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Process of Inclusion of Students From Ethnic Communities In Conventional University Education

River Chávez Santos[1], Yuri Reina Marín[2], Angelica María Carrasco Rituay[3], Einstein Sánchez Bardales[4], Jherali Alondra Oviedo Rabanal[5], Rosas Carranza Guevara[6], Ytmar Tatiana Chávez Santos[7]

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Corresponding Author:

Angelica María Carrasco Rituay
Universidad Nacional Toribio Rodríguez de Mendoza de Amazonas, Perú Email: angelica.carrasco@untrm.edu.pe

Abstract: This study aimed to analyze the inclusion process for students from the Awajún and Wampis ethnic communities within conventional university education in Peru. A case study design with an interpretative qualitative approach was employed. Data were collected using semi-structured, in-depth interviews with five students—three from the Awajún community and two from the Wampis community—selected through convenience sampling. Additionally, two life histories were documented to provide deeper insight into the students' experiences. The findings indicated that the inclusion process for Awajún and Wampis students is influenced by significant economic, linguistic, and cultural challenges. However, some supportive factors were identified, such as peer feedback, solidarity among students, and financial assistance from the State through the Beca 18 scholarship program. This program, established in 2013, aims to provide financial support to low-income students from rural areas to facilitate access to higher education. Despite these supportive mechanisms, the study concluded that a genuine and comprehensive inclusion process for students from ethnic communities remains lacking. This gap is attributed to the inability of conventional universities to foster dialogic communication that equally values diverse cultural knowledge. The main limitation of this study was the language barrier and communication differences, which may have impacted the depth of understanding of the students' expressions. Future research should involve interviewers proficient in native languages to ensure richer data collection. This study contributes to the limited body of research on the inclusion of students from ethnic communities in conventional universities, offering unique insights from the students' perspectives.

Keywords: Intercultural Education, University Education, Ethnic Communities, Dialogic Communication, significant economic, linguistic, cultural challenges

1. Introduction

The study focuses on a small number of members of two ethnic minorities inhabiting the department of Amazonas in Peru: the Awajún, also known as Aguaruna or Ents, and the Wampís, also known as Huambisa or Shuar-Suampis, both of whom belong to the Jíbaro linguistic family. In the department of Amazonas, these groups predominantly reside in the districts of El Cenepa (90.2%) and Nieva (78.1%) in the province of Condorcanqui, and Imaza (77.2%) in the province of Bagua (INEI, 2018). Representing almost 15% of the department's total population, there are 44,143 Awajún speakers and 2,896 Wampís speakers who use their native languages as their first language (Ministerio de Cultura, 2015). Notably, in 1977, these groups established the Aguaruna and Huambisa Council (AHC), marking the first regional and interethnic minority organization in Peru (Romio, 2014).

The social situation of these native peoples is influenced by "structural" and "eventual" processes such as globalization, transnational migration, and socioeconomic marginalization (Rieger, 2021). This disadvantaged position is reflected in limited access to essential services, socioeconomic inequality, racialization, and linguistic discrimination (Sánchez & Koulidobrova, 2023a). For instance, in the health sector, over 75% of ethnic minority members lack access to healthcare, only 23.4% have potable water, and a mere 4% have access to a sewage system (INEI, 2018). Additionally, there is a high prevalence of diseases such as dengue, malaria, anaemia, and HIV among these populations (Iglesias-Osores & Saavedra-Camacho, 2020).

Despite these challenges, powerful societal groups often view Indigenous populations as obstacles to progress and governance (Drinot, 2014; Escobedo, 2015, 2016). Cavero (2011) highlights the absence of the concept of interculturality in state actions, occurring in an asymmetrical context where a state-driven neoliberal model conflicts with the agency of an 'Amazonian Indigenous' actor advocating for recognition and rights.

This lack of cultural recognition extends to the educational sector, where implementing inclusive education faces substantial obstacles. While inclusive education is designed to provide equal opportunities and support for all students (Soeharto et al.,

[1,2,3,4,5,6,7] Universidad Nacional Toribio Rodríguez de Mendoza de Amazonas, Perú.

2024), its effective implementation is hindered by various factors, such as teacher shortages (Ainscow et al., 2006), inadequate teacher training (Ahsan et al., 2013), and negative attitudes toward students with disabilities or those from different cultural backgrounds (Beacham & Rouse, 2012; McHatton & Parker, 2013; Parasuram, 2006). These educational challenges mirror the broader socio-political dynamics between the state and Indigenous communities, underscoring the necessity for an intercultural approach that permeates all levels of society (Chávez Santos et al., 2024).

In Latin America, inclusive education has evolved, particularly focusing on ethnic community participation in higher education. This participation, initiated in the 1980s and 1990s, originally aimed to improve general literacy. Today, however, efforts have shifted towards intercultural bilingual education. Countries like Mexico, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia have pioneered intercultural universities, which are structured to address the specific needs and aspirations of Indigenous populations. Unlike conventional universities, these institutions incorporate practices that respect and integrate Indigenous knowledge and cultural perspectives. For example, the Universidad Intercultural de Chiapas in Mexico and the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar in Ecuador serve as models of inclusive education that prioritize community engagement and culturally relevant curricula (Añaños & Herreras, 2023).

In Peru, however, access to university education for individuals with an Indigenous mother tongue remains limited, with only 4% of this population managing to access higher education (INEI, 2020). The III Biennial Report on University Reality in Peru by the National Superintendence of SUNEDU (2022) indicates that only 6.7% of the Indigenous population has reached higher education, compared to 30.9% of the general population (Ministerio de la Juventud y Deporte, 2024). This stark disparity highlights the barriers faced by Indigenous students in accessing and completing university studies.

Economic constraints are among the primary barriers, as Indigenous communities experience higher poverty and social exclusion levels (Banco Mundial, 2015). Additionally, limited access to educational programs that consider their cultural contexts and needs presents a significant challenge (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2019). Social and cultural barriers, such as discrimination and racism, further impede their integration into higher education (CEPAL, 2021).

In response to these challenges, the Peruvian State has implemented policies such as the Language Law (Congreso de la República, 2011), which promotes the use of Indigenous languages within the education system. The Ministry of Education (2016) has also introduced an intercultural and bilingual approach, and the National Scholarship and Educational Credit Program (PRONABEC) has offered scholarships to Indigenous students since 2012.

A major effort to improve these statistics was the establishment of the National Policy for Indigenous or Native Peoples to 2030, launched in 2021. This policy includes scholarships managed by the Ministry of Education (Ministerio de Cultura, 2021) aimed at increasing the number of Indigenous students in higher education (Castillo, 2020). Under this policy, a goal was set to grant 5,000 scholarships between 2021 and 2024. As of now, over 3,800 scholarships have been awarded, supporting Indigenous students in accessing and remaining in higher education (PRONABEC, 2023). Nevertheless, the current regulatory framework often lacks an intercultural focus that fully aligns with the realities of ethnic minorities (Sánchez & Koulidobrova, 2023b). The neoliberal model established in the 1990s (Drinot, 2014) has shaped an educational landscape that overlooks many of these pressing needs.

While education policies advocate for universality and unrestricted access (Núñez & Rivadeneira, 2021), exclusion persists, affecting ethnic communities and other vulnerable groups (Rodríguez, 2021). Universities have the critical task of promoting interculturalization, recognizing the right of ethnic community students to higher education and fostering knowledge generation through equitable intercultural dialogue (Hinojos et al., 2020). It is essential to amplify the voices of Indigenous students facing inclusion challenges in higher education.

Inclusive education encompasses a range of meanings, including the systemic transformation of educational institutions (Al-Korbi et al., 2024). Although often defined as the practice of integrating diverse students within the same classrooms (Moriña, 2017), true inclusion extends beyond physical co-location. It recognizes students' needs, respects diversity, and incorporates various learning preferences (Smith, 2010). For a significant portion of youth to access higher education, systems must be inclusive and effective (Contini & Salza, 2020).

Studies show that integrating students from native communities into higher education is essential for improving their success and well-being (Florian, 2014; Killoran et al., 2014). This requires fostering inclusive environments supported by cultural programs, adequate resources, and academic assistance (Fatiha et al., 2023; Gupta & Makomenaw, 2022). Aboriginal Education Units within universities have been highlighted as essential support structures, offering academic guidance and mentoring that enhance Indigenous students' university experience (Benton et al., 2021).

While equal educational opportunities in higher education have been underscored in legislation and reports (Piketty, 2022), it remains a relatively recent and under-researched topic compared to primary and secondary education (Beaton et al., 2021). Further exploration is needed to understand the inclusion of students from various ethnic backgrounds in university education (Chávez et al., 2024; Costas-Fernández & Morando, 2022; Sirotová & Michvocíková, 2023).

Recent research has identified various challenges in implementing inclusive policies and bilingual education in Latin America's native communities. Krainer & Chaves (2021) note that limited research on Indigenous needs makes it difficult to address their unique challenges effectively. Mato (2020) emphasizes that non-intercultural universities often exclude Indigenous cultures and languages, unlike intercultural institutions. Castillo (2020) observed that socioeconomic issues persist throughout Indigenous students' university education. Méndez et al. (2019) found that participation in social activities such as artistic and sports clubs sometimes leads Indigenous students to disengage from their cultural traditions. Hanne (2017) showed that socio-academic support programs tailored to Indigenous students' needs are successful but also highlighted economic issues, distance from family, lower prior education levels, socialization challenges, and personal attitudes as obstacles.

Universities must promote intercultural training to encourage respect, dialogue, and cooperation among students, ultimately fostering peace and solidarity (Olivencia, 2019; Tibbitts & Sirota, 2023). Research also shows that university administrators often prioritize inclusion over interculturality and pedagogical innovation (Lourenço, 2018). Adapting communication to academic environments and improving interaction strategies are crucial for maintaining diversity, equity, and inclusion (Islam & Haque, 2022). Micro-communities within universities can support socially disadvantaged students, providing more inclusive spaces that encourage participation in academic and social activities (Varga et al., 2021).

In conclusion, the inclusion of Indigenous students in higher education is vital for training professionals capable of contributing to their communities and improving their quality of life. This requires well-organized intercultural universities that address these communities' specific needs. Such efforts will promote equity-driven research and foster cultural diversity (Dietz & Mateos, 2019; Gore et al., 2017). Given the relative novelty of research on inclusion in higher education, it is essential to analyze existing knowledge and ask: How is the process of inclusion in higher education progressing for students from ethnic communities at the National University Toribio Rodríguez de Mendoza of Amazonas in Peru?

2. Bibliographic review

2.1. Inclusive education

The political and social histories of countries often result in limitations to educational inclusion. Additionally, the neoliberal view of education as a tool for academic achievement and measurable outcomes fails to acknowledge the contributions of diverse cultures and the unique needs of students within educational institutions (Valdés et al., 2022). In this context, it is essential to understand inclusion from a broad perspective that permeates society and recognizes the student as a source of knowledge and a contributor to the educational institution and their peers (Salerno et al., 2018).

The theoretical foundation of inclusive education is shaped largely by a series of demands made by international organizations, starting in 1948 with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and continuing to the present day. The increasing awareness of social inequalities and the progressive establishment of human rights, especially the right to education, equal opportunities, and diversity, have led to the adoption and use of the term "inclusion" in modern society (Hassan et al., 2022). Inclusion extends beyond the educational context and must be integrated into all areas of life: schools, families, and social communities (Parrilla, 2021). Inclusion is fundamentally a social phenomenon, even more so than an educational one.

Over the past few decades, the convergence of various historical, philosophical, political, and social variables has presented new challenges for educational systems. In Peru, the increasing multiculturalism characterized by a mix of ethnic groups, cultures, and social orientations poses a significant challenge (Hassan et al., 2022). Peruvian society's cultural diversity is reflected in a complex social, economic, and political landscape. One of the main challenges for the Peruvian education system is to ensure that these differences coexist within the same space without becoming exclusionary factors. Inclusive education, therefore, calls for a transformation in educational paradigms, embracing diversity rather than uniformity (Fernández, 2017).

Inclusive education should also work to reduce the processes of social exclusion that implicitly affect students with socio-cultural disadvantages (Sharma & Subban, 2023). From an ethical and pedagogical perspective, inclusive education should view diversity as an opportunity rather than a problem (García-Domingo et al., 2019).

The responsibility for educational inclusion should not rest solely on educational institutions, as they are embedded within specific social, political, and economic contexts (De Vasconcellos et al., 2016). Communities need to participate in the inclusion process in harmony with schools (Chicon et al., 2015). However, it is often observed that both families and students are marginalized, remaining peripheral voices in the discourse around educational inclusion. Parrilla (2021) argues that excluding key actors from discussions on educational exclusion leads to biased, partial, and distorted knowledge of the issue at hand. This highlights the importance of listening to the voices of the Awajún and Wampís students, who represent the two largest ethnic communities in the region, in the context of higher education.

The concept of inclusive education emerged in the 1980s and 1990s as part of the international movement advocating for the rights of people with disabilities, influenced by other equality-focused movements (Bamsey et

al., 2023). Over time, inclusive education has evolved and now aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals, aiming for inclusive and equitable quality education to promote learning opportunities for all (UNESCO, 2015).

According to UNESCO (2009), inclusive education is a process that effectively addresses the diverse needs of children, youth, and adults, promoting greater participation in learning, culture, and community while reducing exclusion within educational settings. Governments are responsible for providing opportunities and removing barriers for vulnerable populations (Slee, 2018).

Several studies have explored the perspectives of Indigenous communities on inclusive education (Carvalho et al., 2019; Harman Canalle, 2018; Le et al., 2015; Morales & Calvo, 2022). These studies emphasize the importance of recognizing and valuing the views of Indigenous communities for fostering inclusive development (Duria et al., 2023). Inclusive education aims to engage all stakeholders—including local communities, marginalized groups, and educational institutions—to address the needs of all, including migrant communities and people with disabilities (Gigerl et al., 2022). Research into inclusive play environments underscores the need for innovative, sensory-rich, and accessible spaces that cater to diverse users and abilities (Dalpra, 2022). Overall, these studies highlight the importance of incorporating marginalized communities' perspectives to promote inclusivity and eliminate barriers (Munyoka, 2022; Vančová & Sibgatullina, 2022).

Research on the inclusion of native communities in Peru is limited (Cedillo, 2018; Felix, 2021). One study focused on social and cultural inclusion policies at universities in Ancash, Peru, underscoring the need for innovative approaches to address the sociocultural and sociolinguistic diversity of the region and the country (Julca et al., 2023). Another study analyzed social exclusion and the undervaluation of rural communities' development potential, advocating for continuing and adult education initiatives to enhance learning processes in vulnerable populations, such as rural areas in Peru (Paredes, 2022). Additionally, research on formalizing the collective rights of native communities highlighted the need for collaboration, coordination, and adequate budgeting to improve implementation (Monterroso et al., 2019). A study on inclusive teaching practices during the COVID-19 pandemic in Lima pointed out the challenges teachers face in promoting educational inclusion (Arellano et al., 2020). Lastly, a study examining technology transfer for rural electrification revealed that participatory and inclusive approaches are essential for promoting social inclusion (Harman, 2018).

2.2. Decolonization of Indigenous communities in higher education

For the most part, higher education institutions have adhered to Western paradigms of teaching, learning, and research (Maditsi & Bhuda, 2023). These paradigms, rooted in past colonization tactics used to control Indigenous peoples, continue to suppress the knowledge and perspectives of ethnic communities (Marker, 2019). The prevalence of Western pedagogies and worldviews has led some stakeholders to advocate for the decolonization and humanization of curricula within higher education institutions (Maditsi & Bhuda, 2023).

Decolonization poses a challenge to Western scientific rationality, as it seeks to embrace alternative and multiple frameworks of knowledge (Jansen, 2023). This includes the preservation and revitalization of Indigenous languages, the restoration and development of Indigenous cultures, the recognition of Indigenous groups, the restoration of Indigenous surnames, the affirmation of political participation rights, the establishment of Indigenous media, and the design of autonomous Indigenous governance structures (Galla et al., 2023).

Efforts to initiate decolonization in Indigenous education have involved governments working to redress colonial legacies by incorporating Indigenous perspectives into policy development. However, much remains to be done in terms of codifying best practices. It is also important to clarify that the preservation and revitalization of Indigenous languages, cultures, and identities should not be seen as scientifically irrational; rather, they are essential for fostering a more inclusive and diverse educational framework (Mintrom & O'Neill, 2023).

Decolonizing Indigenous communities in higher education is crucial for achieving equity and sustainability (Bargh, 2022; Knaus et al., 2022; Richardson, 2023). Indigenous knowledge has often been excluded from higher education institutions' pursuit of excellence and innovation (Tamtik, 2023). Including Indigenous epistemologies in theory, practice, and research is necessary to create non-colonizing spaces and move towards decolonization and indigenization in higher education (McCubbin et al., 2023). The presence of Indigenous faculty is vital for advancing decolonization efforts (Tachine & Hailu, 2023). Additionally, Indigenous student-led reform initiatives can catalyze systemic change in postsecondary education, challenging the colonial nature of universities and promoting decolonial reform (Kerr et al., 2022). The relationship between Indigenous worldviews and sustainability is significant, as Indigenous knowledge and traditions contribute greatly to sustainable practices (Higgs, 2023). These studies underscore the importance of decolonization in higher education to promote equity, inclusion, and the preservation of Indigenous knowledge and practices.

2.3. Ethnic Communities in Peru: Wampís and Awajún

Degregori (2019) points out that there is a subjective dimension in which a population perceives itself as an ethnic group, framing its actions in collective terms and competing for resources based on its circumstances. Ethnic groups can be seen as subgroups within the state framework—integral parts of a larger society, but distinguished by unique cultural traits.

Peru is a multicultural, multiethnic, and multilingual country (Medina & Mayca, 2006), where Indigenous peoples have maintained their distinct cultures, languages, legends, myths, and customs since ancient times. These groups adapt to changing contexts at their own pace (Murillo, 2023), transmitting their cultural richness from generation to generation. Indigenous populations are defined as those whose mother tongue is an Indigenous language, with Spanish as a secondary language. They have historically been marginalized by the country's formal education system, which has predominantly been conducted in Spanish. This issue is particularly pronounced in rural areas (Cabanillas Vela, 2022). Similar to other parts of Latin America, this situation has created significant disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations, resulting in higher illiteracy rates, lower educational attainment, and increased poverty (Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática, 2018).

In Peru, only a few universities serve the Indigenous student population, whether public or private. According to SUNEDU (2024), there are 92 universities in the country that hold licenses granted by the National Superintendence of Higher University Education, ensuring compliance with quality standards—41 public and 51 private. Of these, only four universities are considered intercultural, specifically designed to serve students from Indigenous communities (García, 2022).

These intercultural universities are strategically located in regions with a significant presence of Indigenous communities, such as Amazonas, Cusco, and Puno, to facilitate access and inclusion in higher education (García, 2022). However, there remains a gap in both the coverage and quality of educational opportunities for Indigenous students across the country.

According to the Ministerio de Cultura (2022), Peru is home to fifty-five Indigenous or original peoples (native communities), grouped into nineteen linguistic families, including Achuar, Aimara, Amahuaca, Arabela, Asháninka, Ashéninka, Awajún, Bora, Cashinahua, Chamicuro, Chapra, Chitonahua, Ese Eja, Harakbut, Ikitu, Iñapari, Iskonawa, Jaqaru, Jíbaro, Kakataibo, Kakinte, Kandozi, Kapanawa, Kichwa, Kukama Kukamiria, Madija, Maijuna, Marinahua, Mashco Piro, Mastanahua, Matsés, Matsigenka, Muniche, Murui-Muinani, Nahua, Nanti, Nomatsigenga, Ocaina, Omagua, Quechua, Resígaro, Secoya, Sharanahua, Shawi, Shipibo-Konibo, Shiwilu, Ticuna, Urarina, Uro, Vacacocha, Wampís, Yagua, Yaminahua, Yanesha, and Yine.

The Awajún ethnic community is part of the Jíbaro ethnolinguistic family and resides in the rainforest near the Marañón River (Burneo, 2018). This region features tropical rainforest terrain with high hills and rolling alluvial plains (Regan, 2007). The Awajún are the second largest Indigenous group in the Peruvian Amazon and primarily engage in agriculture, hunting, and fishing. According to the Official Database of Indigenous or Original Peoples (BDPI), there are 488 Indigenous localities, with 245 recognized as native communities. The 2017 National Census estimates the Awajún population at approximately 70,468 people.

The Wampís community also belongs to the Jíbaro family and is noted for its warrior lifestyle, particularly in defending their lands, and their deep connection to nature, evident in their political and organizational strategies (Gómez, 2018; Pérez & Delgado, 2019). Both the Awajún and Wampís are located in the Amazon region, specifically in the district of Río Santiago in the province of Condorcanqui, sharing similar geographic, climatic, and cultural characteristics (Calderón, 2013). These communities are the focus of this study due to their status as the largest Indigenous groups in Amazonas, Peru.

3. Method

3.1. Design

The approach used is qualitative with an interpretive character, as it seeks to understand the subjective experiences of individuals and their relationship with their environment (Balderas, 2013), aiming "to know and interpret what is observed from the meanings they give to the actions they perform" (Ramírez-Elías & Arbesú-García, 2019). This approach allows for a deeper exploration of the issue of inclusion and ensures a comprehensive study (Plancarte, 2010).

Given the nature of the research problem and objectives, a multiple case design was chosen, focusing on two ethnic communities (Awajún and Wampis) that share similar characteristics in the process of university inclusion. According to Stake (1995) and Yin (2018), this type of design allows for the examination of two or more cases to understand their similarities and differences, providing a broader view of the phenomenon under study.

This methodology was selected because the multiple case study approach facilitates a holistic understanding of the university inclusion process of these Indigenous students. Each ethnic group functions as a separate case, allowing for direct engagement with the phenomenon of interest, leading to interpretations closer to reality and insights into the personal experiences of participants (Arroyo Rodríguez et al., 2023; Chaves, 2016).

To collect data, semi-structured in-depth interviews were employed. This type of interview was chosen for its capacity to provide an extensive and detailed exploration of students' experiences and perceptions (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019), considering their cultural and linguistic differences compared to conventional university education. The instrument consisted of an open-ended list of questions, allowing the researcher to add further questions based on their judgment and knowledge as the interview progressed (Lankshear & Knobel, 2000).

The interviews were conducted by a sociologist who is part of the research team. They took place in a closed, private environment at the university and lasted approximately one and a half hours. All interviews were recorded with the informed consent of the participants and were subsequently transcribed and analyzed in detail.

The Universidad Nacional Toribio Rodríguez de Mendoza de Amazonas (UNTRM) was chosen as the study site due to its location in the Amazon region of Peru, an area with a significant presence of Indigenous communities. Specifically, the university is situated in the province of Chachapoyas, close to the province of Condorcanqui, which has one of the highest Indigenous populations in the region. As a public university, UNTRM provides greater opportunities for the inclusion of low-income students, who often come from the Indigenous populations of the area.

Fieldwork was conducted during the first semester of 2023. The semi-structured interviews were scheduled according to the availability of students from the Awajún and Wampis communities at UNTRM. All interviews were recorded in audio format, with each lasting approximately one and a half hours. Participants provided express consent after being informed of the research objectives, purposes, and scope.

Additionally, life stories from participants were collected. Two students shared their personal trajectories and experiences leading to their university education, which enriched their understanding of their inclusion processes.

3.2. Validity and Reliability

To ensure the validity and reliability of the study, content validation was implemented, where "experts in the topic and members of the stakeholders review the data collection instruments to assess their relevance" (Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza, 2018). Intercultural education experts and leaders from the ethnic communities reviewed the interview script to evaluate the appropriateness of the questions. A detailed record of data collected during fieldwork was maintained, as recommended by Yin (2018), to increase the study's reliability. Additionally, an intercoder reliability analysis was conducted to ensure consistency in data interpretation, following guidelines provided by Miles et al. (2014).

3.3. Participants

The target population consisted of students from the Awajún and Wampis ethnic communities. Participation was voluntary, and ethical protocols were strictly observed, ensuring the confidentiality of participants' data (Ojeda De López et al., 1997).

Immersion in the target population was facilitated with data provided by the Directorate of Admissions and Academic Records (DAYRA), which indicated that only 23 students from Indigenous communities were enrolled at the university.

Table 1: Participant data

Characteristic	Data
Total number of ethnic minority students	23
University participation in the communities	The university develops research and extension projects that address the needs and problems of these populations. In addition, it has a project for the creation of an academic headquarters in the Peruvian Amazon, where most of the native people are located, to facilitate access to higher education for students.
Most studied careers	Nursing and education
Previous academic training	The students come from rural schools in their communities, where they received education in their native languages (Awajún or Wampis) and Spanish as a second language. At the secondary level, their classes are in Spanish and their native language is practiced in their community.
Decision to study at university	Acquire knowledge and skills that will enable them to promote the sustainable development of their communities. Become professionals who can exercise leadership and representation of their communities.
Job expectations after university	Return to their communities to put into practice the knowledge acquired and contribute to the improvement of the quality of life of their people.

Note: This information was provided by the study participants.

A purposive or convenience sampling method was used, allowing for the arbitrary selection of sample units that met the desired characteristics for the research (Mejía, 2014). During participant selection, purposeful sampling was employed (Patton, 2015) to choose students whose experiences and perspectives represented the diversity within the total group of 23 students. We aimed to ensure that the interviewees came from different schools and grades and included both men and women to reflect gender diversity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, the availability of participants to engage in interviews was considered.

Given the exploratory nature of the study and resource constraints, interviewing five students allowed for an in-depth examination of their experiences and a more detailed analysis (Guest et al., 2006). It is important to note that the selected students were informed about the study's purpose and provided informed consent before participating (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). The sample consisted of five students: three Awajún students and two Wampis students. Each student was treated as a unique case of analysis, contributing distinct narratives of their experiences and the meanings they constructed during their university inclusion process.

The recorded interviews were transcribed and analyzed thoroughly and objectively to preserve every detail. The students were coded as follows: Awajún student number one (E.A.1), Awajún student number two (E.A.2), Awajún student number three (E.A.3), Wampis student number one (E.W.1), and Wampis student number two (E.W.2).

3.4. Analysis Strategy

The data obtained from the interviews were analyzed thematically, following the steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021), which involved a process of abstraction and progressive interpretation (Sabariego-Puig et al., 2014). The analysis steps included:

- Familiarization with the data: The researcher became familiar with the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts and listening to the interview recordings.
- Generation of codes: Codes were generated and reviewed by members of the research team to organize the information and eliminate irrelevant data.
- Construction of sub-themes: This step involved clarifying and reorganizing code similarities.
- Sub-theme review: Research team members reviewed sub-themes and cross-checked coded data to ensure inter-coder reliability.
- Theme definition and naming: Themes were defined and named as sub-themes were refined and developed.

This analysis was conducted using Atlas. ti V.22 software, which facilitated the separation and organization of coded information according to the themes emerging from the participants' narratives (Sabariego-Puig et al., 2014).

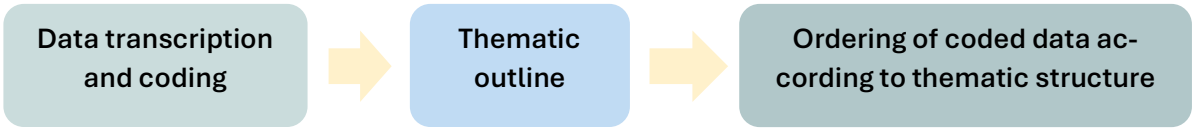

Figure 1: Analysis was conducted using Atlas. ti V.22 software

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are fundamental in any type of research. In this study, special emphasis was placed on obtaining informed consent from participants (Ojeda De López et al., 1997). At the start of each interview, participants were informed of their rights and the research purposes. Throughout the research process, efforts were made to protect the interests, welfare, and identities of the participants.

4. Results

The results of the present study were organized into three main themes: expectations of students from the Awajún and Wampis communities, the inclusion process, and the difficulties and facilitators of the inclusion process.

4.1. Expectations of Awajún and Wampis Students

From the interviews, it can be inferred that university students from ethnic minorities often choose professional careers that address the challenges faced by their communities. Fields such as health, environment, and education are particularly in demand. These students explicitly mentioned choosing careers such as education, nursing, and environmental engineering to support and address their community's needs. They expressed a strong desire to be agents of change in their communities to improve the quality of life and "protect their territory."

"I chose the career to understand my people much better, because I have seen that many of my people, when vaccination comes, for example, the mestizos come and say that we are going to vaccinate against smallpox and all kinds of diseases. They say they are witches; they are going to do us more harm, they are going to give us more diseases, they are not coming to cure us; in fact, they are coming to kill us. And that is what they say, and to change that, I, as a nurse, knowing these things and because I am Awajún too, tell them it is not that. It is so that you will be well, so that I can cure you and treat you, so that you can understand me." (E.A.3)

"I also see the health problems, don't I? Malnourished children or AIDS in our communities, and I would like to change that, don't I?" (E.W.2)

"Those who live further away say that the mestizos want to kill us to steal our minerals, so that they can take our territory; they believe that, and it is difficult to explain to them." (E.A.2)

The students expressed that after completing their university studies, they intend to strengthen their skills by working in areas outside their communities to gain the necessary experience before returning to contribute to their communities' development.

"Ah, well, first of all, when I finish university, maybe I will work mostly around here, but then I want to work with my community, with the needs they have as well, and work sustainably..." (E.W.2)

"I want to do everything I can to make myself equal in the courses, so that I don't stay here any longer and work, to get to know more about my villages and help them. For example, in Santa María de Nieva, further down, there are communities, annexes, that sometimes don't have a health center as well implemented as here, and sometimes they need machines and things. I mean, I would like to go there, win some funds or apply for something to support them." (E.A.1)

The students also believe that university authorities should focus on investigating issues affecting their communities, such as teenage pregnancy, the rise in sexually transmitted diseases, and machismo. They suggested that the university should offer courses to teach the Awajún and Wampis languages. According to them, this would help "mestizo students" gain a better understanding of their culture and enable teachers to interact more effectively with them.

"So, as you mentioned about languages, it would be good to include the Wampis language among the languages practiced here at the university's language center. Because in that way, I think we would preserve our culture, so that the population does not forget that the Wampis language also exists and that we practice it here in the region." (E.W.1)

4.2. Inclusion process

Students from the Awajún and Wampis ethnic communities reported feeling accepted at the university, noting that their classmates were curious about their experiences and customs, which allowed them to express their culture. They mentioned that during "cultural events," they could wear their traditional clothing and showcase their culture through dance.

"...here at the university, when there are presentations, we make presentations with typical clothes from there. Also, our classmates ask us some questions about our culture, and they are interested." (E.A.2)

They noted that expressing themselves in their native language felt more natural, especially when discussing technical or specialized topics.

"...at some point, without realizing it, I spoke in my language, and my classmates liked it. They also enjoy it when I talk to them about our customs and share how we speak. For me, it feels calm and nice." (E.A.1)

It is clear that for students from native communities, expressing themselves in their mother tongue is more natural, highlighting the linguistic challenges they face during their inclusion process at the university.

"Well, it would be good to include the Wampis language among the languages practiced here at the university in the language center. This way, I think we would keep our culture more active, before people forget that the Wampis language exists and that we practice it here in the region." (E.W.1)

This linguistic difficulty relates to the students' request for training centers in their native language to facilitate closer interaction with their peers.

Students also spoke of the empathy they received from some teachers. One teacher was mentioned as offering additional time and resources to help them improve academically through reinforcement workshops, supported by "mestizo students," or students who do not belong to ethnic communities and generally had better academic performance.

"Well, for my part, I have not felt rejection or discrimination, but rather, I am thankful for my classmates who have supported me and for a professor. I was taking an anatomy course that I didn't understand, and we asked him for extra time, which not everyone would do. I learned a lot there, and now in my second cycle of Anatomy II, I understand more." (E.A.1)

However, students pointed out that some teachers lacked the patience to re-explain subjects they did not understand. They noted that such teachers neglected their concerns and showed "indifference to their academic difficulties."

"...because some teachers are closed off. When you ask them questions, they don't respond or take the time to explain. They don't repeat themselves, and when we ask for help, they don't have the patience to explain." (E.A.1)

This reflects a situation in which academic learning is mediated by linguistic differences. The perspectives shared by the interviewees highlight the difficulties they have in understanding content in a second language and the challenges teachers face in connecting with them. This suggests a more complex process of bilingual socialization that extends beyond the research's objectives, involving not only the learning of the university's main language but also the pedagogical approaches guiding teachers' practices.

One Wampis student shared a particularly negative experience of discrimination from a teacher who ignored him in class:

"...I had a teacher who, when I raised my hand to participate, pretended not to see me. I felt like he looked at me angrily, as if he were upset with me, or he wouldn't pay attention. I felt invisible and asked if it was because I was Wampis." (E.W.2)

Despite this, no signs of mistreatment from peers were reported. On the contrary, the students noted that mestizo classmates often demonstrated camaraderie and supported them academically, especially when teachers failed to explain tasks they did not understand.

"...they treat us well and support me. When I don't understand an assignment, I ask them to teach and help me. Sometimes they understand it better than I do, even though they are mestizos." (E.A.3)

Although some interviewees mentioned supportive attitudes from classmates, there were also instances that could be interpreted as negative:

"...but once I gave a presentation on globalization, and I didn't have the ease to express myself like the mestizos. I noticed my classmates were laughing and talking, so I stopped the presentation and told them to stop making fun. I said if they were asked to express themselves in my language, they wouldn't find it so easy." (E.W.2)

While E.W.2 handled the situation effectively, it still points to a hostile environment. Although similar experiences were not reported by other interviewees, E.W.2's actions suggest that subtle and specific socialization strategies are at play in daily university life. Future studies should explore these everyday practices in more detail, considering identity and migration.

Participants also mentioned that they believe studying in a conventional university (i.e., one that does not include an intercultural component in its design) offers better academic development compared to their secondary school education. Most interviewees indicated that they were educated in schools with only peers from their own community, where the teacher was not from the community, and classes were not conducted in their native language. They noted that their interaction with mestizo classmates at university has influenced their thinking about their culture, making them more critical of some customs.

"At school, we only interacted with people from my own community; there were no mestizos, only at university. But our teachers were always mestizos, and the classes were in Spanish. More than anything, I learned many things at university, met new friends, and I am very grateful because it has allowed me to think differently about some things. One day, I would like to return to my village and use my knowledge." (E.W.2)

4.3. Difficulties and ease of the process

Students mentioned that their regular basic education was very deficient, stating that they were taught "very basic" things and consequently "suffered" when facing the academic challenges posed by the university.

"...back there, the education is low, and even though they teach us well, when you come here, it is very low, and that is quite shocking; but we still tried to catch up and understand the changes at the university." (E.A.1)

Another common difficulty they cited was the lack of economic resources to access higher education. They noted that they were aware that the educational opportunities they had were not available to those who "live farther away from the cities." Additionally, some students mentioned seeking financial support from their local authorities.

"...in my area, the lack of economy does not allow them to come here, and those who live further away cannot even think about it. Well, they cannot access advanced education, and maybe one or two might manage to access it..." (E.W.1)

"So, when I met the mayor, I asked him to support us financially to pay for my university academy." (E.W.2)

Some students mentioned that studying away from their home communities provided them with a sense of comfort, as it allowed them to distance themselves from family issues and concentrate more on their studies.

"Being further away from home helps me concentrate more and be more dedicated to my studies. The closer you live, you see the same people and the same problems, and you won't notice any difference in yourself. So, the further away you go, the more experience you gain in professional training, and when you return to your village, people will see you differently..." (E.W.1)

Of the five students interviewed, four had access to the Beca 18 program provided by the State—a scholarship available only to students who excel in secondary school and come from ethnic communities. It is noteworthy that these students obtained the scholarships because they ranked among the top in their schools despite the educational deficiencies in the Condorcanqui area. While Beca 18 is an important resource for accessing education, its coverage is limited, leaving many students without support.

"I got the scholarship. First, I went to my school after finishing my fifth year of secondary school. They awarded scholarships to those of us who were top-ranked. I took my scholarship, my first exam, and I got the scholarship." (E.A.3)

"This scholarship covers room, board, and university materials, but we can no longer enroll in the canteen because we already have government benefits." (E.A.1)

Regarding the use of the Spanish language, a slight difference was observed between Awajún and Wampis students, with the latter reporting more complications with the language when they started university. The students indicated that they would feel more comfortable expressing themselves in their mother tongue, as there are technical terms they do not fully understand.

"...the ease with which I learned Spanish was thanks to my mother. She enrolled me in a school where mestizos studied, and at first, it was difficult—I didn't understand what they were saying. Over time, I learned things I didn't know..." (E.A.2)

"When I arrived, I didn't have much fluency in Spanish. I could understand everything, but expressing myself, saying what I deeply felt, and speaking in public were very difficult for me, but little by little..." (E.W.2)

As seen, ethnic minority students are generally expected to "fit in" with mainstream higher education. There is currently no educational plan or project to encourage students, in general, to learn a native language.

"It would be nice if they taught native languages in college. That's something I've always thought might happen, so our peers would be more interested in our culture."

5. Discussion

The role of universities is not only to emphasize the acquisition of knowledge but also to focus on the ways of learning, the integration of diverse worldviews, and the mutual recognition of different types of knowledge. However, conventional Peruvian universities have yet to incorporate native languages into their training programs. Such an initiative could initiate dialogic communication that respects and values all forms of knowledge, not just those rooted in Western traditions. As highlighted in the literature, conventional learning in Latin America often excludes the culture and language of Indigenous students (Mato, 2020). This underlines the importance of the requests made by students from native communities, who stress the need to integrate their language into the training programs so that non-Indigenous students can gain a closer understanding of their culture (Kulago & Jaime, 2022). It is essential to recognize that knowledge within these universities is not yet shared equitably; it continues to be the subject of epistemological power struggles dominated by the State, elites, power groups, and their institutions. In this context, the interest and need of ethnic minority students to learn about other cultures contrast sharply with the institutional disinterest in establishing frameworks for learning about and engaging with native cultures.

A significant challenge faced by students from the Jíbaro family native communities in the Peruvian Amazon is their economic situation. The percentage of students who manage to access university education is minimal compared to those who cannot. Interviewed students noted that individuals from more remote areas "cannot even think" about attending university. Government support through the Beca 18 scholarship program is limited and insufficient, as it only benefits those who are already in relatively less excluded positions.

Interestingly, Wampis and Awajún students exhibit a strong desire to learn and engage with new realities and perspectives, demonstrating an openness that goes beyond strict adherence to their cultural traditions. This finding aligns with Méndez et al. (2019), who noted that Indigenous students do not exclusively cling to their cultural practices and often participate in social activities, such as artistic associations and sports clubs. However, Castillo (2020) reported that Ngäbe and Buglé Indigenous students showed less cultural rootedness and merely identified with their heritage. The current study presents a different view, showing that students from native communities maintain a strong concern for their communities even before entering university. This is reflected in their choice of careers, often in fields like health, education, and the environment. When asked about their motivations, students emphasized their desire to improve the living conditions of their communities, demonstrating awareness of issues such as high illiteracy rates, limited access to education, widespread sexually transmitted diseases, and high rates of malnutrition. Moreover, they aspire to become important conduits for dialogue upon completing their university education.

There is a need for studies investigating the "beliefs" that Indigenous communities hold about those outside their group. For instance, students noted that "mestizos want to kill them to steal their minerals and riches" (E.W.2) or that education provided by "mestizos" could brainwash their children and distance them from their community (E.W.2). What underlies these beliefs? What is the origin of such perceptions about those perceived as "other"? Further research is urgently needed to explore the implications of these beliefs for Indigenous communities and the broader national context.

Although one interviewee described an experience marked by mockery of their way of speaking, most Indigenous students highlighted the support and solidarity they received from their mestizo peers. This support, coupled with the understanding and feedback from some teachers who promote intercultural spaces, is highly valued by students from native communities. While the inclusion process is not uniform, these supportive actions help lay the groundwork for an inclusive environment that welcomes the entire university community (Moliner, 2013).

Such efforts foster a sense of community, with student collaboration contributing to success despite cultural differences. These findings are supported by Hanne (2017), who demonstrated that socio-academic accompaniment programs and emotional support during the academic journey are successful in promoting inclusion. Therefore, the role of teachers in facilitating inclusion through empathy and collaborative practices is crucial. Additionally, recognizing diversity as an asset enhances comprehensive learning (Moliner, 2013).

Students also expressed that they feel more comfortable communicating in their mother tongue, which can hinder their academic performance, particularly for Wampis students. This underscores the need for studies that investigate differences in language acquisition among students from the same linguistic family. Awajún and Wampis students' desire for a training center dedicated to their native languages at the university further emphasizes the need for closer interaction and understanding among peers.

University education, by nature, embodies universality and challenges class-based segregation (Núñez & Rivadeneira, 2021). Nevertheless, the rate of students who fail to access or successfully complete university education remains high. The interviewees pointed out that many of their peers and family members were unable to attend university. For the minority who do enter higher education, economic, social, and cultural challenges persist, complicating their academic journey. Despite these hurdles, according to Ossola (2020), pursuing higher education represents a life project for Indigenous youth—a path toward self-improvement, a means to represent their community, and a step toward a better future. This educational journey becomes an act of resistance and transformation, where students strive to redefine their relationship with knowledge by incorporating their cultural and social realities into a system that has historically marginalized their voices.

6. Conclusions, limitations, and Future Research

Peru's rich cultural diversity is reflected in its university student body, which includes students from a variety of communities and regions. These students face unique cultural, social, and economic challenges during their pursuit of higher education.

Despite this diversity, conventional Peruvian universities have yet to incorporate native languages into their curricula. This integration would be a crucial step toward fostering meaningful communication that values and respects diverse knowledge systems, extending beyond those rooted in Western traditions. To make this shift feasible, universities could consider launching pilot programs, collaborating with Indigenous leaders, and providing language training for faculty to promote cultural inclusivity.

The proportion of students who successfully access university education remains low, highlighting significant disparities in educational opportunities. Government initiatives, such as the Beca 18 scholarship, provide some support, but their reach is limited and often benefits only those already less marginalized. Expanding and enhancing such programs is essential to bridge this gap and support more students from Indigenous and economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Students from native communities show a deep commitment to improving their communities, which is evident in their choice of careers focused on health, education, and the environment. These fields reflect their determination to address pressing issues such as high illiteracy rates, limited access to education, malnutrition, and health challenges within their communities.

A positive aspect is the sense of support and solidarity that Indigenous students find among their non-Indigenous peers. This support, when coupled with empathetic and culturally aware teaching, fosters an inclusive environment that values intercultural learning and mutual respect. Universities should leverage this dynamic by promoting peer mentorship programs and teacher training that emphasizes empathy and cultural understanding, which can significantly enhance the educational experience for all students.

Future research should investigate the beliefs and perceptions that Indigenous students hold about "mestizos" and their impact on university life. Understanding the origins of these beliefs and their potential implications can offer insights that contribute to bridging cultural divides and fostering more harmonious relationships in academic and broader social contexts.

This study faced limitations related to language barriers and the expression styles of students from the Awajún and Wampis communities. For future research, it is recommended that interviewers be fluent in these native languages to facilitate more in-depth and authentic data collection. Additionally, studies should explore the long-term impacts of university education on Indigenous communities and examine successful models from other countries where native languages and cultural practices have been integrated into higher education curricula.

In conclusion, addressing the challenges faced by Indigenous students in higher education requires a multifaceted approach. Universities should not only implement inclusive language and cultural programs but also strengthen support systems and policies that promote access and equity. By doing so, higher education can become a platform for cultural exchange, community development, and empowerment for all students.

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About the Author(s)

River Chávez Santos, Administrator, with a Postdoctorate in Ethics and Social Responsibility and Human Rights, Doctor in Educational Administration, and Master in Educational Sciences with a mention in research and Teaching. He is a full-time professor at the Faculty of Education and Communication Sciences of the Universidad Nacional Toribio Rodríguez de Mendoza de Amazonas. With a line of research in education, intercultural education, and administration.

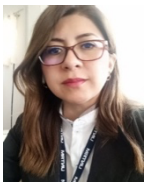
Yuri Reina Marin, an Industrial Engineer, with a Master's Degree in Supply Chain Management, graduated from Universidad Federico Villareal. Full-time associate professor at the Universidad Nacional Toribio Rodríguez de Mendoza de Amazonas, with more than 11 years of experience in higher education, in universities such as ESAN and the Universidad Nacional de Cajamarca. With lines of research in marketing, logistics, quality systems, and education.

Angelica María Carrasco Rituay is a graduate of Business Administration from the Universidad Nacional Toribio Rodríguez de Mendoza de Amazonas, with work experience in public investment projects and research. With lines of research in marketing, logistics, quality systems, and education.

Einstein Sánchez Bardales, Degree in Tourism and Administration from the Universidad Nacional Toribio Rodríguez de Mendoza de Amazonas, with work experience in academic quality in universities, accreditation processes, licensing, investment project management, and market research. With lines of research in education, tourism, quality processes systems, and marketing.

Jherali Alondra Oviedo Rabanal has a Master's degree in sociology from the University of Barcelona and a Bachelor's degree in sociology from the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos. She has published scientific articles in national and international journals and has received the 2019 research award granted by the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos. Currently, she is a university professor and researcher at the Universidad Nacional Toribio Rodríguez de Mendoza and coordinates the Center for Interdisciplinary Research on Culture and Society "CEIIN-CS". Her interests are focused on gender studies, sociology of religion and interculturality.

Rosas Carranza Guevara, Certified Public Accountant, Lawyer and Graduate in Education. With a PhD in Public Management and Governance, a Master in Constitutional and Administrative Law. Master in Public Management and Master in Educational Sciences with a Major in Higher Teaching and Educational Research. He is a full-time Professor at the Faculty of Economic and Administrative Sciences of the Toribio Rodríguez de Mendoza National University of Amazonas. With a line of research in education, accounting, law and administration.



Ytmar Tatiana Chávez Santos is a Business Administrator, Master in Business Management and PhD Candidate in Sciences for Sustainable Development with a specialization in Natural Resources and Environmental Management. Currently, she is a Specialist in Pre-Incubation and Business Incubation at the National University Toribio Rodriguez de Mendoza of Amazonas, where she leads initiatives aimed at promoting entrepreneurship and business innovation in the region. With a line of research in education and training for sustainable entrepreneurship, entrepreneurship and sustainability and management.