Multilingual Policies and Practices in Higher Education: A Nation-Wide Exploration in Colombia

Políticas y prácticas multilingües en la educación superior: una exploración a nivel nacional en Colombia

Politiques et pratiques dans l'enseignement supérieure : une exploration à l'échelle nationale en Colombie

Políticas e práticas multilíngues no ensino superior: uma exploração a nível nacional na Colômbia

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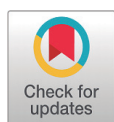sxbonillam@udistrital.edu.co
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Abstract

In the last two decades, foreign language policies in Colombia have prioritized English across the education system, aiming for international competitiveness and educational quality. These policies have sparked concerns among educators, including language stratification, commodification of English for the privileged, adoption of foreign benchmarks, insufficient policy implementation, and limitations of the English-Spanish bilingual model compared to multilingual perspectives. Inspired by critical race theory and decoloniality, this qualitative study examines higher education policies in Colombia, focusing on how they address multilingualism and the country's sociocultural diversity. The study explores language policies related to student access, retention, and graduation; language requirements for faculty; and the promotion of various languages. Data collection involved a documentary analysis, interviews and surveys conducted across 16 universities from different regions of the country. Findings suggest the ongoing pervasiveness of English language-centered ideologies in most participating institutions, the invisibilities these ideologies and associated practices bring about in universities, and some emergent policies aiming at promoting multilingualism. The recommendations emanated from this study could resonate with universities both in Colombia and internationally, particularly those in similar contexts.

Keywords: language policy, multilingualism, higher education, critical race theory, decoloniality

Resumen

En las dos últimas décadas, las políticas de lengua extranjera en Colombia se han fijado como prioridad el inglés en todo el sistema educativo, en respuesta a las

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demandas de competitividad a nivel internacional y calidad educativa. Dichas políticas han generado inquietud entre los educadores, como la estratificación lingüística, la comoditización del inglés para los privilegiados, la adopción de referentes extranjeros, la implementación insuficiente de las políticas y las limitaciones del modelo bilingüe inglés-español en comparación con enfoques multilingües. Inspirado en las teorías crítica de la raza y de la decolonialidad, el presente estudio cualitativo analiza las políticas de educación superior en Colombia, con énfasis en su abordaje del multilingüismo y la diversidad sociocultural del país. El estudio explora las políticas lingüísticas que regulan el acceso, la retención y la graduación estudiantiles; los requerimientos de lengua para las facultades, y la promoción de diferentes idiomas. La recolección de datos comprendió un análisis documental, entrevistas y encuestas realizadas en 16 universidades de distintas regiones del país. Los resultados indican una generalización permanente de las ideologías centradas en la lengua inglesa en la mayoría de las instituciones que participaron, las invisibilidades que estas ideologías y sus prácticas asociadas generan en las universidades y algunas políticas incipientes que buscan fomentar el multilingüismo. Las recomendaciones emanadas de este estudio pueden resonar con universidades de Colombia y otros países, en especial contextos similares.

Palabras clave: política lingüística, multilingüismo, educación superior, teoría crítica de la raza, decolonialidad

Résumé

Au cours des deux dernières décennies, les politiques en matière de langues étrangères en Colombie ont donné la priorité à l'anglais dans le système éducatif, dans un souci de compétitivité internationale et de qualité de l'enseignement. Ces politiques ont suscité des inquiétudes chez les éducateurs, notamment en ce qui concerne la stratification linguistique, la marchandisation de l'anglais pour les privilégiés, l'adoption de critères étrangers, la mise en œuvre insuffisante des politiques et les limites du modèle bilingue anglais-espagnol par rapport aux perspectives multilingues. Inspirée par la théorie critique de la race et la décolonialité, cette étude qualitative examine les politiques de l'enseignement supérieur en Colombie, en se concentrant sur la manière dont elles abordent le multilinguisme et la diversité socioculturelle du pays. L'étude explore les politiques linguistiques liées à l'accès, à la rétention et à l'obtention de diplômes par les étudiants, les exigences linguistiques pour le corps enseignant et la promotion de diverses langues. La collecte des données s'est faite au moyen d'une analyse documentaire, d'entretiens et d'enquêtes menés dans 16 universités de différentes régions du pays. Les résultats suggèrent l'omniprésence des idéologies centrées sur la langue anglaise dans la plupart des institutions participantes, les invisibilités que ces idéologies et les pratiques associées entraînent dans les universités, et certaines politiques émergentes visant à promouvoir le multilinguisme. Les recommandations issues de cette étude pourraient trouver un écho dans les universités colombiennes et internationales, en particulier celles qui se trouvent dans des contextes similaires.

Mots-clés : politique linguistique, multilinguisme, enseignement supérieur, théorie critique de la race, décolonialité

Resumo

Nas últimas duas décadas, as políticas de idiomas estrangeiros na Colômbia priorizaram o inglês em todo o sistema educacional, visando à competitividade internacional e à qualidade educacional. Essas políticas geraram preocupações entre

os educadores, incluindo a estratificação do idioma, a mercantilização do inglês para os privilegiados, a adoção de padrões de referência estrangeiros, a implementação insuficiente de políticas e as limitações do modelo bilíngue inglês-espanhol em comparação com as perspectivas multilíngues. Inspirado na teoria racial crítica e na decolonialidade, este estudo qualitativo examina as políticas de ensino superior na Colômbia, concentrando-se em como elas abordam o multilinguismo e a diversidade sociocultural do país. O estudo explora as políticas linguísticas relacionadas ao acesso, à retenção e à graduação dos alunos; os requisitos linguísticos para o corpo docente; e a promoção de vários idiomas. A coleta de dados envolveu uma análise documental, entrevistas e pesquisas realizadas em 16 universidades de diferentes regiões do país. As descobertas sugerem a contínua disseminação de ideologias centradas no idioma inglês na maioria das instituições participantes, as invisibilidades que essas ideologias e práticas associadas geram nas universidades e algumas políticas emergentes que visam à promoção do multilinguismo. As recomendações emanadas deste estudo podem repercutir em universidades tanto na Colômbia quanto em outros países, especialmente naquelas em contextos semelhantes.

Palavras-chave: política linguística, multilinguismo, ensino superior, teoria crítica da raça, decolonialidade

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Introduction

Despite the inclusion of approaches to multilingualism in Colombia, such as Law 1381 of 2010 for native languages and Decree 2369 of 1997 for Colombian Sign Language (CSL), bilingual policies and practices formulated and implemented by the national government in the last two decades, such as the National Bilingual Program (NBP) (MEN, 2005) and the National English Program (MEN, 2014), have been criticized, since they position English as the dominant language to be learned across the educational system and as a tool for international competitiveness (Roux & Soler Millán, 2023).

In this sense, Colombian language policies have instilled a homogenizing view of bilingualism in which all citizens are immersed. Since the launch of NBP by the Ministry of Education (MEN) in 2004, significant efforts have been directed towards promoting English learning in primary, secondary, and tertiary education, using comparable standards worldwide. A few studies, such as Ramos Pineda et al.'s (2021), have portrayed the NBP as positive and successful. However, for the most part, governmental policy and planning practices have raised concerns, including the stagnation of standardized test results (Benavides, 2021), the stratification of languages (Usma Wilches, 2009), the commodification of English (Guerrero, 2010), the adoption of foreign benchmarks (Ayala Zárate & Álvarez, 2005), the subaltern position given to Indigenous languages and cultures contributing to linguicism and language loss (Ortiz et al., 2020), the reshaping of new transnational imagined identities eroding regional and national identities (Miranda Montenegro, 2023), and limitations of the concept of bilingualism (Guerrero, 2008).

Based on this approach, one recommendation to counter bilingualism centered on English or Spanish has been to advance an ecological and multilingual perspective in language policy by examining how the colonial matrix functions within institutions. This approach is complemented by an emphasis on promoting Colombian native languages in language policies (Miranda & Valencia Giraldo, 2019; Usma Wilches et al., 2018). Even though some works have shown multilingual practices that are challenging the language and cultural homogenization of English and Spanish in higher education institutions—e.g., language courses based on a decolonial and critical intercultural perspective, and the mixing of Indigenous languages with English and Spanish in content and language classes (Álvarez Valencia & Miranda, 2022; Ortiz et al., 2020)—to our knowledge, there is a lack of research that addresses institutional multilingual policies in higher education.

This qualitative study investigates the extent to which university language policies promote multilingualism and cultural diversity. As researchers, we have addressed language policies in our roles as teachers and educational administrators at different universities and some of us have been involved in creating institutional language policies. We share a critical perspective on monolithic views of languages and language policies, advocating instead for the recognition and promotion of linguistic and cultural diversity. By researching multilingual policies in universities, we aim to inform policy makers at both institutional and macro levels of educational policy in their efforts to support linguistic and cultural diversities. In this way, we hope to contribute to the advancement of educational equity for disadvantaged populations that have suffered from linguistic and cultural discrimination (Soler Castillo & Pardo Abril, 2009). To do this, we analyzed several aspects of multilingualism, ranging from language policies associated with undergraduate and graduate students' access to higher education, retention and graduation, to factors such as language course offerings, language requirements for students and faculty, research and publications, and the promotion of several languages in institutions.

In this paper, we present the theoretical underpinnings that support our view of language policy and multilingualism from a critical race theory (CRT) and decolonial perspective, followed by an

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explanation of the research design. We then focus on three main findings: the persistent hegemony of English, the invisibilities created through language policies, and recent initiatives that contribute to a multilingual approach. We conclude with a number of recommendations for higher education institutions in similar contexts in Colombia and abroad where findings could resonate.

Theoretical Framework

Decoloniality and CRT take a critical stance against socially-constructed structures which have subalternized certain individuals, limiting their rights and freedoms. While CRT challenges social constructions based on race and racism highlighting their biological, social, economic and political effects, decolonial theory exposes Western rationality as invisibilizing Otherness and causing a division in abyssal lines (Bonilla & Finardi, 2022). In the light of the intersectional concepts of these theories, the following sections present a conceptualization of language policy and multilingualism and analyze them in the context of Colombia.

Language Policy and Epistemological Perspectives

Policies are "ideological and political artifacts which have been constructed within a particular historical and political context" (Burton & Weiner, 1990 as cited in Rendon, 2019, p. 35). As actions shaped by contexts and historical factors, policies imply ideological components in their construction. Ball et al. (2011) delve into the complexity of policies in the field of education by noting that policy is multidimensional, as different actors might take various roles in doing policy work. Ball et al. (2012) argue that policies make sense and embrace meaning in context with actors who *enact* or—as Levinson et al. (2009) phrase it—*appropriate* policy. In this perspective, policymakers formulate policies which will inform educational actors' identities; however, teachers *make policies* when they interpret them based on their own social, cultural, economic and political dispositions.

Language policies share this complexity. As Johnson (2013) explains, they are mechanisms that affect "the structure, use, or acquisition of language" (p. 9) including regulations, de facto installed practices, unspoken agreements, processes of creation, interpretation and appropriation, texts and discourses. Importantly, language policy is not restricted to teaching and learning, but it deals also with the status of languages. These policies are materialized in official institutional documents, pedagogical decisions, and communication practices reflecting language ideologies affecting language users.

In language education, a comprehensive view of policy may be one of the most important bases for the criticism over contradictions identified between theory and practice (see e.g., Malsbary, 2014; Usma Wilches, 2009). Policy documents appear to reflect different realities from what actually happens to teachers in specific contexts. Therefore, language policy as a macro discourse driven by particular ideological assumptions has been widely discussed. In consonance with Ball et al. (2011), David Gillborn (2005) has raised awareness on power relations embedded in said assumptions which have perpetuated discriminatory practices, not only on teachers, but also on students and their views and imaginaries about language and language communities (De Jong et al., 2016; Gillborn, 2005; Usma Wilches, 2009; Veronelli, 2015).

According to the postulates of CRT and decolonial theory, language policies contribute to the reinforcement of asymmetrical relationships that construct educational actors and language speakers in disparity, perpetuating inequality and obscuring otherness (Bonilla Medina & Finardi, 2022; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Gillborn, 2006). In the words of Veronelli (2015), this reflects a homogenized view of language that emerged during colonization, racializing colonized territories and individuals. This fact goes beyond racial classification and permeates all aspects of social experience. This is why Veronelli urges to resist

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those racialized experiences and to advocate for changes in language education practices.

An Ecological Approach to Multilingualism

The discussion around terms such as multilingualism and plurilingualism, and how they shed light on different individual and societal processes, has been ongoing for some time (e.g. Cenoz, 2013; May, 2014; Ortega & Piccardo, 2018). As explained by Ortega and Piccardo (2018), since the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) introduced the concept of plurilingualism at the individual level, as compared to multilingualism at a societal level, a number of initiatives and studies have used this terminology to explain factors associated with how languages are present and interact in societies. The UNESCO Chair on Language Policies for Multilingualism (UCLPM) identifies a number of research lines related to multilingualism in societies, including internationalization, language education, linguistic economy and rights, intercultural mediation, and information and communication technologies. The UCLPM also incorporates emergent areas like translation and accessibility, borders and diasporas, and written and oral literatures. All these contribute to understanding and emphasizing not only language education but also to incorporating a series of spheres where languages are present (Petrova, 2024).

Multilingualism and plurilingualism are sometimes used to distinguish between the presence of multiple languages in a society and the individual processes of language learning and use. However, this distinction is not always consistent (Cenoz, 2013). Plurilingualism often refers to the psychological, cultural, and sociolinguistic aspects of how and why individuals learn and use languages (Díez-Astruga, 2020). Multilingualism is said to conceive languages as separate, in contrast to plurilingualism (Ortega & Piccardo, 2018). However, García et al. (2023) argue that bilinguals and multilinguals use a single repertoire to communicate, instead of discrete languages that

are "compartmentalized [in the brain] into different grammars and modes" (p. 90).

From a decolonial perspective, focusing solely on multiple language use when approaching multilingualism would misrecognize the sociocultural factors at play (Piller, 2016). This position would additionally banish the historical conditions under which languages have evolved and their power relations in the decisions made for language formalization and use in particular contexts (Johnson, 2023). Multilingualism views languages as repertories configured and used within specific social contexts, i.e., it is necessary to reflect on the factors influencing language use and their historical conditions so that multilingualism is seen from an ecological approach (Groff, 2018). This paper highlights the importance of multilingualism to explore areas of the multidimensional use of languages in societies with a critical view of language that analyzes racialized and colonized policies and practices involving historically-constructed unequal power relationships.

Language Policies of Multilingualism in Colombia

In line with the discussion above, it is relevant to review the historical development of language policies and multilingualism in Colombia. A legacy of colonialism, Colombia is shaped by socio-cultural and political factors that contribute to its uneven divisions (Wade, 1995). In times of the Colony, the territory was invaded by Spaniards, being entitled them by virtue of it with political and economic power which served to reduce the original inhabitants' rights (Valencia Giraldo et al., 2023). During the Independence period, although this social organization started to change, the country continued to be enmeshed in unequal relationships among the different communities, i.e., Indigenous, Black, and Spaniards (Chaves & Zambrano, 2006; OAS, 2004). This imbalance was reflected, for example, in the fact that, despite the abolition of slavery declared along with Independence, the former was not

realized until 50 years later with the "*Freedom from the Womb*" Law/Act[1]. Nevertheless, people believed in liberty and freedom despite the fact that it did not materialize immediately. This is an illustration of how an uneven configuration of Colombian society settled its identity in asymmetrical relationships where non-white communities were discriminated against and how this atmosphere grew normalized (Bonilla-Medina, 2018).

Within this panorama, after several centuries in which the Spaniards and the Spanish language acted as a major socio-cultural imposition in the territory, the 1991 Political Constitution granted co-official status to minoritized[2] languages in the Colombian territory. This came with official recognition in the places where these languages are spoken (Art. 10).

This decision—along with the acknowledgement and protection of the different ethnic groups and cultures (Art. 7), showing a spirit of openness to and valuing linguistic and cultural diversity—was the result of Indigenous and Afro-Colombian fights as they claimed their humanity in Colombian society. In this line of thought, reflecting the appreciation of these fights, it is paradoxical that language policies of multilingualism in the country do not appear to develop accordingly[3].

In contemporary policy developments, multilingualism—defined by the recognition of language varieties, their socio-political and cultural factors, and their flexibility—has garnered attention, yet language education policies often remain parallel but detached. On the one hand, ethno-education emerged as a policy intended to rescue ancestral values and languages of different communities (Enciso Patiño, 2004), an approach that has been criticized by Indigenous peoples and replaced by their own education [*educación propia*] (Triviño Garzón & Rojas Curieux, 2023). On the other hand, a bilingual policy has assumed a monocultural and monolithic view focused on Anglo-white-centered approaches through English ignoring otherness and diversities (Guerrero, 2009; Usma Wilches, 2009).

Therefore, policies in Colombia appear oppositional to multilingualism and multicultural views claimed in ethno-education. "In the context of the USA, Leonardo and Norton (2014) have referred to this [a similar problem] as a failure in multicultural education because, even though changes have happened, [education] … continues to be irrelevant to minorities" (Bonilla-Medina, 2018, p. 42) and has focused on Eurocentric global demands.

From a critical viewpoint of multilingualism in Colombia, the coloniality of language has caused languages of minoritized communities to become marginalized in education and in general social practices (Veronelli, 2015). Therefore, we argue that language policies have failed to develop multilingualism as a holistic perspective that considers an ecological understanding of the country's social organization. Ecological views of language policy imply a socio-cultural and critical view of language policies that recognizes diversity and different linguistic resources as equally important (Groff, 2018; Johnson, 2013; Miranda & Valencia Giraldo, 2019). Consequently, multilingualism and cultural diversity serve as guiding principles for our work in teaching, research, and outreach projects to identify language education goals towards multilingualism in higher education.

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1   Freedom of womb—which was a mandated law in Colombia in 1851—stated that Black women could have their children free but only when they were grown-ups.

2   Minoritized is used here to refer to the social and historical effect of granting major status to languages and communities affected by colonization.

3   Multilingual language policies in Colombia have developed in two directions: those using the term bilingualism, focused on English—Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo of 2004, Programa de Fortalecimiento del Desarrollo de Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras (PFDCLE) of 2010, Law 1651 "Bilingualism Law" of 2013, Colombia, Very Well! of 2014, and Colombia Bilingüe of 2015—and those addressing the language rights of minoritized populations (Law 1381 of 2010 and Decree 2369 of 1997, for example).

Method

We conducted a qualitative study to examine the phenomenon of language policies within the context of universities, relying on participants' experiences without intervention from researchers (Hatch, 2002). From our theoretical standpoint, we critically analyzed the data to understand participants' perspectives as reflections of social practices, informing our inquiry.

Data Collection and Participants

Our primary data sources included institutional documents and interviews obtained from five universities. Additionally, we expanded the data collection by conducting a survey across 16 institutions[4].

Our analysis involved two types of documents: language policies and language-related policies. The former encompassed official regulations regarding the status, use, or learning of languages, while the latter comprised other official norms that also impact language regulations. These documents allowed us to explore the overt decisions made by universities and analyze how these decisions were associated with a multilingual perspective. Table 1 presents a summary of the documents analyzed here. They were published by five universities (one private and four public institutions) from different regions: two located in the southwest, two in the northwest, and one in the center of the country. Most documents were publicly available online on the institutional website, and some were obtained via email through administrators working in the universities.

We carried out individual and group interviews to understand how university policies are involved in multilingualism and cultural diversity, based on participants' viewpoints and work experience within their institutions. The interview contained

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4   The participating institutions were all members of RED-PoliDiversa, a group of researchers from universities across Colombia who came together to research and debate the role of diversity in language education, aiming to contribute to peace and equity from academia.

Table 1 Institutional Policy Documents Analyzed

	Language Policy Documents	Language-Related Policy Documents
University 1 (U1)	5	9
University 2 (U2)	2	5
University 3 (U3)	7	10
University 4 (U4)	6	2
University 5 (U5)	3	3
Total	**23**	**29**

nine open questions organized in three sections: (a) institutional language policies, (b) institutional language-related policies for undergraduate and graduate programs, and (c) institutional language-related policies for teaching and research. We added a final open question for participants to provide further comments and insights.

Examples of questions from the first section included: (1) From your knowledge and experience at the University, how have you perceived the implementation of linguistic policies and norms about language education? (2) What is the origin of the bilingual or multilingual policies and regulations of the University? From whom or from where have the ideas of creating policies and regulations emerged? (3) From your perspective, what is the institutional view about multilingualism? Interviews were conducted face to face and online, depending on participants' preferences, and they were all recorded and transcribed for analysis. Individual interviews lasted from 60 to 110 minutes for a total interview time of 7 hours.

Interviewees were recruited face to face and by telephone. Eight administrators affiliated to the Faculty of Humanities, Education or Human and Social Sciences from the above-mentioned five universities were interviewed. They were responsible for academic undergraduate or graduate programs, departments, or language education units. All of the participants signed a consent form.

A survey was conducted to gather data from a larger sample, enabling a broader exploration of multilingual policies. The online survey, reviewed and tested by the principal investigators and then piloted with two colleagues in the same area, was created using Microsoft Forms. It examined policies related to access, language requirements, and language education in both undergraduate and graduate programs. Additionally, the survey included sections on policies for teaching and research, outreach, and the existence of an official institutional multilingual policy (See Appendix). Invitations were sent via email, resulting in 22 responses from 16 universities. The respondents included faculty members, administrators, and program directors from the participating universities.

Data Analysis

In the frame of our CRT and decolonial epistemological perspective, and through the views of some policy actors, we tried to understand institutional multilingual language policies situated in their context. In doing so, we followed a combination of deductive and inductive approaches to data using preconceived codes based on the various areas where multilingual policies might manifest in higher education settings and, at the same time, allowing space for emerging codes. The findings we present in this article are based on the cross-analysis of the results from the different instruments and sources.

For interviews, we implemented thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Each researcher transcribed and coded the interviews carried out in their setting and prepared a summary to discuss with the research team to collaboratively identify trends among the participating institutions. As for documents, a matrix was created with descriptive codes emerging from the list of documents from each institution. Similar to the procedure followed with the interviews, each researcher analyzed the documents from their own university and included critical memos and excerpts in the matrix. After this, we all completed a cross-analysis of the documents by comparing and contrasting the findings from the institutions, which we later summarized in a report. Survey results enriched our analysis of the primary data obtained from the interviews. Surveys were analyzed using descriptive statistics, with the frequencies and mean for each question, revealing trends across the universities. At the end of the analysis of each instrument, findings were contrasted paying special attention to the diverse characteristics of the institutions.

Findings and Discussion

We classified our findings in three categories, namely, the persistent hegemony of English, the invisibilities created through language policies, and recent initiatives that contribute to a multilingual approach, which will be analyzed in this section.

Persistence of English Hegemony

Findings indicate that the discourse of English has brought a hegemony difficult to surpass in the academic environments of the participating institutions. Publishing is believed to take more value if it is done in English, and standardization regarding language level is based on a foreign benchmark — the CEFR.

According to our findings from the documentary analysis, even though there exist some institutional policies for multi- and plurilingualism emphasizing foreign languages, a type of bilingualism from a monolingual perspective prevails, with English at the core, i.e., the concept of bilingualism is recognized only if it is associated with English. The findings from the interviews indicate that efforts to promote other languages are largely ineffective due to the persistence of English hegemony. As one interviewee stated, "because there were many people who ... wanted Multilingua to disappear by establishing [the] foreign language policy of only English" (U5Participant6).

The lack of multilingual policies in some universities might be guiding the adoption of just English as the vector to immerse the country in a globalized world, minimizing their autonomy to build academic plans aiming to respond to the society's real needs of transformation and development.

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Language teachers are the ones called upon to analyze the different aspects of language education and propose guidelines for the design and appropriation of policies which are socially and academically relevant. However, findings reveal that the weight of the intervention of external agents such as the Council of Europe (with its CEFR) on the MEN's regulations is so heavy that, in many cases, internal proposals for multilingualism are just null.

> We start from what the MEN demands, ...of the different programs, ... in the different stages, at the basic level, at the secondary level, at the professional level, at the university level. So, we base ourselves on what the MEN is demanding, which is also managed at a global level... So, we are governed by the policies, let's say, by the regulations that are managed by the MEN (U4Participant5).

English hegemony is also present when it comes to publishing. As part of the Plan de Desarrollo of some universities (U1, U4, U5), research and the way knowledge production is seen play an important role in high quality accreditation processes. English is said to be a predominant language in publications because of the impact these might have on national and international rankings, as expressed by this interviewee: "when it comes to publishing in another language, this has been promoted to be done mainly in English because there is a direct impact on...the classification systems of the journals" (U5Participant6). This ideology, as described by Hamel (2007), is a science-controlling strategy in academia that brings about strong hierarchical parameters in research and publications to the point of selecting and excluding the production of knowledge released in other languages.

In this sense, researchers become interested in and in need of publishing in English as a way to guarantee their production to be internationally recognized and thus validated by their universities. This links to their intention to compete within certain patterns in order to become visible: "...when we look at the issue of publications in any field, there is ...a statement that is frequently heard: if you do not publish in English, you do not exist" (U4Participant4). Another participant corroborates:

> When publication in another language has been promoted, it has mainly been in English due to its direct impact on journal classification systems and the prominence of impactful journals. Most articles in these high-impact journals are written in English. Although there are some journals in Portuguese or Spanish, they are very marginal compared to the volume of English-language journals. The highest impact journals (Q1, Q2) are predominantly in English, making it necessary for researchers and universities to publish in English to gain visibility. (U5Participant6).

In addition to Spanish, although Colombian scholars publish in other languages, English has emerged as the most popular foreign language promoted by institutions. It has been chosen as the global language and universities have put pressure to produce knowledge in this language (Banks, 2002), situating it in privilege, while other cultures and languages are undervalued.

University Policy Invisibilities

The analysis suggests that, while institutional language policies are beginning to encourage alternative perspectives beyond the critical establishment of monolingual claims derived from the national bilingual policies and are considering options of multi and plurilingual policy projects, there are invisibilities in the design and implementation of those policies. To understand this, we were inspired by Mazzei's (2011) decolonial proposal on *silences as* an analytical tool that reveals unnoticed power relationships. Those silences are represented in the absence of voice or the exercise of oppressing other voices, which is usually the result of structural injustice. In particular, to guide the discussion, three dimensions of linguistic social injustice—economic inequality, cultural domination and unequal political participation (Piller, 2016)—are the basis for understanding how those invisibilities manifest in both institutional policies and the discourses of administrative representatives who described their experience towards those policies. The first characteristic has to do with institutional policies perpetuating the oblivion of economic imbalance.

Keeping in mind the socioeconomic conditions that characterize the Colombian context, it is important to remember that this country has been recently categorized as one of the most socioculturally imbalanced in South America (Cruz-Arcila, 2018). Under these circumstances, we aim to show how the economic imbalance seems to be exacerbated and also how these issues have been silenced in institutional policy. Institutional policies leave out the economic distribution that marks disadvantage and, consequently, causes a deeper division between *us* (the ones in privilege) and *the others* (the ones in disadvantage). Echoing Santos (2007), this division is such that the other side of the line vanishes as reality becomes non-existent. Nonexistence means not-existing in any relevant or comprehensible way of being (p. 43).
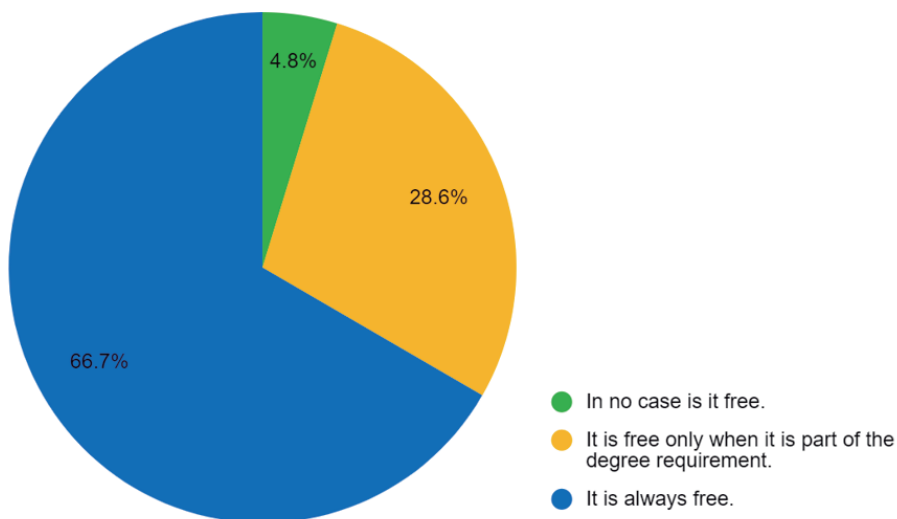
In the economic dimension, it is important to note that 14 of the 16 universities involved in the study were state universities, which primarily serve low socio-economic strata (MEN, n. d.). Therefore, socioeconomic privilege is not one of the characteristics defining the majority of those institutions. On the contrary, because of the disadvantageous social and economic conditions, one of the most critical aspects to implement multicultural policies

has to do with the lack of resources and government support, as affirmed by one of our interviewees (U5Participant7). In this sense, implicit relationships represent the silencing of socioeconomic realities that stand between policy intentions and students' academic and linguistic profiles.. This is reflected in strategies and guidelines students follow during their educational trajectories, especially at the undergraduate level, but similarly throughout their postgraduate education. It includes educational goals, the requirements to be admitted to the university, and the requirements for graduation. In this fashion, although other languages are emerging as part of the offer and requirements (e.g., CSL, ẽbẽra Chamí, Kriol, Mandarin, and Japanese), English is quite prevalent at most of the universities as the students' best possibility for acquiring a second language (U2, U4, U5). At the undergraduate level, for example, that can be seen as an opportunity in superficial terms because the majority of those institutions offer this chance for free, through strategies of curricular inclusion (Figure 1).

However, these policies usually assume that, by doing this, students obtain expected optimal results. In opposition, negative results are interpreted either in deficit or in discriminatory practices

Figure 1 Language Course Offering

Is the offer to learn different languages, as part of mandatory or optional undergraduate education, free of charge?

- 4.8%
- 28.6%
- 66.7%

- In no case is it free.
- It is free only when it is part of the degree requirement.
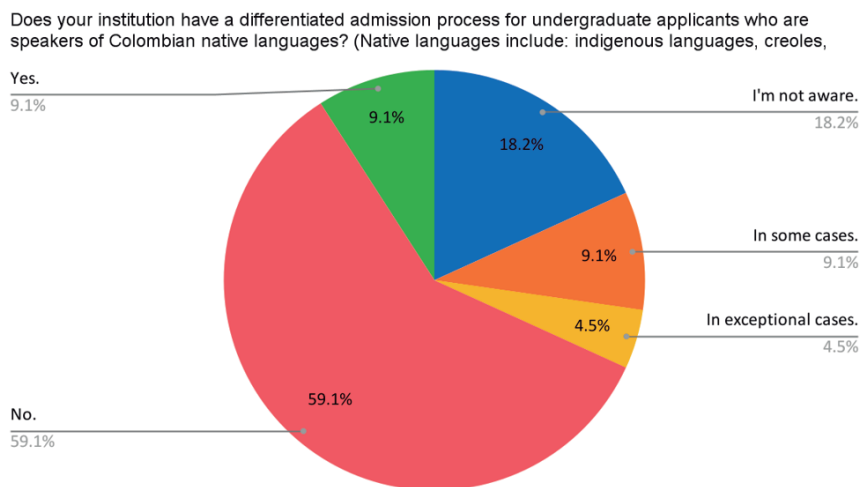- It is always free.

(Gillborn, 2005). In the frame of social justice outlined by CRT, those deficit perspectives evade and are silent on understanding inequality as a factor that configures an individual's identity and naturalizes poverty in racialized structures (Ortega & Soto, 2024). That is, students that belong to communities at a socio-economic disadvantage (ethnic, rural minorities and Deaf population, for example) are expected to develop homogenized learning attitudes towards the language, and their institutional communicational needs are invisibilized. As can be seen in Figure 2, native languages are rarely considered in admission processes. Also,

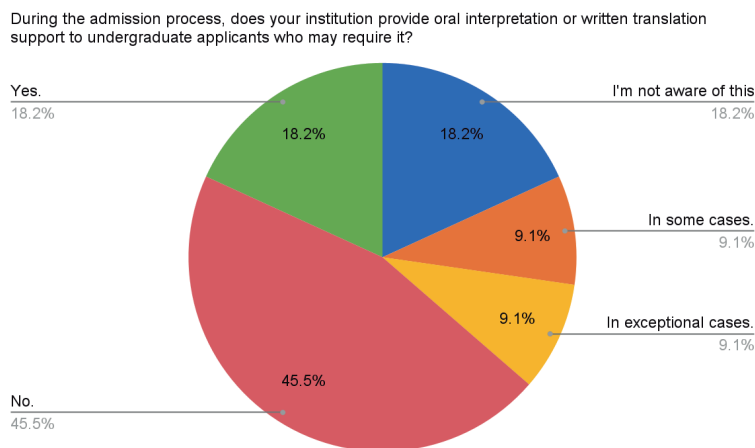Figure 3 portrays the limited interpreting and translations services for these applicants.

In the case of some postgraduate programs, the option to learn a second language is reduced to an acceptance or finishing requirement. This requirement is not free at any university, and, in some cases, it is validated through an international exam, e.g., TOEFL or IELTS (U2, U3). Additionally, these tests must be paid for in foreign currency, making this requirement even more expensive. Then, we find these situations silence economic distribution, increase pressures for students who have limited economic

Figure 2 Native Languages in Admission Processes

Does your institution have a differentiated admission process for undergraduate applicants who are speakers of Colombian native languages? (Native languages include: indigenous languages, creoles,

- Yes. 9.1%
- I'm not aware. 18.2%
- In some cases. 9.1%
- In exceptional cases. 4.5%
- No. 59.1%

Figure 3 Interpreting and Translation in Admission Processes

During the admission process, does your institution provide oral interpretation or written translation support to undergraduate applicants who may require it?

- Yes. 18.2%
- I'm not aware of this 18.2%
- In some cases. 9.1%
- In exceptional cases. 9.1%
- No. 45.5%

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conditions, and make it difficult for them to reach their academic goals. In this respect, U5Participant6 confirms: "if students do not reach their levels, they do not complete their program. Then, they cannot graduate either.... Then, this is mandatory."

We find this silence on economic distribution to be intrinsically related to the cultural domination of English, a fact that creates dysconsciousness and abyssal thinking. The former has to do with the inability to critically understand reality as an effect of the historical formation of injustice (King, 1991), and the latter refers to "the creation and invisibilization of the 'other' located on the other side of the abyssal lines" (Bonilla Medina & Finardi, 2022, p, 827). This revelation relates to the oppression local communities may find within the university environment where their language and culture are absent and ignored. Despite some universities explicitly stating that different languages (though usually foreign languages) can be learned to fulfill graduation requirements, all of the interviewees noted that their universities (U1, U2, U3, U4, U5) adhered to official governmental guidelines regarding language proficiency, mirroring the CEFR (Ayala Zárate & Álvarez, 2005; Miranda Montenegro, 2023)—with most expecting undergraduates to achieve a B1 level. These mechanisms for recognizing achievements are shallow as they disregard the disadvantages of populations that differ greatly from communities where these frameworks were idealized and deepen constructions on disparity that students could bring to the institution. Therefore, students who do not achieve those suggested levels enroot themselves in the dominant discourses of English as success and are faced with a choice: either they achieve their linguistic goals by investing money on those exams or they self-discriminate as being part of the subalternized individuals who are "not able" to achieve expected language goals.

Policies usually disregard the individual and collective possibilities of special populations. For instance, as shown in Figure 2, although multilingual policies promote intercultural, plural and multilingual perspectives as their approach (U1, U3, U5), in practice, the diverse needs of different groups of speakers do not receive adequate attention. For example: "The university is always looking to train graduates ...that master a language. We focus mainly on foreign ones. In this case, a language that gives opportunities to these graduates... to study and become better" (U4Participant5).

From another perspective, the institutional environment appears to be insufficient to reach multilingual and multicultural goals. In this regard, we noticed that other languages are introduced as a requirement for the university professor profile in their hiring and categorization processes (U1, U2, U3, U4, U5). Nonetheless, similar to what happens with students' educational goals, silence is shown in how the universities afford teaching devices to meet those language needs. One of our participants (U3) suggests accordingly: "the university establishes mechanisms to evaluate students but does not provide mechanisms to turn this into a successful process". Last but not least, the physical and pedagogical environment is clearly more silent on the community's needs as reported in the cross-analysis of documents. Only U5 pointed out hiring of professional interpreters to support institutional access to Deaf students who are CSL users. The silence on socio-cultural differences as well as the suppression of the voice of the multilingual and multicultural populations push the pressure for recognition, ignoring constructions of empathy or a distant relationship with the "*other*". Hence, dysconsciousness also produces abyssal thinking by standing on normalized discriminatory practices.

The last layer we want to explore is the invisibility of participation in policy making as a question of neoliberal pressures and privilege. Here, we refer to the work of policy agents, that is, individuals, groups or entities who are responsible for the design, interpretation, appropriation and follow up process of language policies. Their roles

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are important as they decide towards bilingualism, multilingualism or plurilingualism as part of institutional identity. In this sense, we found that the development and delivery of policy documents are handled by collegiate bodies such as the Superior[5] and the Academic Councils[6] in public universities, and the Board of Directors in private universities, who have been assigned this responsibility. Although the support documents by some universities (U1, U3) refer to teachers, students, administrators and ethnic communities participating in policy construction, the collegiate entities are usually the ones participating in the planning of institutional policies. Then, it can be inferred that a top-down approach to policy making remains in practice. This analysis suggests that *silence* is a continuum in terms of participation as none of the official documents presented explicit information about communities or representatives of communities belonging to the multi-diversity of the Colombian territory having a voice in the planning, design and delivery of institutional language policies.

This presumptive absence of participation of diverse communities suggests that the promulgation of multilingual or plurilingual policies maintains a monolingual, monocultural view since reality continues to be observed from an outsiders' perspective (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). That is, the ones commanding the process of policy development are people who do not represent the sensibilities of racialized (ethnic, class, gender) minorities who can provide valuable understanding of necessary adjustments. From one perspective, policymakers are transitionally influenced by their privileged position; but, from another, they are highly influenced by the pressures of neoliberal discourses reproduced in national and international policy mandates forcing them to comply with global marketing demands (Bonilla-Medina & Samacá-Bohórquez, 2023; Miranda & Valencia, 2019). It is clear that institutional policies impregnated with neoliberal interests

underscore the power of institutional entities that subaltern the voice of the communities that should be benefited by multilingual and multicultural policies. Thus, policy decisions tend to invisibilize not only minoritized identities but also their languages by following the ideas that language policies use to hierarchize English and Spanish over other languages in the country (Usma Wilches, 2009). This ongoing prominence prolongs discriminatory practices.

Initiatives for Multilingualism: Opening Decolonial Cracks

As previously mentioned, English has been hierarchized as the language of science (Hamel, 2007) and a required skill in higher education, tagging minoritized languages as non-desirable. Resistance to this narrative is latent and sometimes apparent, such as in some initiatives by the participating institutions that have opened decolonial cracks, challenging the coloniality of language (Veronelli, 2015). According to Walsh (2015), "the cracks become the place and space from which action, militancy, resistance, insurgency, transgression and pedagogy are advanced, alliances are built and something else is invented, created and constructed" (p. 9). In the following, we detail some instances of these cracks.

Our data show that universities are expanding their repertoire of institutional languages. For instance, most institutions provide courses in different languages, including CSL and native languages. CSL is offered at several universities, used in the institutional webpage and anthem of one of them (U5), and the means of instruction of an academic program (U1). In fact, according to survey results, seven out of the 16 surveyed institutions have a differentiated admission process for undergraduate applicants who are CSL users. As for the increase in motivation to study this language, one interviewee affirms: "There is an increasing interest among students in learning CSL... For example, I see this in this new request [of courses] from Engineering

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5 *Consejo Superior*
6 *Consejo Académico*

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students, Architecture, and other programs that had never requested CSL" (U1Participant1).

Indigenous languages such as Nasa-Yuwe, Kriol, ēbēra Chamí, Wayuunaiki and Minika, which were not studied or even heard of in universities before, have become part of the linguistic landscape at these institutions, challenging the "complicities with capitalism" (Walsh, 2023, p. 19) of global universities that often uncritically accept English as the only language deserving to be part of the official curriculum. In valuing Colombia's native languages as part of the country's cultural heritage, four of the surveyed universities have developed differentiated admissions processes for undergraduate applicants who speak native Colombian languages, and the same number of institutions offer optional courses in Indigenous languages.

Besides, we found that U5 has also designed its institutional printed pieces in native languages. Regarding the new place of native languages in the institution, one interviewee mentioned: "It seems to me that [it] has been a success from the point of view of attenuating the hegemony of English... The program... has also opened a space... that allows us to recognize Indigenous languages within the university" (U4Participant4).

Faculty and administrators have adapted policies and purposefully made changes that take into account the sociolinguistic profile of the institutions and society at large. For instance, in U4, the usefulness of the requirement for undergraduate students from the foreign languages program to write the thesis in English or French was questioned:

> Up to a few years ago . . . our final degree projects were in English or French... At a certain point in our history, we realized something: What is the readability of these works within the community we work with? Perhaps none. Why do we only write our texts in English and French in the hope that there is an imaginary public? (U4Participant 4).

In U4, writing the thesis in English or French was denaturalized as faculty unlearned (Walsh, 2023) the established 'need' to show that language students are capable of producing this academic genre in foreign languages. Instead, the focus readdressed the actual language practices of the readers, dismissing the elaborated "inevitability" of English monolingualism in academic publications (Hamel, 2007). Similarly, the foreign language entry requirement for some graduate programs was lifted in U6 as this university realized that keeping the requirement would restrict the study opportunity for a large number of applicants. Likewise, U1 decided to change the foreign language requirement in the job openings as "it was seen as a barrier, a limitation for professors to be appointed" (U1Participant1).

Not only have universities adapted their restrictive policies, but they have also created new institutional multilingual and plurilingual ones. We identified three recent institutional policies focused on multi- and plurilingualism (U1, U3, U5) that include the country's linguistic diversity in an attempt to replace previous official documents focused on English. These policies seek to recognize, respect and value the linguistic and cultural diversity of the country while also aiming at goals ranging from sharing knowledge production to achieving access and equity. The documents take the rhetorical forms of institutional program (U3) and language policy (U1, U5).

U3 embraces the term *plurilingualism* to refer to "the ability of individuals to use more than one language or variety of language as a way to ensure better communication and a means to access cultural heritage." In this conceptualization, U3 follows the tradition of the Council of Europe, which distinguishes between individual plurilingualism—that can be achieved through education—and social multilingualism—which is already present in societies (Ruiz Bikandi, 2012).

U1 chooses the concept of *multilingualism*, which they define as "the flexible use that individuals or

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social groups make of their communicative repertoire, with resources in two or more languages and varying levels of proficiency…" (U1Participant1). In these conceptualizations, both the individual and social use of languages are considered part of multilingualism (García et al., 2023). For its part, U5 prefers to invoke second and foreign language proficiency and focus on language education for undergraduate students. The delay in sanctioning these three policies, proposed over a year ago for U1 and U3, may reveal the challenges these initiatives face in gaining institutional agreement.

Besides policy development, translation services also account for an interest in multilingualism. Although the translation of written documents involves mostly English, the fact that four of the 16 institutions surveyed translate documents into other foreign languages and that one university does translation into CSL evidences an interest in translation services that might continue to grow, as this interviewee points out: "In the translation agency, that has taken off a lot, the number of people looking for us to translate texts from Spanish into English… We hope it becomes more multilingual" (U5Participant8). U5Participant8's aspiration to provide translations in languages other than English reflects her commitment to inclusivity and addressing disparities in language representation and status.

Survey results also suggest that some universities provide interpreting services, mainly in CSL (Figure 4). Acknowledging the importance of having interpreting services, an interviewee comments: "I'm in charge of hiring the professors of the Interpreting program and I can't communicate with them, right? … there are the interpreters, [and] there is the professor [name], who serves as a channel" (U1Participant1).

Another strategy for expanding interpreting is through the academic offer. Two universities provide undergraduate programs on CSL translation and interpreting. By educating professionals in this field, they contribute to improving accessibility to social and academic life for the Deaf community and individuals without access to foreign languages.

Conclusions

This research informs various areas of language policy in higher education. As demonstrated in the study, institutional language policy entails key critical social, cultural and economic issues that are often ignored, such as professor recruitment, knowledge dissemination, or institutional environment. As a recommendation, we are certain that addressing language policy from such a broader perspective within universities—and

Figure 4 Interpreting Services Offer
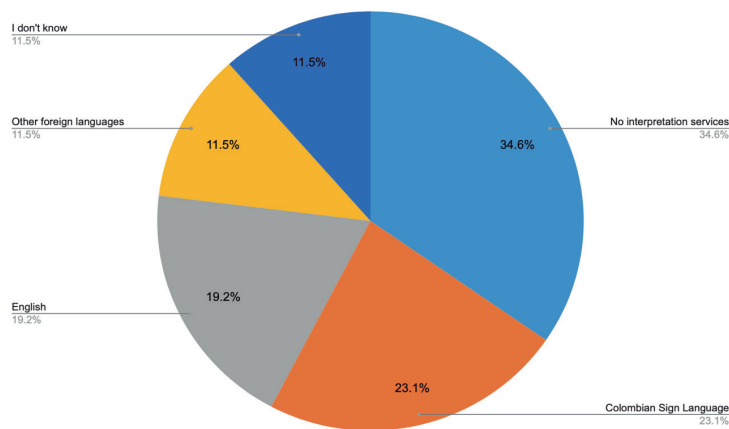
not just considering issues related to teaching and learning—allows for a better understanding of the complexities of how language-related decisions and contextual relationships impact language use, status and ideologies, in addition to acquisition.

From a critical and decolonial perspective, it is observable in the results that several multilingual and multicultural intentions in institutional language policies in higher education still remain in an atmosphere where English predominates over other foreign and local languages. This prevalence perpetuates social inequalities represented and accentuated in oblivion of economic imbalance, invisibility of cultural domination and disparity of political participation mediated by English-centered policies. In this regard, a second recommendation is to review current policies that privilege English to ensure they do not perpetuate social, economic, and cultural inequalities. When institutional language policies are labeled as foreign language policies but focus solely on English, they may conceal these inequalities.

A salient concern arising from the study is the disregard for a multilingual institutional environment. Access to a multilingual environment creates an atmosphere that is conducive to getting acquainted with and appreciating languages, which is a simple but primary aim of multilingual policies. As criticized by Piller (2016), policies on multilingualism keep on configuring white supremacy and Eurocentric views that invisibilize and silence the knowledge and needs of marginalized communities, including the community of English as second language speakers in the global sphere. In this way, we see that the imaginaries surrounding the language and the political intentions to develop inclusive practices of multilingualism are still insufficient and scarce.

Despite the still pervasive English monolingual mindset in higher education, we acknowledge that language policies *otherwise* are beginning to open up spaces for multilingualism, embracing linguistic diversity. Universities have begun to recognize historically

neglected languages, such as Indigenous ones. This is a step forward in recognizing the sociocultural identity of these languages speakers and contributing to equity. However, it is necessary to transition to explicit and official institutional policies that reposition these languages by granting them a more permanent role in higher education. As Walsh (2023) notes, "[t]he fissures and cracks are not the solution, but the possibility of something else, something present, emerging, and persistently taking shape and hold" (p. 7).

Therefore, as universities strive for linguistic diversity, it is imperative to determine, identify, and address the underlying structural injustices that perpetuate inequalities. If the education system works persistently to defeat historic and contemporary barriers—through raising awareness of social issues in policy making by recognizing that such praxis may hinder access and limit opportunities for diverse student populations—a multilingual perspective could start to take form.

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Appendix: Sample of survey questions*

Multilingualism Policies for Higher Education Access

1. In your institution, is the admissions process for undergraduate programs done only in Spanish (information about the programs, submitting documentation, admission tests, registration, enrollment, etc.) or can it be done in other languages?

- Only in Spanish.
- In Spanish and in some cases in other languages.
- In Spanish and in exceptional cases in other languages.
- I don't know.

2. Does your institution have a differentiated admissions process for undergraduate applicants who use Colombian Sign Language?

- Yes.
- In some cases.
- In exceptional cases.
- I don't know.

3. Does your institution have a differentiated admissions process for undergraduate applicants who speak Colombian Native languages (Native languages include Creole, Indigenous and Romani languages)?

- Yes.
- In some cases.
- In exceptional cases.
- No.
- I don't know.

4. Does your institution have a differentiated admissions process for undergraduate applicants who speak a foreign language?

- Yes.
- In some cases.
- In exceptional cases.
- I don't know.

*Note: Questions were asked in Spanish but translated into English for this article.