


## THE WORLD'S FIRST UNIVERSITY OF INDIGENOUS MATURITY: AN INNOVATIVE INITIATIVE IN THE AMAZON

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### ABSTRACT

Education is a fundamental right and an essential tool for personal, social and cultural development. In Brazil, educational programs seek to serve social groups, such as indigenous populations. In this context, the University of Maturity, of the Federal University of Tocantins, stands out with the creation of the first University of Indigenous Maturity in the world, aimed at the elderly of the indigenous population of the Amazon. The objective of this article is to present the creation and impacts of the University of Indigenous Maturity in Tocantínia, Tocantins, addressing its contribution to the social and educational inclusion of indigenous elders and the preservation of traditional knowledge through intergenerational educational programs. The research adopts a bibliographic approach, reviewing literature, consulting articles, government documents and university extension projects. Secondary data and reports about the University of Maturity and its extension aimed at indigenous populations were also analyzed. The results indicate that the University of Maturity has expanded its actions to include the indigenous population, becoming a pioneer in Brazil and in the world. The conclusions point out that the creation of the University of Indigenous Maturity in the Amazon represents a milestone in international education, promoting the social inclusion of a historically marginalized group.

**Keywords:** Indigenous education. Education in the Amazon. Traditional Knowledge. Lifelong education.

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## INTRODUCTION

Education is a fundamental right and an essential means to promote the personal, social and cultural development of individuals (Freire, 1996). In Brazil, a multicultural country, it is essential that educational programs are adapted to the needs of different social groups, including indigenous populations and the elderly. In a context of population aging and the need for social inclusion, the University of Maturity, of the Federal University of Tocantins (UMA/UFT), in the Amazon, stands out with the creation of the first University of Indigenous Maturity in the world. An innovative project that aims to offer specific educational opportunities for the elderly of the Amazonian indigenous population.

This article aims to present the creation and impacts of the first University of Indigenous Maturity in the world, located in the city of Tocantínia, a municipality in the State of Tocantins, a member state of the Brazilian legal Amazon. The focus is to discuss how this initiative contributes to the social and educational inclusion of indigenous elderly people and to reinforce the importance of intergenerational educational programs for the preservation of indigenous knowledge.

The methodology of this study is based on a bibliographic research, with a literature review related to the education of elders, indigenous education and educational inclusion policies. Sources such as academic articles, national and international government documents and university extension projects were consulted to support the discussion. In addition, the research includes the analysis of secondary data and reports on the University of Maturity, focusing on its extension aimed at indigenous populations.

The results indicate that the University of Maturity, an extension program of the Federal University of Tocantins, initially created to serve elderly people from the general population, expanded its actions for the inclusion of the indigenous population, and became a pioneer in Brazil and in the world. The creation of this extension in the indigenous communities of the Amazon was the result of a series of dialogues between indigenous leaders, the state government and the Federal University of Tocantins. The main objective is to ensure that indigenous elders have access to a democratic lifelong education (Gadotti, 2016) (Libâneo, 1990) that respects and values their cultural traditions, while offering new learning opportunities (Ciavatta, 2005).

In this way, the work shares phenomenological perceptions that involve the universe of the creation of the first University of Indigenous Maturity in the Amazon, an act that represents a milestone in international education, by providing access to university for the elderly. It involves an in-depth analysis of how this initiative not only promotes the social



inclusion of a historically marginalized group, but also strengthens formative itineraries of intercultural and intergenerational dialogue (Brito et al, 2024).

## METHODOLOGY

The bibliographic research seeks to theoretically support academic studies that involve the keywords, to disseminate productions that achieve the construction of knowledge based on reliable scientific sources. It was developed based on structured steps that range from the selection of databases to the critical analysis of sources. The main steps used in the bibliographic research in national and international databases are described below.

The first moment involved the clear delimitation of the research theme and the formulation of guiding questions (Minayo, 2008). In the case of this study, the research problem was related to the analysis of educational initiatives aimed at indigenous elderly populations, focusing on the performance of universities in Brazil and in the world. The main objectives were to identify similar experiences and theoretically support the analysis of the impact of this institution.

In this way, following phenomenological perceptions and experiences of the authors (Merleau-Ponty, 2018), the national and international databases relevant to the topic in question were selected (Marconi and Lakatos, 2003). The main databases used include, in the national databases: a) SciELO (Scientific Electronic Library Online), one of the main sources for articles in Portuguese and Spanish in the areas of social sciences, education and health; b) CAPES (Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel), in its Journal Portal that offers access to a wide range of Brazilian academic publications; and c) Google Scholar, a resource widely used for broad search of articles and theses in Portuguese.

Among the international databases reached, the following stand out: a) ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), specialized in articles and documents related to education; b) PubMed, focused on articles in the health area, especially relevant to the theme of aging; and c) Scopus and Web of Science, in their multidisciplinary databases that bring together peer-reviewed scientific articles, essential to search for works of international relevance.

It is worth clarifying that the keywords and search strategies were intentional (Merleau-Ponty, 2018), and involved translation in an appropriate way to ensure the retrieval of relevant results (Minayo, 2008). On the other hand, combinations of terms in Portuguese, English and Spanish were used, in order to contemplate both national and



international literature. Among these terms are: education of older people, intergenerational teaching, indigenous maturity, indigenous elderly education, intergenerational learning, aging populations, University for the Third Age, University of Maturity, inclusive education for indigenous people, educación de personas mayores, enseñanza intergeneracional, madurez indígena, envejecimiento poblacional.

Search strategies involved the use of Boolean operators (AND, OR) to refine results and exclude irrelevant content (Marconi and Lakatos, 2003). Thus, the article selection criteria establishes a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure that only relevant sources are analyzed. The inclusion criteria involve articles and documents published in the last 10 years, in Portuguese, English or Spanish, which dealt with the education of the elderly, indigenous populations or intergenerational educational practices. And exclusion studies that did not directly address the proposed theme, publications outside the cut-off period or without peer review, and articles that were not available in full text.

During the content analysis (Bardin, 2011) exploratory reading was carried out, that is, a first quick reading of the abstracts and introductions to verify the relevance of the material. This was followed by an analytical reading, in which the selected articles were read in full, with emphasis on the analysis of the objectives, methodology, results and discussions. This stage included the organization of the data into thematic categories to facilitate the synthesis of the contents.

In the end, the data were organized and categorized (Bardin, 2011) according to the main themes identified in the critical reading, to facilitate the management of the bibliography. This stage relied on tools such as Mendeley and Zotero, which help in the organization of references and the automatic creation of citations.

The last stage of the bibliographic research involved the synthesis of the information obtained, in which the findings of the literature were related to the theme of the University of Indigenous Maturity. In addition, a comparative analysis between national and international experiences highlights the uniqueness of a University for the elderly and how this innovation becomes a reference for good practices and lessons learned, while building a solid theoretical framework for the analysis of the challenges and potentialities of this educational initiative within the scope of the communities of the Amazon.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

By conducting a bibliographic analysis on indigenous universities in Brazil and in other countries, the results reveal that, although these institutions are consolidating themselves as important spaces for the educational inclusion of indigenous populations,



they still focus mostly on the training of young people, leaving out the elderly population, which plays a central role in the preservation of cultures and traditions. However, there is a growing international appreciation of the knowledge generated by indigenous peoples, both before and after colonization, and international examples can inspire new initiatives in Brazil.

In Brazil, several universities have offered courses aimed at the training of indigenous people, however, there is a focus on valuing cultural traditions and training these students to act as community leaders, teachers or health agents. However, as highlighted by Evaristo (2006), the creation of indigenous universities is still a novelty in the country. Initiatives such as the Indigenous Intercultural Degree, present in federal universities through the National Program for the Training of Basic Education Teachers (Parfor), aim to train indigenous teachers and strengthen bilingual teaching in the communities, but these actions have young adults as their main target audience.

Parfor Equity, for example, aims to:

the training of teachers in indigenous teaching degrees and pedagogies. It is an action of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES), conceived together with Secadi/MEC, and is intended to comply with strategy 15.5 of the National Education Plan - PNE, Law No. 13,005, of June 25, 2014. It is in line with the National Curriculum Guidelines for Indigenous School Education in Basic Education - Resolution CNE/CEB No. 5, of June 22, 2012 and with the National Curriculum Guidelines for the Training of Indigenous Teachers in Higher Education and High School courses - Resolution CNE/CEB No. 1, OF JANUARY 7, 2015. (Brazil, 2023)

It is noted that Parfor Equity, guided by the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (Capes), made it possible for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to propose courses in Indigenous Intercultural Pedagogy and Indigenous Intercultural Licentiate, and the approval of 39 specific courses was found in the research, which led to the creation of 2,412 new enrollments in Higher Education Institutions offering the courses in 2024.

Even with this recent advance, it is worth noting that Evaristo (2014) points out that, although Brazil is just beginning to experiment with this university model, Latin American countries, such as Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Mexico, are already advanced in promoting indigenous universities that value traditional knowledge in its various forms. These institutions aim not only at the social and academic inclusion of indigenous peoples, but also at the preservation and transmission of ancestral knowledge.

On the American continent, the research pointed out that countries such as Bolivia, Nicaragua, Mexico and even the United States have already established indigenous universities that go beyond the training of young people, promoting the recognition of



indigenous knowledge as an integral part of higher education. According to Evaristo (2014), Bolivia is a notable example, with five indigenous universities and 22 courses aimed at training young people and strengthening culture. Nicaragua has two universities with 10 majors, while Mexico is home to eight indigenous universities and 49 majors, revealing a robust and well-established educational infrastructure. Even in the United States, which has historically had a troubled relationship with its indigenous populations, there are two indigenous universities that seek to promote higher education among native communities.

These international examples demonstrate the success of an educational policy that values indigenous knowledge at various levels and areas of training, something that Brazil is still beginning to implement (Brasil, 2024). In addition, these universities have as one of their goals the preservation of traditional knowledge, facilitating the dialogue between academic knowledge and ancestral knowledge, something essential for the identity of indigenous peoples.

In addition to indigenous universities in the American continent and youth-oriented courses in Brazil, it is also possible to find study programs focused on indigenous peoples in other parts of the world. Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand offers an MA in Indigenous Studies, which places Māori and Pacific cultures and histories in a global context by analysing their colonial experiences (VUW, 2024). In Australia, Southern Cross University offers a Bachelor of Indigenous Knowledge, which explores the histories, knowledge systems, health, well-being, and ways of life of Indigenous peoples (SCU, 2024). In addition, the Australian Catholic University has an Indigenous research liaison officer, in an Aboriginal fishing community, bringing their experiences to the academic setting (UCA, 2024). These international examples show the growing interest in valuing and preserving the knowledge and histories of indigenous peoples in different educational contexts.

The research pointed out that, although international indigenous universities have promoted significant progress in the education of indigenous youth, the analysis reveals that most of these institutions still focus on programs aimed exclusively at youth, with little or no attention to the elderly population. In Brazil, this reality is even more evident, since indigenous universities are in the initial phase of development and there are no records of initiatives aimed specifically at indigenous elders, apart from the University of Maturity, of the Federal University of Tocantins (UMA/UFT).

This gap reflects a broader educational challenge: the aging of indigenous populations and the need to include older people in formal educational processes (Oliveira et al, 2023). Thus, indigenous elders, often considered guardians of traditional knowledge,



have not been contemplated by these educational institutions, which compromises the preservation of ancestral knowledge and the strengthening of indigenous cultural identities (Santana et al, 2023).

The bibliographic results related to the University of Indigenous Maturity (UMA/UFT), located in Tocantínia, Amazonia, reveal an innovative approach to the education of indigenous elders. The research indicates that the UMA/UFT was created with the objective of promoting inclusion, strengthening cultural identity and the transmission of ancestral knowledge, meeting the specificities and needs of the elderly indigenous population.

UMA/UFT adopts an intergenerational educational model, allowing indigenous elders to share their ancestral experiences and knowledge with younger people. This fosters an environment of knowledge exchange, where traditional and academic practices meet. It has a curriculum adapted to respect the ways of learning of older people, prioritizing methodologies that value orality, practice and life experience. Classes include topics such as literacy, health, rights, and traditional knowledge, such as handicrafts, agricultural practices, and mother tongue.

Research that points to the training of educators, teachers and cultural mediators, many of whom are indigenous, as a fundamental part of the functioning of UMA/UFT stands out. These professionals are trained to meet the specific demands of indigenous older people, respecting their learning times and modes (Brito et al., 2023). In other words, inclusion and cultural appreciation can be perceived when the university respects indigenous traditions, in pedagogical approaches that encourage the empowerment of older people, recognizing them as active agents in education, rather than mere recipients of knowledge.

In this way, the analysis also highlights the social and cultural results, considering that the UMA/UFT has a significant impact on the lives of indigenous elders, by strengthening cultural identity and promoting traditional knowledge. While participants report an increase in self-esteem and a sense of belonging, as well as a greater connection with their cultural roots (Oliveira et al., 2023; Santana et al., 2023).

When comparing UMA/UFT with other initiatives of indigenous universities in the world, it is observed that, while the former focus on the training of young people, UMA/UFT stands out for its innovative proposal to include the elderly population. This differential is crucial for strengthening intergenerationality and for reflections that contemplate traditional knowledge, areas often neglected in some higher education institutions.

The results also demonstrate that, in order to seek solutions that can include both young and elderly people in educational processes, there are extension projects and



programs that welcome the elderly in university spaces. Experiences achieved in all the countries mentioned so far, with emphasis on Bolivia. However, in a specific approach and concern for elderly people, naming them as academics, only the UMA/UFT was found, in the city of Tocantína, a municipality in the State of Tocantins that is part of the Brazilian legal Amazon. The UMA/UFT becomes, therefore, a space that provides opportunities for indigenous elders to learn throughout their lives (Gadotti, 2016) with university practices and manages to effectively integrate traditional indigenous and academic knowledge.

Such notes culminated in the perception that the University of Indigenous Maturity, of the UMA/UFT, in Brazil, is the first in the world specifically focused on the education of indigenous elders, with the aim of promoting intergenerationality and the transmission of ancestral knowledge (Brito et al, 2021). By listening to experiences from other countries, Brazil would have the opportunity to expand its indigenous educational policies to include all age groups, respecting and valuing the different modes of knowledge of indigenous peoples.

While the current focus of indigenous universities, both in Brazil and in other countries, is directed at young people, international examples show that there is significant room to expand these programs, including older people. The creation of a University of Indigenous Maturity, as seen in the Amazon, can be an innovative initiative, capable of filling the gap in the care of indigenous elders. After all, UMA/UFT manages to promote intergenerational dialogue, where the elders share their traditional knowledge and the younger ones learn, strengthening indigenous cultural identities (Oliveira et al, 2023).

One of the great differentials of the UMA/UFT Indigenous initiative is the intergenerational and intercultural approach. In addition to offering classes focused on literacy, health, and rights, the program's indigenous centers promote activities that involve the transmission of traditional knowledge, such as handicrafts, agricultural practices, and the mother tongue (Santana et al, 2023). Actions that Gadotti (2016) considers fundamental for the preservation of culture and the strengthening of the identity of students at all ages, and, in this context, with the elderly, from the perspective that many of whom did not have access to formal education in their youth (Ciavatta, 2005).

It is found in the material analyzed that the University of Indigenous Maturity also stands out for its inclusive pedagogical practices (Oliveira et al, 2023). In which, teachers and cultural mediators, many of them indigenous, are trained to deal with the specific challenges of this public, respecting the times and ways of learning of older people (Brito et al, 2023). In other words, the institution adopts a pedagogy that values orality and practice, in addition to creating an environment of respect and welcoming.





Another relevant impact is the promotion of the protagonism of indigenous elders, who have come to be recognized not only as holders of traditional knowledge, but as active agents in the construction of new ways of educating (Brito et al, 2021 and 2023; Santana et al, 2023; and Oliveira et al, 2023). Thus, the educational experience with the elderly, young university students and other subjects reached becomes a space for exchange and empowerment, strengthening ties between different generations and communities.

In this regard, the production organized by Osório et al (2022), reveals how UMA/UFT manages to value indigenous traditions and provide new learning opportunities for older people. It is clear that the university is able to fulfill its social mission by contributing significantly to cultural preservation and to the promotion of a more inclusive and diverse education. While the experience of Tocantínia can serve as an inspiration for other regions of Brazil, America and the World, where indigenous populations are aging and need specific educational policies that respect their cultural particularities.

Finally, the analysis of the results reveals that, although indigenous universities in Brazil are still in their early stages, international experience demonstrates that these institutions can be great allies in valuing and preserving indigenous knowledge. However, there is a significant gap with regard to the inclusion of the ancestral knowledge of indigenous elders in these educational spaces. The UMA/UFT proposal can bring important contributions to the creation of more spaces such as the University of Indigenous Maturity, which offer opportunities for learning and valuing traditional knowledge in an intergenerational dialogue.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The final considerations of this research point to the urgent need to expand indigenous universities in Brazil, including initiatives aimed at the elderly population. Although indigenous universities in the country and in other countries have achieved important progress in the educational inclusion of indigenous youth, the predominant focus still falls on this age group.

The innovative experience of the University of Indigenous Maturity (UMA/UFT), located in Tocantínia, Tocantins, Amazonia, stands out as the first institution in Brazil – and in the world – dedicated to the formal education of indigenous older people. By promoting intergenerational dialogue and integrating traditional, ancestral, and academic knowledge, UMA/UFT establishes a milestone in the inclusion and appreciation of older people within the indigenous educational context.



This initiative brings to light the protagonism of indigenous elders, recognizing them as holders and transmitters of ancestral knowledge, while providing new learning opportunities. The bibliographic research showed that, while other countries in the world advance in their indigenous university systems, these still focus predominantly on the training of young people. At the same time, the creation of universities that contemplate the elderly population, such as UMA/UFT, can contribute to the preservation and scientific reflection with traditional, ancestral knowledge, but also promote the construction of an inclusive intercultural and intergenerational education.

Therefore, the lessons brought by UMA/UFT can serve as a model to expand the offer of indigenous universities in Brazil and in other countries, strengthening educational policies that integrate people of all ages, especially those who, historically, have been left out of formal educational processes. Thus, Brazil has the opportunity to lead a global movement in favor of indigenous education that values ancestral, traditional knowledge placed by elders of older generations, ensuring the continuity and preservation of indigenous cultures in all their diversity.



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