sumak Kawsay, or "good living", represents a way of life rooted in indigenous peoples, which ranges from everyday aspects to ritual practices. In Ecuador, interculturality in higher education is crucial to address inequality in access to education, especially among indigenous peoples. This implies ethical action that guarantees their rights and intercultural training to manage and operate in this context. Interculturality in higher education promotes diversity, respect and tolerance, develops intercultural skills and prepares for global citizenship. Furthermore, it enriches learning by exposing students to diverse perspectives and contributes to sustainable development by integrating traditional and scientific knowledge. The transmission of knowledge from an intercultural perspective implies recognizing, valuing and using cultural diversity as a resource in the educational process. Keywords: ancestral knowledge, Andean worldview, interculturality. The methodology, based on the postpositivist paradigm, uses a qualitative and participatory approach to study indigenous communities. It includes preparatory, field work and analysis phases. Various tools such as brainstorming and interviews were used to promote citizen inclusion. In the research, fourteen knowledge bearers from the Surupukyo, Gradas, Arenal, Grupo Cacuango, San Antonio, Chinipamba, Erapamba and Llama Corral communities were taken as class informants. To analyze and interpret the information, theorizing, structuring, triangulation and categorization were implemented. Being the objective of the research to identify the ancestral knowledge in the native peoples from the Andean worldview as a contribution to the development of interculturality in the HEIs, a strategy is presented that allows its contribution to sustainable development, allowing the development of intercultural competencies based on principles of inclusion. and participation that encourages the active participation of all interested parties, promoting mutual understanding and respect that allows working in intercultural environments. **Keywords:** Ancestral knowledge, interculturality, transmission of knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

In Ecuador, a nation rich in cultural and ethnic diversity and perspectives, interculturality emerges as a fundamental pillar to forge an inclusive, equitable and respectful society of differences. This is how Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) stand as privileged spaces for the training of professionals committed to preservation, respect, equity, justice and harmonious coexistence among various social groups. In this context, HEIs play a crucial role in the promotion and consolidation of this intercultural vision, thus contributing to the social fabric and the integral development of the country.

Ecuador's human, economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights are rooted in an ancestral concept rooted in the ancient societies of the South American Andean region called *Buen Vivir*, also known as *Sumak Kawsay* in the indigenous worldview (Moreno et al, 2017). This philosophy represents much more than a mere existence; It is a way of "being and being" rooted in the traditions of the native peoples and in which harmony with nature and the community is maintained that becomes the central axis.

In the field of higher education, interculturality goes beyond the simple recognition of cultural diversity; it implies promoting a horizontal and enriching dialogue between different cultures. According to Walsh (2009), he states that "interculturality aims at the construction of equitable relations between different cultural groups, along with a radically different project of society" (p. 12). In this way, the integration of interculturality in higher

education institutions has a significant impact on the training of professionals capable of understanding and valuing the diverse perspectives and ways of life in the world.

It is essential to question the systems of thought and the construction of knowledge predominant in higher education, which have often been shaped by Western and Eurocentric perspectives. This is how epistemic interculturality emerges as a fundamental strategy to decolonize knowledge and promote a more diverse and inclusive understanding in the production of knowledge. Table 1 outlines the relevant theoretical positions on this topic.

Table 1 *Epistemic Interculturality in Higher Education: Rethinking Knowledge Systems*

Year	Author	Contribution
1987	Lévi-Strauss	Cultural diversity is no less important than biodiversity, and its preservation is equally vital for the survival of humanity (Strauss, 1987). It provides a conceptual basis for addressing interculturality in higher education, highlighting the importance of recognition, dialogue, and deep understanding of cultural diversity.
1979	Paulo Freire	Literacy as an instrument of liberation is an act of knowledge that implies the construction of the human being, society, and the world (Aguilar, 2020). It highlights the idea that education is not only about acquiring knowledge, but also about transforming social reality. In the context of interculturality in higher education, this implies recognizing and valuing diverse cultures and perspectives as an integral part of the educational process.
1992	Aníbal Quijano	"The decolonial critique must, then, begin by unveiling the power relations that have made modern/colonial epistemicide possible and continue with an epistemological critique that shows how modernity, its science and its myths, have been not simply the basis of knowledge but also the foundations of a secular theology that has justified the project of world domination." (Quijano, 2014, p. 38) It analyzes how the coloniality of power has influenced the configuration of knowledge in Latin America and proposes a critical perspective that challenges the dominant Eurocentrism in higher education.
2003	Walter Mignolo	"Openness and freedom of thought and ways of life-others (economies-others, political theories-others)" (Mignolo, 2008, p. 253). Higher education should provide spaces for dialogue and information exchange, fostering a deeper and more respectful understanding of diverse worldviews and systems of thought.
2005	Catherine Walsh	Interculturality tries to break with the perspective that those who are different are the 'others', recognizing themselves as equals. (Walsh, 2009). Epistemic interculturality involves recognizing and valuing a variety of knowledge systems, including those that have been historically marginalized or made invisible by Western hegemony.
2010	Boaventura de Sousa Santos	The decolonization of knowledge cannot be achieved through a single critical theory and a single paradigm, but through a constellation of critical theories and paradigms (Iuri, 2021). This means that we must be open to learning from different intellectual traditions and forms of knowledge, overcoming the idea that there is only one legitimate path to truth.
2012	Linda Tuhiwai Smith	The notion that research is independent of the circumstances in which it occurs is a Western fiction (Smith, 2012, p. 5). Therefore, it is necessary to question assumptions and biases internal to the dominant paradigms and open up to alternative perspectives.

Note: The authors mentioned above have contributed to the understanding and promotion of epistemic interculturality as a way to decolonize knowledge and foster diversity and inclusion in the production of knowledge.

When applying this systematization to the educational field and the concept of interculturality, it is vital to address the eradication of inequity in access to the Higher Education System (SES) in Ecuador. This is especially crucial in contexts where indicators of inequality persist and social, economic, and cultural problems are faced, particularly among indigenous peoples. In addition, Cuji (2020) highlights the importance of strengthening policies aimed at improving the access, permanence, and participation of students belonging to indigenous, Afro-descendant, and Montubio peoples and nationalities in higher education institutions. This objective can be achieved through the implementation of scholarship programs, individualized academic support, and the recognition and appreciation of students' knowledge and cultural experiences.

In this context, interculturality in higher education institutions plays a crucial role in the decolonization of knowledge and in the questioning of the structures of power and domination rooted in the academic field (Mato, 2020). The teaching-learning process is significantly enriched by integrating the ancestral knowledge, epistemologies, and cultural practices of the native peoples, which leads to a broader and more contextualized understanding of knowledge.

Given the imperative need for ethical action in relation to the rights of peoples, it is essential to accurately address census information and data to ensure their protection, in turn, implementing intercultural approaches in higher education requires the formation of a critical community of managers, operators and educators with a deep understanding of cultural diversity. These professionals must apply intercultural criteria in education with sensitivity and discernment, both in research and in practice, thus responding to the varied demands of higher education institutions.

Despite its importance, the incorporation of interculturality in higher education institutions in Ecuador faces several challenges. One of the main obstacles is resistance to curricular changes and the persistence of monocultural approaches in teaching (Cortez, 2021). The construction of a true intercultural dialogue is also hindered by the low representation of students and teachers from indigenous, Afro-descendant, and Montubio peoples and nationalities (Ramón, 2020).

Interculturality acquires concrete applications when it relates to the transmission of ancestral knowledge and knowledge. As this concept is deepened and an attempt is made to define it in a simple way, new sensitivities, concepts and profiles emerge that enrich the debate on nature. This does not act as a brake, but rather as a stimulus for constant critique, understood as a transversal analysis of the societies of the twenty-first century.

Comprehensive plans involving all members of the educational community are needed to address these issues. First, it is essential to review and update curricula and programs, incorporating intercultural approaches, methodologies, and content (Garcés, 2022). This includes the integration of ancestral knowledge, worldviews, and ways of life of indigenous peoples, as well as the promotion of research and knowledge production from an intercultural perspective. Second, it is essential to promote the continuous training and training of teachers on topics such as decolonial pedagogies, cultural diversity, and interculturality (Ortiz, 2021). This will enable educators to acquire the tools and skills necessary to effectively address interculturality in their educational practices.

In this sense, interculturality must be a transversal axis in higher education due to multiple reasons, among them, it promotes respect and tolerance towards the diversity of identities and peoples, recognizing the condition of citizenship of all. In addition, it fosters the development of intercultural skills that prepare students for global citizenship in an increasingly interconnected and multicultural world. Interculturality also enriches the learning process by incorporating different perspectives and worldviews, thus contributing to sustainable development. However, its importance lies not only in inclusion and respect for diversity, but also in the preparation of the university community to live together and work in multicultural contexts.

In this way, the diversity of cultures, traditions, languages and forms of knowledge present in society is recognized and valued. Integrating this approach into higher education helps to create inclusive spaces where differences are respected and celebrated. By focusing on mutual understanding and respect between different cultural groups, interculturality contributes to fostering tolerance and peaceful coexistence both in educational settings and in society at large.

Higher education that integrates interculturality provides students with the opportunity to develop crucial skills, such as effective communication with people from different backgrounds, the ability to work in diverse teams, and empathy for the experiences and perspectives of others. In an increasingly interconnected world, it is critical for students to gain a deep understanding of cross-cultural realities and prepare to be global citizens. Intercultural higher education provides the necessary tools to participate effectively and ethically in a multicultural and globalized society, thus promoting coexistence and mutual understanding in diverse contexts.

Interculturality in higher education enriches the learning process by exposing students to a diversity of perspectives, knowledge, and pedagogical approaches. This not only allows them to question their own assumptions, but also to expand their worldview and develop a deeper, more nuanced understanding of global realities. By integrating interculturality, educational institutions can contribute significantly to sustainable development, through the promotion and preservation of indigenous and local cultures, as well as by fostering educational and research practices that combine traditional and scientific knowledge. Such a holistic approach makes it possible to more effectively address environmental, social and economic challenges, preparing students to participate responsibly and ethically in a globalized and multicultural society.

It is essential to integrate multiple cultural perspectives into the curriculum and into teaching and learning activities. This involves readings, case studies, class discussions, collaborative group work, and extracurricular activities that reflect diversity. Valuing and sharing the diverse cultural backgrounds present in the classroom enriches the educational process, fostering an inclusive environment and promoting the development of

intercultural skills among students. This approach not only expands knowledge, but also prepares students to participate effectively in a globalized and diverse society.

According to Hidalgo (2022), it is crucial in educational institutions to promote spaces for intercultural dialogue. This implies promoting meetings where different cultural groups can exchange knowledge, live together and share experiences. These spaces not only foster mutual respect and understanding, but also contribute to the construction of shared knowledge. Activities such as cultural events, workshops, seminars and collaborative research projects are effective tools to promote this dialogue and enrich the educational environment. The creation of these spaces reflects a commitment to diversity and strengthens social cohesion in the educational community.

Participatory methodologies, such as active, problem-based and collaborative learning, are particularly effective in fostering interaction and knowledge sharing between students from different cultures. By promoting the active participation of students in their learning process, these methodologies cultivate mutual respect and collaboration, creating an environment conducive to the exchange of ideas and experiences in a multicultural and diverse context.

Therefore, higher education from an intercultural perspective recognizes the richness of the traditional and ancestral knowledge of indigenous and local communities, which implies the integration of this knowledge into the academic curriculum and the promotion of respect and appreciation of the various forms of non-Western knowledge. In addition, it seeks to develop intercultural competencies in students, such as effective communication and the ability to collaborate with people from different cultures. It also fosters the ability to critically reflect on one's own cultural beliefs and prejudices, thus preparing students to be sensitive global citizens committed to diversity in a multicultural and globalized society.

However, in order to achieve a more egalitarian, inclusive and respectful society of cultural diversity, it is essential to integrate interculturality as a transversal axis in HEIs in Ecuador. This intercultural perspective not only enriches the teaching-learning process, but also contributes to decolonizing knowledge and training professionals committed to harmony between different cultural groups. Incorporating interculturality in the educational field is essential to cultivate mutual understanding and respect for diverse cultural expressions, thus promoting peaceful and collaborative coexistence in society.

Despite challenges such as resistance to change and the low representation of indigenous, Afro-descendant and Montubio groups, it is feasible to overcome them through comprehensive strategies. These include curriculum review, teacher training, equitable access for diverse students, and the creation of spaces for intercultural dialogue. With these measures, higher education institutions can move towards greater inclusion and respect for cultural diversity in the academic field.

In this framework, the objective of the research is to propose a strategy to integrate interculturality as a transversal axis in Higher Education Institutions in Ecuador. This involves developing inclusive educational policies and practices that promote respect for and appreciation of cultural diversity in all aspects of academia.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study adopts a quantitative approach, structured under a descriptive and correlational design. It aims not only to describe the perceptions and attitudes of the participants regarding the integration of the intercultural axis, but also to explore possible relationships between sociodemographic variables (such as ethnic origin, educational level, and teaching experience) and the perceived effectiveness of the intercultural strategy in higher education institutions.

The study population is composed of two main groups: 10 intercultural teachers and 300 students belonging to indigenous, Montubia and Afro-descendant communities who are studying at the State University of Bolívar. Interculturality teachers include teachers who teach subjects or modules related to interculturality at the university. While indigenous, Montubio and Afro-descendant students are those who identify themselves as members of these communities and who are legally enrolled in the university's undergraduate careers. The selection of the sample was carried out through non-probabilistic sampling for convenience, selecting participants who are willing and available to participate in the research. The sample is expected to be composed of 10 teachers and 100 students, to ensure adequate representation of the perspectives of the different groups involved.

For data collection, structured questionnaires were designed, which were applied through online surveys. These questionnaires were divided into sections that covered: (a) Demographic data, information on age, gender, educational level, previous experience in interculturality, and ethnicity; (b) Perception of the Intercultural Strategy, questions with answer options under the Likert scale (scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means "Strongly disagree" and 5 means "Strongly agree") to assess the participants' perception of the effectiveness, relevance, and applicability of the proposed intercultural strategy; (c) Personal and Academic Experience, the students'

experience in terms of cultural integration and teachers' perception of the effectiveness of intercultural teaching were explored.

A pilot test was carried out to ensure the clarity and validity of the questionnaires before application to the full sample. Once the instruments were adjusted, data were collected over a period of two months. The data were collected and stored confidentially, respecting ethical regulations in research.

RESULTS

The results of the application of the instrument to teachers are as follows:

Teacher Demographic Profile

The research sample was composed of 10 intercultural teachers, who participated by providing demographic data and their perceptions on the integration of the intercultural axis in higher education institutions in Ecuador. Most teachers are in the age range of 36 to 45 years old (50%), followed by those between 46 and 55 years old (30%), and finally 20% are over 55 years old. In terms of gender distribution, 60% of teachers are women and 40% are men, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Age distribution of teachers. In original language Spanish
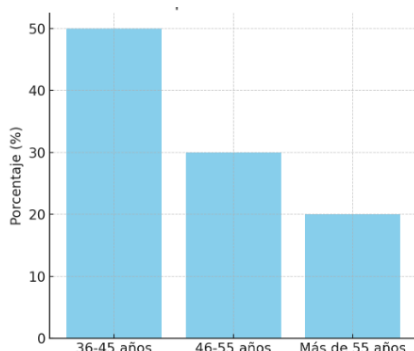
Regarding ethnicity, 80% of the teachers identify as indigenous, while 10% identify as Montubio and another 10% as Afro-descendant. In terms of teaching experience, 40% of the participants have between 5 and 10 years of experience, followed by 40% with between 11 and 15 years, 20% have less than 5 years, and only one teacher (10%) has more than 15 years of experience.

Teachers' perception of the Intercultural Strategy

The teachers showed a high level of agreement regarding the importance of the inclusion of interculturality in the academic curriculum. Table 1 summarizes the teachers' responses.

Table 1 Teachers' perception of the intercultural strategy

Items	1	2	3	4	5
The inclusion of interculturality in the academic curriculum is essential for higher education.					10
I believe that my institution promotes an inclusive and respectful environment towards all cultures.				2	8
I perceive that students from different cultures feel included in the educational dynamics of my institution.		1		2	7
The training in interculturality that I have received is adequate to face the challenges of the current educational context.					10
The intercultural strategy has contributed positively to my academic or professional development.				1	9
The intercultural strategy implemented in my institution has improved my understanding of other cultures.			1	2	7

All participants (100%) consider the presence of the intercultural axis in higher education to be essential. Regarding the perception of the inclusive environment within their institutions, 80% of the teachers agreed that a respectful environment towards all cultures is promoted, while the remaining 20% showed a moderate level of agreement.

Regarding the inclusion of students from different cultures in the educational dynamics, 70% of the teachers perceived that students feel included, while 20% disagreed, and 10% were neutral. All teachers agreed that the intercultural training received is adequate to face the challenges of the current educational context, with 100%.

Finally, 90% of the teachers stated that the intercultural strategy has contributed positively to their academic or professional development, and only 10% presented a neutral position. Likewise, 70% indicated that the strategy implemented has improved their understanding of other cultures, with 20% being neutral and 10% disagreeing.

The results of the application of the instrument to students are as follows:

Student Demographic Profile

The student sample was composed of 100 students, of which the majority are in the age range of 18 to 25 years (82%), followed by 17% in the range of 26 to 35 years, and only 1% are between 36 and 45 years old. In terms of gender distribution, 54% of students are women and 46% are men.

Figure 2 Distribution of students by age. In original language Spanish
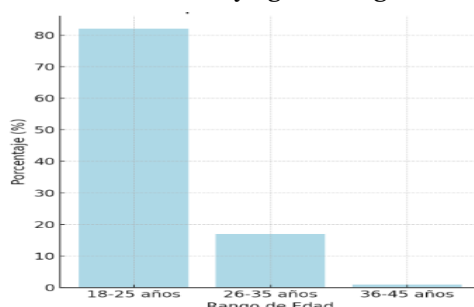
Regarding ethnicity, 71% of students identify as indigenous, 19% as Afro-descendants, and 10% as Montubios. In addition, in terms of the degree they study, 58% of students are enrolled in Education, 23% in Law, 12% in Administration, 5% in Sociology, and 2% in Nursing.

Perception of the Intercultural Strategy

The answers provided by the students can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2 Teachers' perception of the intercultural strategy

Items	1	2	3	4	5
The inclusion of interculturality in the academic curriculum is essential for higher education.			2	15	83
I believe that my institution promotes an inclusive and respectful environment towards all cultures.	2	5	10	35	48
I perceive that students from different cultures feel included in the educational dynamics of my institution.	2	5	7	47	39
The training in interculturality that I have received is adequate to face the challenges of the current educational context.		1	6	41	52
The intercultural strategy has contributed positively to my academic or professional development.		1	3	59	37
The intercultural strategy implemented in my institution has improved my understanding of other cultures.		1	7	59	33

The students showed a high level of agreement regarding the importance of the inclusion of interculturality in the academic curriculum, with 83% indicating that they consider the presence of the intercultural axis in higher education essential. Only 2% disagreed. Regarding the inclusive environment within institutions, 83% of students considered that their institution promotes an environment that respects all cultures, while only 7% perceived the inclusive environment in a less positive way. In terms of the inclusion of students from different cultures in the educational dynamics, 86% of students perceived an inclusive environment, while 7% were less satisfied. Figure 3 shows the graph that reflects the students' perception+on of the importance of interculturality.

Figure 3 Perception of the importance of interculturality. In original language Spanish
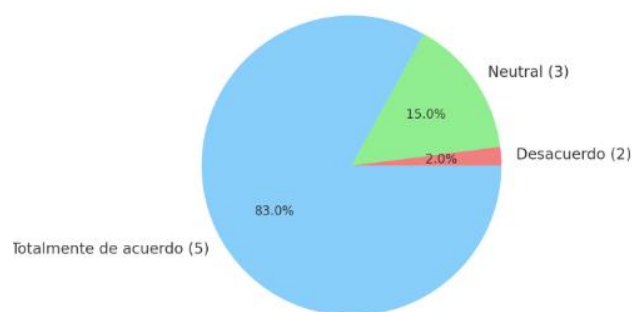

DISCUSSION

Guidelines for understanding, working and developing interculturality in HEIs

A strategy is proposed for addressing interculturality in higher education that enhances the axis of interculturality. Based on two components, one cognitive, related to knowledge, and the other interventional, related to pedagogical praxis. These are incorporated into the components of the teaching-learning process (methods, means, forms of organization, resources and evaluation), generating learning scenarios. This process is accompanied by a diagnosis, the planning resulting from the diagnosis carried out, the execution of said planning and finally the control and evaluation of the strategy, as can be seen in Figure 2.

Figure 3. Strategy for addressing interculturality in HEIs. In original language Spanish
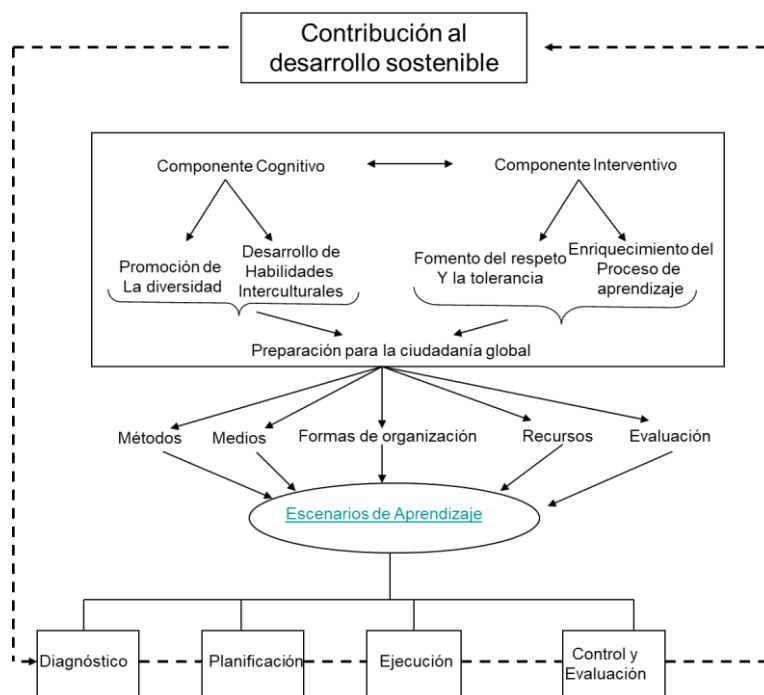
The guidelines that should be followed to understand, work and develop interculturality from HEIs

a)   Diversity promotion: is a process that involves deliberate actions to recognize, value, and foster the multiplicity of identities, cultures, perspectives, and experiences present in a society or community. Achieving the recognition of cultural diversity is essential to build inclusive, fair and respectful societies of human rights, through this promotion the recognition of cultural diversity will be achieved. In HEIs, this is materialized through the incorporation of activities that enhance the visibility of different cultures, the promotion of intercultural dialogue, support for inclusion and equity, respect and appreciation of differences, and multicultural education. It manifests itself when activities such as the Inti Raymi, the holiday of the dead, carnival, to mention a few, are celebrated.

b)   Promotion of respect and tolerance: it is essential to achieve the incorporation of multiple perspectives in any context, whether educational, social, political or cultural. In HEIs, it is materialized through openness to the diversity of ideas and experiences, promotion of dialogue and constructive discussion, generation of empathy and understanding, conflict prevention and promotion of peace, promotion of inclusion and equity, as

well as the enrichment of learning and decision-making. It is manifested when congresses, symposia, and academic conferences are held that integrate topics related to interculturality.

c)   Development of intercultural skills: it involves acquiring competencies and capacities that allow you to interact effectively and respectfully with people from different cultures, as well as to understand and work in diverse cultural environments. These skills are increasingly important in a globalized and multicultural world. The following can be enunciated: effective communication in a clear, respectful and understandable way with people from different cultures; flexibility and adaptability, being able to accept and manage ambiguity, uncertainty and cultural differences constructively; Empathy and cultural sensitivity, involve having empathy and sensitivity towards the experiences, values, beliefs and cultural norms of others, being able to put yourself in the place of the other, understanding their perspective and showing respect for their cultural identity; ability to resolve cross-cultural conflicts, includes the ability to identify, address, and resolve conflicts that arise due to cultural differences, manage divergence of opinions, and find solutions that are acceptable and satisfactory to all parties involved; cultural awareness and self-knowledge, implies being able to critically reflect on one's own cultural identity and being open to learning and growing through interaction with people from other cultures; multicultural teamwork, working effectively in multicultural teams, drawing on diversity of experiences, perspectives, and skills to achieve common goals, building trusting relationships, collaborating productively, and resolving conflicts constructively in cross-cultural settings. It is materialized by incorporating two subjects in all careers whose name and minimum contents are structured by the higher education control bodies.

d)   Global Citizenship Readiness: is an educational process that seeks to equip people with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary to understand and actively participate in an increasingly interconnected and diverse world. This concept recognizes that the challenges and opportunities we face today, whether social, economic, political or environmental, transcend national borders and require a global perspective and a commitment to collective action, for this a global awareness must be generated that allows intercultural understanding with civic engagement, environmental responsibility and sustainability. which allows the development of skills for global problem solving. Like the previous item, it must be part of the content system of the two proposed subjects.

e)   Enrichment of the learning process: This approach recognizes the importance and value of traditional, ancestral and cultural knowledge from diverse communities and societies, and seeks to incorporate it meaningfully into education systems and teaching and learning processes. To this end, it is necessary to value the diversity of knowledge while respecting ancestral wisdom, intercultural dialogue and collaboration, through the integration of inclusive pedagogical methods where the interrelationship between knowledge is recognized. It is materialized in the training that university professors receive each semester where the process of socialization of these topics is carried out, which are later transmitted to the students.

f)   Contribution to sustainable development: finally, this guideline is essential to achieve the development of intercultural competencies, since both concepts are closely related and mutually reinforcing. Sustainable development is based on principles of inclusion and participation, which are fundamental for the development of intercultural competencies. By including people from different cultures in decision-making processes and by encouraging the active participation of all stakeholders, mutual understanding and respect are promoted, as well as the development of skills to work in cross-cultural environments. It is materialized in subjects related to entrepreneurship, national reality or other related subjects.

CONCLUSIONS

The new meaning of the old terms was identified in the process of forming the critical mass of teachers and students with a clear understanding, dimensioning interculturality from the Andean worldview. In this way, the learning process is enriched with an approach that rescues the importance and value of the traditional, ancestral and cultural knowledge of diverse communities and ethnic groups, seeking its incorporation in a significant way in educational systems and in teaching and learning processes. Concluding that through the strategy, teachers and students are offered awareness on the subject, in addition, the incorporation of teachers and students of HEIs in the traditional celebrations of native peoples will allow the promotion of diversity through the promotion of intercultural dialogue.

When analyzing interculturality as a transversal axis in higher education, it is necessary to start from the community participatory methodology to collect information that allows diagnosing the ethnic cultural traits that occur in the area and from there carry out the planning that allows the development of these intercultural skills in both teachers and students.

A strategy that allows its contribution to sustainable development is presented as a contribution to the development of interculturality in HEIs, allowing the development of intercultural competencies based on principles of inclusion and participation, which encourages the active participation of all interested parties, promoting understanding and mutual respect that work in intercultural environments allows.

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