

Trajectories, epistemic tensions and retention challenges of Indigenous university students: A Colombian case mixed-analysis

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In Colombia, only 6% of Indigenous youth access higher education despite legal protections, facing persistent socio-economic exclusion and statistical invisibility within universities. This mixed-methods study investigates the experience of Indigenous students at Universidad Antonio Nariño (UAN), Colombia, combining longitudinal enrolment data with interviews from 37 students, faculty and staff. Despite growing Indigenous youth enrolment amid declining non-Indigenous participation, 40% drop out within the first three years (24% in the first year). Epistemic frictions between Indigenous and Western knowledge systems emerge, with Health/Social Sciences retaining students better than Engineering/others. Women, comprising 59% of UAN's Indigenous youth, demonstrate greater persistence despite intersectional oppressions of sex/gender, class, race/ethnicity and sexuality. Specific strategies include first-year retention programs leveraging communal responsibility and curricular integration of Indigenous epistemologies into culturally resonant fields. Far from special treatment, this constitutes structural redress for historical exclusion, yielding graduates who bridge community needs with professional competencies. Future research should track longitudinal graduation rates across Colombian universities.

Keywords: Indigenous peoples, higher education, university, decoloniality, decolonial praxis, mixed-methods research

Introduction

In contemporary Colombia, Indigenous communities continue to face significant challenges in socio-economic, political and educational spheres. Despite the existence of a legal framework that recognises and seeks to protect the collective and cultural rights of these communities, discriminatory practices and persistent limitations in access to basic services hinder their full development and participation in Colombian society (Guerra-Bonet et al., 2024; National Indigenous Organization of Colombia [ONIC in Spanish], 2022a).

In line with data from the University Observatory in Colombia (2025), only six out of every 100 Indigenous individuals enter higher education, highlighting that the gap in access and persistence remains a national challenge (Suárez, 2017). In addition, the statistical invisibility of students from Indigenous communities within universities hinders efforts to carry out comprehensive analyses and to develop relevant strategies to address this gap (Bada-Laura, 2020; Fagetti et al., 2024).

According to Suárez (2017), Latin America has experienced growing democratisation of higher education, expanding access for historically excluded groups. However, the author notes that the continent “continues to be one of the most unequal regions in the world ... The data reveal that economic conditions, gender differences, ethnic background, and cultural factors persist and act as barriers” (p. 67). Recent scholarship confirms these enduring inequalities, particularly for Indigenous students through Brazil’s affirmative action quotas (Windle, 2023) and persistent access challenges for Mapuche youth in Chile (Silva et al., 2023; Tapia-Parada, 2023).

Within this context, the present study set out to analyse the case of Indigenous students at the Universidad Antonio Nariño (UAN) in Colombia, guided by the following research question: What are the trajectories, tensions and challenges faced by Indigenous students at UAN in their professional training processes? This analysis contributes to innovation and transformation processes within universities in the Global South by offering insights that strengthen dialogue, integration, and the recognition of ethnic and cultural diversity in the construction of pedagogical, epistemic, and scientific projects within these institutions.

To achieve this objective, the text first presents UAN as the specific context of the research, followed by a description of the interpretive perspective, in which we outline our analytical framework and positionality. Next, we describe the study’s methodological approach, based on a mixed-methods design. Finally, we present an analysis of the study’s main findings and conclusions aimed at strengthening the educational and academic processes of Indigenous students in universities across the Global South.

Research context: Universidad Antonio Nariño

UAN is a private Colombian higher education institution accredited for high quality, founded in 1976 with four initial academic programs and its first campus in southern Bogotá (UAN, 2005). Since then, UAN has significantly expanded, establishing a national presence through multiple campuses and 17 faculties. It now offers over 80 undergraduate, graduate and continuing education programs in diverse modalities: in-person, online and distance learning. Over the past decade, student enrolment has consistently ranged between 13,000 and 16,000 students (UAN, 2025).

A core pillar of UAN’s strategic direction involves creating mechanisms to foster equal opportunities, democratise knowledge, promote educational leadership, and identify pathways for national development (UAN, 2005). In line with this commitment, UAN established the *Etnias 0150* agreement in 2015 with ONIC and the Colombian Institute of Educational Credit and Technical Studies Abroad (ICETEX in Spanish). This initiative was designed to cover tuition and living expenses for Indigenous Colombian youth seeking access to higher education, supporting both enrolment and persistence (ONIC, 2022b).

In 2023, UAN intensified its focus on researching the educational experiences of Indigenous students to strengthen academic processes and institutional inclusivity. This effort led to the 2024 launch of the research project *Toward an Intercultural Higher Education: Strengthening the Educational Experience of Indigenous Communities at UAN*. The project seeks to identify barriers to these students’ academic trajectories and propose targeted actions for retention and success. The present study originates from this initiative, contributing scientifically grounded insights to refine institutional, administrative and curricular decision-making for Indigenous student support at UAN.

Interpretive perspective: Positionality and analytical framework

Authors' positionality

We are two Colombian women, aged 37 and 47, shaped by the country's profound *mestizaje* – a political category that transcends “harmonious hybridisation” between Western and non-Western ontologies to resist the concealment of ethnical diversity and reaffirm ancestral roots within the inhabited territory. Through the *ch'ixi* (a greyish hue formed by black and white specks that don't blend together; they live side-by-side in a state of permanent friction) lens, we recognise this persistent tension and expose the links, frictions and structural inequalities that define our cultural and political identities (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2018, pp. 37–110).

We carry out our professional and personal lives in the capital of a Latin American state that continues to struggle to sustain a national project amid deep-rooted inequality, persistent violence and ongoing armed conflict. Both of us are professors who believe in the social value of education and are committed to the recognition and empowerment of marginalised and resilient minorities in Colombia and Latin America. Our vocation is increasingly marked by the precariousness of labour rights and the growing uncertainty caused by the lack of opportunities for professional development. We have found in our work with Indigenous peoples an opportunity to better understand our present history and a means to contribute to closing the social, economic and cultural gaps that persist in our country.

While Colombia's *mestizaje* has eroded Indigenous belonging in our families, ancestral community engagement reveals persistent Indigenous ways of knowing, doing and being (Martin / Mirraabopa, 2003). This ontological continuity amid assimilation aligns with Moreton-Robinson (2020) on enduring Indigenous relationalities to Country, and Reid and Sieber (2019) on geospatial ontologies privileging Western over Indigenous spatial concepts. Our work with Indigenous peoples has become not only an ethical and political commitment in our academic and professional paths, but also a healing journey – one that allows us to reconcile a past marked by resistance, wounds and scars with an ancestral present that, through its struggles and ways of life, is transforming education.

It is from this perspective and from our lived experiences that we develop a critical view of higher education and the university as a historical and social institution responsible for the production and dissemination of scientific knowledge, and, at the same time, as a centre for the reproduction of the coloniality of knowledge and being (Ramallo, 2013). We believe that recognising the contributions Indigenous students make to university contexts can help transform the rigid structures that have historically been imposed on academic spaces. From this standpoint, we advocate for a university that envisions itself as a *pluriversity* – as a space where other ways of knowing can take root and flourish.

On decolonial thought

Universities have long privileged knowledge produced in Europe and North America, presenting Western theories and methodologies as universal and objective while obscuring their specific historical-cultural origins (Drummond, 2020; Gleeson et al., 2025; Reid et al., 2020). This epistemic hierarchy manifests across disciplines: criminology curricula continue prioritising Western frameworks over so-called First Nations perspectives; nursing programs fail to embed Indigenous ways of knowing despite policy commitments; and geospatial ontologies perpetuate Western dominance over Indigenous spatial relationalities (Reid & Sieber, 2019; Walsh, 2007). This results in the devaluation of other forms of

knowledge and the imposition of a particular worldview that marginalises and ignores the knowledges of other cultures and regions (Ortiz-Ocaña et al., 2018).

Nevertheless, despite the role universities have played in disseminating and reinforcing the idea of Western modernity as the sole path to progress and development, there are educational spaces where critical alternatives to the hegemony of Western knowledge are emerging. These settings reveal the potential of universities to move beyond being mere reproducers of the coloniality of knowledge, doing and being, and instead become centres of intercultural thought aimed at building more diverse, just and equitable societies (Chica-Cañas & Marín-Gallego, 2016).

Given that this study explores the trajectories, tensions and challenges that emerge from analysing the university experience of the Indigenous population at UAN, it is important to clarify how we understand these three elements from a decolonial perspective. In this study, we understand *trajectory* as a description of both individual and collective paths that are deeply shaped by colonial legacies and the power dynamics that persist in the present, intertwined with experiences of resistance and adaptation (Mignolo, 2008). We define *tension* as the manifestation of contradictions and conflicts inherited from the historical coloniality of the territory – that is, contemporary power asymmetries that structure being, knowledge and power through the devaluation of non-hegemonic identities, the marginalisation of local and ancestral knowledges, and the configuration of political, economic, and social relationships based on domination and exploitation (Grosfoguel, 2013). Lastly, we define *challenge* as an idea or practice that questions, confronts and destabilises the legitimacy of the colonial matrix of power in its various manifestations, opening pathways toward social justice, equity and self-determination (Quijano, 2007).

Materials and methods

Methodological approach

The mixed-methods research approach guiding this research has grown in popularity due to its ability to explore phenomena from multiple perspectives, allowing for integrated and in-depth understandings of the research problem and, therefore, providing more comprehensive answers to the research question. In mixed-methods research, investigators are able to capture statistical patterns and trends while simultaneously gaining individual perspectives on the phenomenon within a single study.

Technics, participants and analysis strategy

We employed a mixed-methods approach to data collection and analysis in a parallel design, through the triangulated analysis of primary and secondary sources. Primary data consisted of semi-structured interviews (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021) conducted in 2024 with 21 Indigenous students, eight faculty members and eight administrative staff from UAN's Bogotá, Riohacha and Popayán campuses, where the largest concentrations of Indigenous students are located.

Participant selection followed a culturally sensitive process adapted to the university context. Initially, open days were organised to socialise the research objectives and invite Indigenous students to participate. These events utilised electronic media and face-to-face meetings, fostering open conversations and contributions from attendees. Subsequently, contact was established with students through two pathways: (1) volunteers who expressed interest in participating and learning more about the study, and (2) referrals from peers or academic community members. Once identified, informed

consent was obtained via institutional email and telephone, with interview modalities (face-to-face or online) agreed upon flexibly.

Interviews were conducted in Spanish, recognised as the lingua franca in the university setting for communication among students from diverse groups such as Wayuu, Nasa and Yanacóna (Hamel, 2013). This language functions as a cultural interface (Nakata, 2007), enabling participants who demonstrate high proficiency to defend their identities and collective rights (Gutiérrez, 2025). This choice reflects the linguistic realities of many Colombian Indigenous peoples, who, amid colonial pressures and language loss, have adopted Spanish as their primary or sole means of expression (Ministry of Culture, 2022). Narrative analysis techniques were applied to the interviews.

Secondary data were drawn from institutional databases updated each semester via UAN's digital process management system. These included socio-demographic questionnaires completed by the educational community. In 2024, we retrieved data spanning 20 semesters (first semester 2015 to second semester 2024), consolidating them into a unified dataset. Descriptive statistical analysis (Parampreet et al., 2018) was performed in the first semester of 2025, generating tables and graphs to visualise semester-by-semester enrolment trends by key variables (Frieman et al., 2018).

Data analysis occurred in two levels. First, sequential and independent processing: narrative analysis for interviews and descriptive statistics for databases (Frieman et al., 2018). Second, integration via simultaneous methodological triangulation, applying mixed methods in parallel to deepen understanding of the phenomenon (Forni & de Grande, 2020). Thus, statistical patterns in Indigenous enrolment trends were enriched by participants' lived experiences.

Ethical considerations

For the collection and analysis of both primary and secondary sources, the research project from which this study derives was reviewed by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education at UAN. The committee approved the analysis of institutional documents and the implementation of semi-structured interviews with Indigenous students from UAN. Participants were fully informed about the implications of their involvement in the study, which clearly stated that their participation was voluntary and would not entail any harm to their physical or emotional wellbeing, nor would it involve any academic advantage or financial compensation.

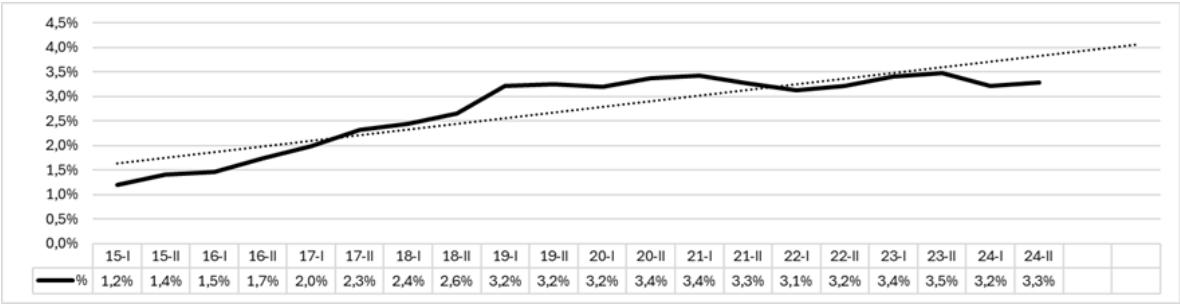
Results and discussion

This section presents the results obtained through the collection and analysis of data, articulated with an analysis focused on recognising the trajectories, tensions and challenges faced by Indigenous students at UAN. These are expressed through three key dimensions: persistence within the institution (trajectory), disciplinary choice (tension), and the experiences of Indigenous women (challenge).

Trajectories: Persistence of Indigenous students at UAN

Ossola (2020) uses the category "Indigenous University Youth" to refer to students from Indigenous communities pursuing higher education in conventional universities lacking tailored Indigenous programs. Chávez-González et al. (2022) show that Indigenous youth trajectories reveal intensifying inequalities as they reach university. Figure 1 illustrates enrolment trends of Indigenous youth at UAN over the past 10 years, along with a projected tendency for the next two semesters.

Figure 1: Historical enrolment of Indigenous youth at UAN by semester from 2015-I to 2024-II



Source: Authors' elaboration based on UAN data

According to Figure 1, Indigenous students have represented between 1.2% and 3.5% of the total student population each semester over the past 10 years, showing an upward trend that diverges from the implicit decline in non-Indigenous enrolment proportions. This figure aligns with the findings of Colombia's most recent national Census (National Department of Statistics [DANE in Spanish], 2019), which reports that the Indigenous population represents 4.4% of the national total, with a 36.8% increase compared to the 2005 Census (DANE, 2005). According to the technical report of the Census, this growth is not attributed to fertility rates, but rather to improved enumeration coverage in Indigenous territories and to an increase in ethnic self-identification among Indigenous peoples.

A comparative analysis of Indigenous and non-Indigenous enrolment at UAN revealed that the proportional increase in Indigenous youth is due more to the progressive decline in the university's overall enrolment rather than to a significant rise in the admission of students who self-identify as Indigenous. According to López-Segrera (2023), high dropout rates and low enrolment levels are among the main challenges currently faced by universities in Latin America and the Caribbean. Nevertheless, the Indigenous student population at UAN is both significant and persistent in its efforts to access and remain in academic programs. This phenomenon is linked to the value that some Indigenous communities place on higher education for younger generations, and it is reinforced through national and local government policies. The following testimonies illustrate this relationship:

In Amazonas ... the governor's office opens scholarship calls. They review the applicants' reports, school scores and socio-economic status. If the applicant is Indigenous, Afro-Colombian or belongs to a specific group, they do a classification and filter the applicants because there are about 200 slots, and only 50 are awarded. I had the opportunity to be selected, and with that scholarship they provide living support and cover the tuition. Once you finish, the governor's office requires you to work for one year in return for covering your studies, and, if you don't, you must pay 50% of the cost of your degree. We work for a year wherever the governor's office assigns us. (Interview with Indigenous Student 5, Bogotá Campus, April 19, 2024)

I've noticed that the number of Indigenous students at UAN is quite high. They come with a strong willingness to learn, with a desire to move forward. They're always present despite the challenges they face ... I'm Indigenous my self – I'm Wayuú – so I understand their behaviours, I understand their processes. Here in La Guajira, the Wayuú population is very dispersed, which is why I know these students make a great effort to attend university ... Coming to class is often difficult for them due to many factors: environmental, economic or personal situations like the death of a family member. For them, being present at a funeral is important, and having to choose between attending class or a funeral is meaningful. I understand that. ... I know how important it is, and that makes me more flexible. Perhaps another professor who doesn't understand the significance of that

moment in Wayuú culture might not get it and might say, “How can a student skip class just to attend a funeral?” (Interview with Indigenous Professor 4, Riohacha Campus, May 8, 2024)

From this perspective, despite the structural and geographical barriers that hinder Indigenous peoples' access to higher education (Díaz Ducuara et al., 2025; Martínez Silva, 2023), the UAN has seen that territorial policies have boosted their enrolment. However, retention and graduation are not only individual achievements; they are also an opportunity to advance meaningful debates about institutionality, knowledge and cultural hegemony (Rodríguez & Ossola, 2022). Likewise, academic success is the result of a collective commitment, given that communities often co-finance the education of the young people they send to university. This dynamic resonates with wider research on rural and Indigenous education, which shows that the reception of teachers and professionals by local communities depends strongly on their knowledge of, and respect for, local cultures and community engagement processes (Baeza et al., 2023). The following testimony illustrates this sense of responsibility:

When something is needed for the benefit of a community member, the Elders gather. They have the final say, even though I'm a formal authority, I'm the one who leads. I'm simply a facilitator there, because decisions are made collectively by the Elders. For example, in my case, since I'm studying at a private university that requires tuition payments, I inform everyone and involve them in the decision that expenses will be made for the semester. Together, we decide how to gather those resources. The only resources the community has, aside from crafts and livestock herding, come from the General System of Participation (national funding). If funds are to be set aside from that to support a community member's education, the entire community must approve it for it to be made effective. I don't make that decision on my own. (Interview with Indigenous Student 4, Riohacha Campus, April 29, 2024)

As evidenced in the previous testimony, the educational path and trajectory of an Indigenous student who remains actively connected to their community is, in some cases, the result of collective decisions through which not only the financial support is defined, but also the purposes and expectations for the trained youth's contributions to the collective (Barney, 2018). According to Ossola (2020), despite ongoing debates around the professionalisation of Indigenous peoples within Western universities, graduation remains the primary goal for Indigenous youth:

There are moments when I feel like I'll never finish [my degree], but knowing where I'm headed gives me strength and encouragement. Knowing that there are many mothers and children coming after me—and being able to reach this goal [graduation]—is important. Behind me, there is a community that needs fully Indigenous professionals, because we are the ones who truly understand our community's needs. They [my community] are always watching over me, and that makes me want to keep going, especially in the moments when I feel like I won't make it. (Interview with Indigenous Student 7, Bogotá Campus, April 9, 2024)

Unlike youth from the majority society, who increasingly view higher education as a less viable path to improved opportunities (Zerpa & Rodríguez-Montoya, 2024), the arrival of Indigenous youth at the university is the result of a long history of struggle by Indigenous peoples themselves for access to education as a historically denied right, which in turn has blocked access to other fundamental rights (Ossola, 2020). The following testimony illustrates this ongoing struggle:

We [the *cabildos*, a public entity exercising traditional authority that represents Indigenous peoples] know that Indigenous peoples have very limited access to higher education ... and we feel a strong

need to study. I belong to a cabildo, and we see the importance of having young people studying and growing so they can bring new ideas, new ways of doing things, back to the territories, so they can be a source of support. The alliance between UAN and ONIC is not well known in the *resguardos*[a legally established collective territory and communal property that serves as the geographic space where Indigenous communities exercise autonomy and self-governance], so when we visit schools, I start asking questions, because many students are ashamed to say they’re Indigenous. But that’s where I can tell them how to apply for a scholarship. In 2019, many students from cabildos enrolled. Those students didn’t eat breakfast, and often not even lunch. We noticed it, and with the help of some professors ... we organised ourselves to support them. ... After they received the ONIC scholarship that covered tuition, I had to help them apply for another scholarship for living expenses, so they would be able to eat. (Interview with Indigenous Administrative Staff Member 7, Popayán Campus, April 27, 2024)

The analysis of Indigenous youth retention at UAN reveals that 40% permanently withdraw within the first three years, with the highest dropout rate occurring during the first year (Table 1). This pattern is consistent with Australian Indigenous retention challenges (Cook et al., 2023) and highlights the need for in-depth analysis of the causes associated with these dropout rates within the university.

Table 1: Year of Indigenous youth withdrawal at UAN

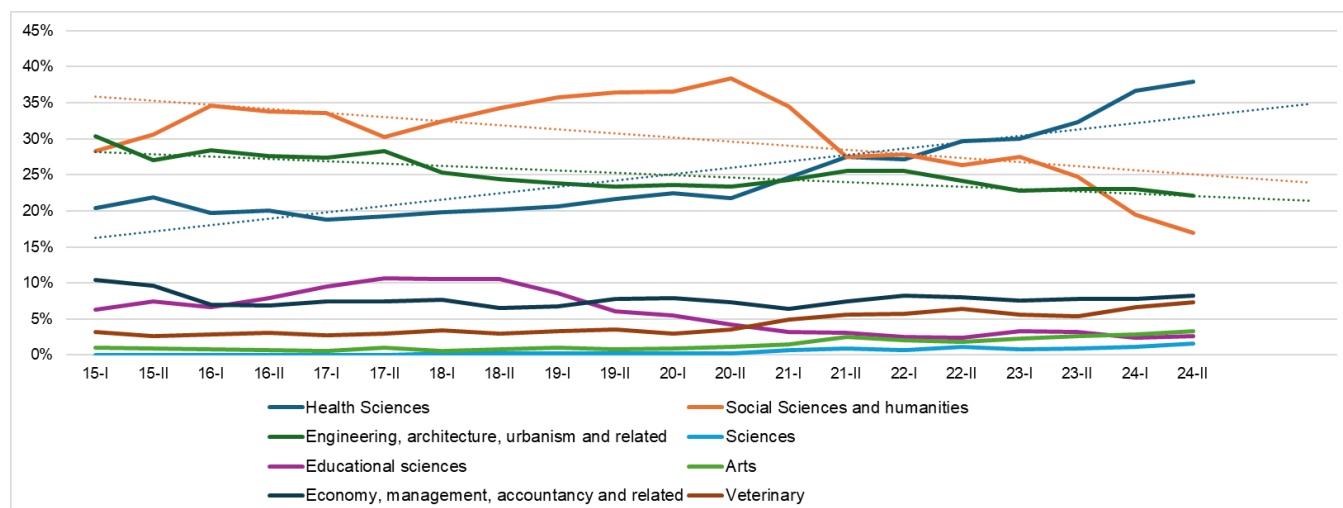
Year of study	Percentage
1st year	24%
2nd year	8%
3rd year	8%
Total	40%

Source: Authors’ elaboration based on UAN data

Beyond these quantitative patterns, student narratives highlight the dual pressures of individual aspirations and community commitments that characterise Indigenous trajectories in higher education. Thus, despite higher education becoming increasingly less appealing to non-Indigenous youth, Indigenous youth trajectories reflect both the struggle to access a historically denied right—rooted in colonial legacies—and the strong sense of communal responsibility that motivates their persistence, even amid significant retention challenges.

Tensions: Disciplinary choices of Indigenous students at UAN

The trajectories of Indigenous youth also entail the perpetuation of coloniality through curricula that generate tensions between Indigenous knowledge systems and university-based professional profiles (Ramallo, 2013). These tensions compel Indigenous students and Indigenous graduates to reflect on their return and contributions to the development of their communities, as well as on their roles in professional environments where they work alongside non-Indigenous colleagues (Ossola, 2020). Figure 2 presents the academic programs at UAN with the highest number of Indigenous students over the past 10 years.

Figure 2: Academic programs preferred by Indigenous youth at UAN in the last 10 years

Source: Authors' elaboration based on UAN data

According to Figure 2, three fields of study have shown the highest participation of Indigenous youth at UAN over the past 10 years: Engineering, Architecture, Urbanism and related fields; Social Sciences and Humanities; and Health Sciences. In 2024, Health Sciences became the most frequently chosen program by Indigenous students, showing an upward trend, followed by Social Sciences and Humanities with a downward trend, and thirdly, Engineering, Architecture, Urbanism and related fields, also showing a downward trend. Together, these three fields accounted for 77% of Indigenous enrolment at UAN in 2024. Specifically, Dentistry, Psychology and Engineering are among the most preferred disciplinary choices of Indigenous students at UAN.

According to Sierra (2005), the Eurocentric structure of universities generates acculturative tensions between university education and the traditional knowledge of Indigenous communities, creating a disconnection that limits interest in ancestral knowledge systems. The following testimony illustrates how Indigenous knowledge is not reflected in the educational and curricular approaches of higher education programs:

The community where I'm currently registered, or the resguardo where I spent most of my life, is a bit far, it's about four hours away. ... It's been a long time since I've had contact with them ... My mom is a teacher there ... Since I haven't been involved in things there for a while, you could say I've already left the community. ... I went straight from high school to university, and because of my studies I started to grow distant from the community. ... Right now, I'm like any regular person. ... At the university, they don't really focus on that [on being Indigenous]; you could say that it goes unnoticed. ... [The Biomedical Engineering program] isn't really focused on Indigenous communities, but rather on rural communities that lack certain services, or places where portable equipment could be used. (Interview with Indigenous Student 4, Popayán Campus, August 11, 2024)

According to Jara-Labarthé et al. (2018), higher education reproduces epistemic hierarchies that influence the choice of fields of knowledge by Indigenous students, as it promotes hegemonic forms of knowledge that marginalise Indigenous ways of knowing. The following testimony illustrates some of the tensions between Indigenous knowledge and Western knowledge that circulate within higher education programs:

[In our culture] spirituality doesn't require specific objects or resources to connect with nature. In the past, plants were used to heal illnesses, but now there's a large part of our culture that uses the inverted cross, those I would call sorcerers, because they are influenced by other artifacts and resources that are not part of our culture and don't necessarily relate to spirituality. Around 180 years ago, we were truly talking about spirituality because none of that existed, there was a connection with nature, and from that, a sense of inner peace could arise that calmed and drove away bad spirits. In our tradition, in our language, we use the word "spirit" to mean "within us". In the Psychology program, they call that disorders. What we call madness is when someone is afflicted by a spirit. There are good and bad spirits, and some of them can be driven away with specific plants and medicines. (Interview with Indigenous Student 1, Riohacha Campus, April 29, 2024)

Additionally, Navia Antezana et al. (2020) warn that affirmative action policies may unintentionally reinforce positive discrimination, contributing to the stigmatisation of Indigenous youth by implying that they require special assistance to succeed academically. This can negatively impact their self-esteem and social perception, and ultimately compromise their persistence and completion of academic programs (Nakata, 2025). The following testimony illustrates a possible case of discrimination or the presence of prejudices toward Indigenous youth:

When a student enters my courses [on academic writing], my first approach is to understand their particular conditions for improvement. ... I once had a medical student. Honestly, I believe she was referred to me because of some prejudice; when I assessed her oral expression and command of the [Spanish] language, she was like everyone else; she needed to improve in some areas, but nothing out of the ordinary. (Interview with Professor 1, Bogotá Campus, April 25, 2024)

Despite the challenges faced by Indigenous students in Western universities, Table 2 reveals that two of the three fields with highest Indigenous student participation at UAN – Health Sciences (21 % enrolment) and Social Sciences (31%) – exhibit lower dropout rates within the first three years compared to the overall average (40%), while Engineering fields (26% enrolment) show intermediate retention patterns.

Table 2: Year of Indigenous students withdrawal at UAN by field of study over the last 10 years

Year of study	General	Health Sciences	Social Sciences, etc.	Engineering, architecture, etc.	Other
1st year	24%	23%	19%	25%	26%
2nd year	8%	6%	8%	6%	10%
3rd year	8%	7%	6%	6%	11%
Total	40%	36%	33%	37%	47%

Source: Authors' elaboration based on UAN data

These disciplinary patterns suggest greater cultural resonance between Indigenous epistemologies and the pedagogical approaches of Health Sciences and Social Sciences, as corroborated by student narratives highlighting better alignment with their ways of learning, knowledge construction and relational practices. Together, these three fields – Health Sciences, Social Sciences and Engineering – represented 78% of Indigenous youth enrolment over the past decade, with Other fields showing substantially higher withdrawal rates. The following testimony illustrates this phenomenon:

[In the Performing Arts Education program] we’ve had students from various [Indigenous] communities, mostly Muisca. There was one student from Cauca, and we had a lot of difficulties with him because the training process was very challenging for him. And for the professors as well, ... there was little understanding of his context, and he was held to the same expectations as other students. ... He had enormous potential, but he didn’t have a habit of reading or strong discipline. He was expelled from the university for poor academic performance, but the real issue was that there was no effective communication when he enrolled or during his academic process. By the time I realised it, it was too late. (Interview with Professor 3, Bogotá Campus, April 30, 2024)

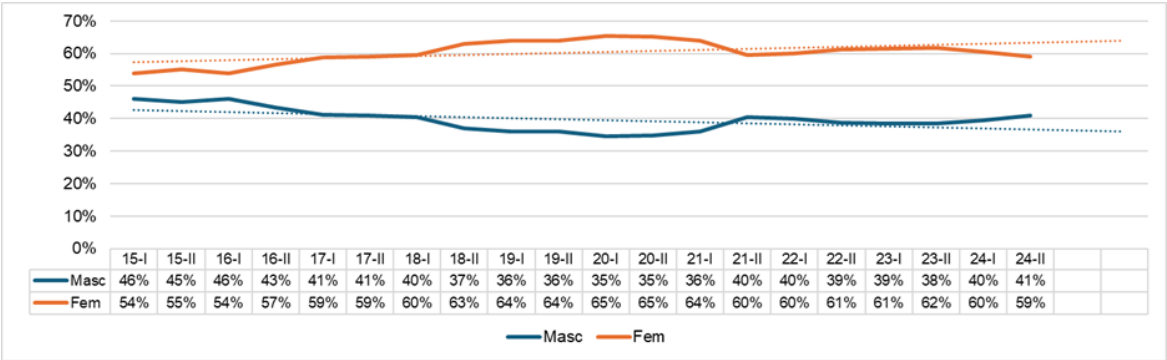
Thus, the analysis of the tensions arising from the disciplinary choices of Indigenous students at UAN over the past 10 years highlights the academic fields most preferred by Indigenous youth and the frictions between Indigenous knowledge systems and the Westernised knowledge offered by the university. These tensions have led to processes of acculturation and positive discrimination affecting these students. It is also evident that some of these tensions stem from a lack of understanding of Indigenous ways of learning and the imposition of dominant knowledge-construction practices over others. In this regard, Sandoval Forero and Guerra García (2007) warned that institutions of higher education—even those that incorporate an intercultural Indigenous approach—remain subordinated to modern scientific and state logics inherited from the colonial era, limiting their ability to offer genuinely contextualised training centred on Indigenous epistemologies.

Challenges: The experience of Indigenous women students at UAN

According to Herrera Siles (2012) and Santamaría (2016), Indigenous women students face multiple barriers to accessing and persisting in higher education: poverty and the need to engage in paid labour, the burden of gendered roles shaped by the sexual division of labour and gender norms within their communities, unwanted motherhood, paternal or Elder authority, and challenges in cultural adaptation, among others. Vásquez Soto et al. (2024) also identified instances of sexual harassment as a factor threatening the retention of Indigenous women in higher education—an issue that reflects the triple oppression this population faces: sex/gender, class and race/ethnicity (Viveros-Vigoya, 2016).

Within this challenging landscape for Indigenous women in higher education, the analysis of Indigenous enrolment at UAN over the past 10 years shows a progressive increase in the number of Indigenous women students (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Indigenous enrolment at UAN by sex over the last 10 years



Source: Authors’ elaboration based on UAN data

This progressive increase in Indigenous women students at UAN over the past 10 years is because women drop out of academic programs at a lower rate than their male peers, who tend to leave their programs primarily during the first year of studies (Table 3).

Table 3: Year of withdrawal of Indigenous youth at UAN by sex over the last 10 years

Year of study	General	Fem.	Masc.
1st year	24%	18%	32%
2nd year	8%	7%	9%
3rd year	8%	8%	9%
Total	40%	34%	50%

Source: Authors’ elaboration based on UAN data

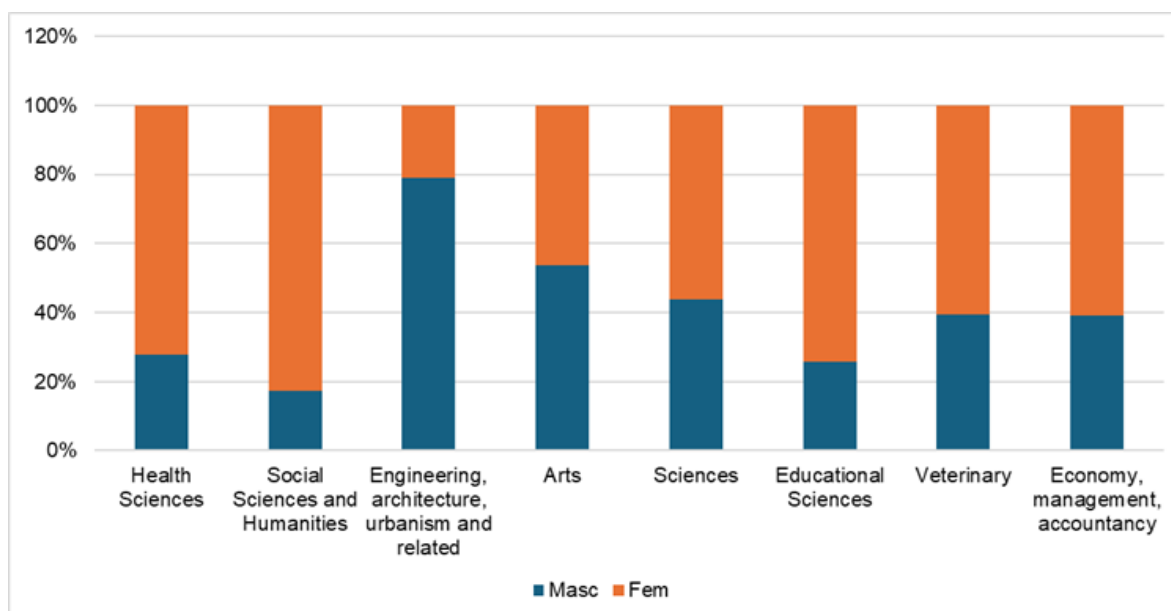
During the period analysed in this study (2015–2024), women accounted for 59% of Indigenous students at UAN, while men made up the remaining 41%. In line with Latin American debates on intersectional configurations of sex/ gender, class and race/ ethnicity in the production of inequality and domination, we approach the progressive increase of Indigenous women students at UAN through an experiential lens that foregrounds how these structural relations are lived in the everyday life of an Indigenous woman in higher education.

Rather than offering a full-fledged Indigenous women’s standpoint analysis, which would require a broader theoretical and methodological development, in this section we present individual testimonies to illustrate how multiple and intersecting forms of oppression shape Indigenous women’s trajectories in a specific institutional context. The following testimony exemplifies these dynamics and the challenges faced by Indigenous women, related to their triple condition of being women, Indigenous and members of a historically excluded group:

When I was younger and my brother was born, my family’s economic situation was very difficult: I had a very young mother, my grandparents had no financial resources. ... We’ve always lived in basic conditions, with hardship, we don’t know wealth or property, only what’s necessary to live. Currently, things have improved for me because since my second semester (at university), I’ve been getting involved in [academic] projects. At the beginning, university was intimidating, eating and interacting with other people terrified me. I had that inferiority complex; even just entering and finding the classroom was hard. Some security guards were kind and helpful, but others weren’t so friendly. I was scared. ... I never asked professors for support because I was afraid of making a bad impression, I was very young. There were some classmates I’ll never forget. I saw them speaking in class with so much confidence, and it really intimidated me. I didn’t dare ask about things I didn’t understand because I thought they would say I was ridiculous for asking basic questions. And I saw how their conversations with the professors flowed, while I preferred not to know things rather than admit I didn’t. I feel like I was always heavily criticised. One time, in fact, a professor told us that a lawyer couldn’t dress in Indigenous clothing. Another professor once said, “What you [the Indigenous community] do, punishing people, is horrible and violates human rights.” And I didn’t know how to defend the way we administer justice in my community, because I didn’t have the knowledge about it. (Interview with Indigenous Student 3, Bogotá Campus, April 9, 2024)

According to Chávez-Arellano (2020), the participation of Indigenous women in higher education has gained relevance with the increase in female enrolment in recent generations. The analysis of Indigenous enrolment at UAN by sex and field of study over the past 10 years confirms this trend (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Participation of Indigenous youth at UAN by sex and field of study over the last 10 years



Source: Authors' elaboration based on UAN data

According to Figure 4, most fields of study (except for Engineering, Architecture, Urban Planning and related areas) show greater participation of women, particularly around Social and Human Sciences. According to Ballarín Domingo and Aguado Cabezas (2018), the gender-based division of academic disciplines in higher education is a persistent reality with implications for academic organisation, professional trajectories and the reproduction of gender roles.

According to the authors, disciplines traditionally associated with femininity (such as education, health, and social work) tend to be less valued and lower paid than those dominated by men (such as engineering and sciences), thus perpetuating an academic gender hierarchy (Ballarín Domingo & Aguado Cabezas, 2018). In addition to these gendered, classed and racialised dynamics, sexual orientation emerges as another key axis of differentiation that structures Indigenous women's experiences of violence, exclusion and resistance in both university and community settings, in ways that are also entangled with colonial legacies of heterosexual normativity and binary gender orders:

I think that, as Indigenous women, we have it especially hard in this world in many ways. Embracing that identity has cost me countless things: friendships, jobs ... I'm in a romantic relationship with a woman, and that has caused a lot of controversy – it has brought a lot of macho violence against me. In my community, men clearly show their disapproval of that decision. There was a time when they isolated me because of it; people wouldn't talk to me, and I heard comments like, "We can't be near that woman." I've been socially and morally punished a lot. At first, it's hard and complicated because you're left to fight alone, but later it becomes empowering. I realised that the more I make the patriarchal structure uncomfortable, the more I must be doing something right. (Interview with Indigenous Student 3, Bogotá Campus, April 9, 2024)

Thus, the analysis of the challenges faced by Indigenous women in higher education shows that, despite the structural barriers they encounter in accessing and remaining in university, Indigenous university

students are increasingly represented and, in specific cases, manage to negotiate and partially overcome the intersecting oppressions of sex/gender, class, race/ethnicity and sexuality that shape their lives within and beyond university.

As evidenced in Indigenous Student 3's account, remaining at the UAN for Indigenous women not only involves overcoming economic obstacles, but also negotiating their identity in the face of patriarchal violence that may come from their own environments. Following Moreton-Robinson (2013), this situated point of view allows us to understand the university not only as a centre of study, but also as a space of dispute where students manage, through resistance, to disrupt the existing structures of domination.

Although the central purpose of this research was to analyse the overall situation of Indigenous students at the UAN, the shared testimony acts as a critical precedent that reveals the urgency of delving deeper into the Indigenous women's standpoint (Moreton-Robinson, 2013). This approach would allow for a more rigorous analysis of the tensions and practices of resistance that students deploy in the face of the multiple layers of exclusion and violation of rights, both personal and collective, that they experience throughout their trajectories.

Conclusions and recommendations

Through this research, we employed a mixed-methods approach from a decolonial perspective to examine the trajectories, tensions and challenges faced by Indigenous students at Universidad Antonio Nariño (UAN) between 2015 and 2024. This research contributes to multiple stakeholders: Indigenous communities gain evidence validating their educational investments, UAN and Colombian universities receive actionable retention strategies, national policymakers access data supporting scholarship expansion, and Colombian society benefits from graduates bridging Indigenous needs with professional competencies. The analysis revealed three key findings specific to this institutional context:

1. Indigenous youth trajectories at UAN are marked by persistent high dropout rates (40% within three years) despite increasing enrolment, reflecting the structural barriers rooted in Colombia's colonial legacy that continue to deny Indigenous populations equitable higher education access, while non-Indigenous enrolment declines regionally.
2. Disciplinary choices generate epistemic frictions between Indigenous ancestral knowledge systems and Westernised university curricula, evidenced by lower dropout rates in culturally resonant fields such as Health Sciences (36%) and Social Sciences (33%) compared to Engineering (37%) and other disciplines (47%).
3. Indigenous women, comprising 59% of Indigenous students at UAN, face compounded intersectional oppressions (sex/gender, class, race/ethnicity) yet demonstrate greater retention than male peers, negotiating these barriers through community commitments and resilience, as illustrated by student testimonies. The findings reveal a research gap demanding a situated approach to Indigenous women's higher education trajectories, using an intersectional framework to centre their standpoint beyond mere statistical description.

These outcomes suggest specific institutional strategies for UAN that may serve as a benchmark for other universities across the region. First, targeted retention programs addressing first-year dropout (24% overall) could build on Indigenous students' persistence factors such as communal responsibility identified in interviews. Second, curricular reforms should integrate Indigenous epistemologies into

Health Sciences and Social Sciences programs where cultural resonance already exists, reducing epistemic alienation without devaluing Western knowledge frameworks.

Valuing ancestral knowledge reframes the “special treatment” approach into a perspective of reparative justice, through which the systemic denial of opportunities throughout centuries of colonial exclusion is finally acknowledged. This integration would enhance UAN’s social relevance by producing graduates who bridge Indigenous community needs with professional competencies, contributing to Colombia’s pluralistic society. Future research should examine longitudinal Indigenous students graduation outcomes at UAN and comparative analyses across Colombian universities to test the transferability of these context-specific strategies.

Acknowledgements

We thank the Indigenous students, teachers and administrators of UAN who participated in the interviews for their willingness to let us deepen in their life experiences. This research received financial support for the first author from Vicerrectoría de Ciencia, Tecnología e Innovación of the Universidad Antonio Nariño, through grant number 2023216 of 2023 and involved the Conciencia research group of the Facultad de Educación. For the second author, this work was supported by the Dirección General de Investigación at Universidad de La Sabana and involved the 'Educación y Educadores' research group and the Faculty of Education under the project 'Educational Innovation Observatory', grant number EDU-94-2025.

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Please cite this article as:

Gómez, C., & Reyes Ramírez, O. L. (2026). Trajectories, epistemic tensions and retention challenges of Indigenous university students: A Colombian case mixed-analysis. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 55(1). DOI 10.55146/ajie.v55i1.1990



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The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education

Volume 55 | Number 1 | © The Author/s 2026 doi 10.55146/ajie.v55i1.1990
