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This is an **author produced version** of a paper published in:

Disability & Society 38.2 (2023): 305 – 322

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2021.1932758>

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*“This is an Accepted Manuscript version of the following article, accepted for publication in Disability & Society. Calderón Albornoz, M. P., & Rodríguez Herrero, P. (2023). Social representations of intellectual impairments in universities: the educational implications of a case study in Chile.38(2), 305–322. It is deposited under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.”*

Calderón Albornoz, P., & Rodríguez Herrero, P. (2023). Social representations of intellectual impairments in universities: The educational implications of a case study in Chile. *Disability & Society*, 38(2), 305-322.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2021.1932758>

## **Social Representations of Intellectual Impairments in Universities: The Educational Implications of a Case Study in Chile**

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**Abstract:** This paper presents the results of a study setting out to identify changes in the construction of social representations held by members of the academic and student community concerning the active participation at their university of students with intellectual impairments. The approach was qualitative, with phenomenological methodology, a case study, and in-depth interviews as the data-gathering instrument. The sample comprised 15 participants from different groups at a Chilean university (senior managers, academic managers, teachers and students) which offers a programme for young people with intellectual impairments. The most important results are that, in the areas of socialization and participation, elements of exclusion and social representations

based on deficits still persist. Our conclusions enable the creation of educational and administrative guidelines for strengthening inclusiveness in university programmes for both students with intellectual impairments and whole university community.

Keywords: Social representations, university, intellectual impairments, exclusion, inclusive education.

## **Introduction**

Social representations theory analyses the socially constructed and shared common sense of different social groups (Jodolet 1986). Thus social representations enable a group to share a social vision that allows its members to interpret the world they live in and establish common patterns in social communication processes. As established by Moscovici (1984; 1988) social representations theory rests on the following assumptions: (1) that social life is constructed through communication between individual members of society and rooted in customs and historic development; (2) that social representations are embodied in verbal expressions and social functioning; (3) that incompatible representations can exist within a single society; and (4) that these incompatibilities are often ignored, since certain social representations are constructed as self-evident truths. On this basis, disability theory has been able to adopt a relational paradigm in which the hegemonic discourses on people with disabilities are seen as shaped in historic fields defined by the political, economic, social and cultural processes characterising different periods, which construct a range of categories for situating people with disabilities (Sartori 2010). In short, social representations theory is a suitable conceptual tool for analysing collectively constructed processes identifying the normal and the different within

a given society (Tuval and Orr 2009); in this specific case with regard to social representations at a university where students with intellectual impairments take courses. These students are characterized by having a recognised intellectual impairment and hence general learning difficulties. This study, then, does not focus on the inclusion of students with specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia or dyscalculia.

In accordance with this social model, the exclusion of people with disabilities stems from social barriers that transcend individual perception and are therefore located in the field of established social representations (Guldvik and Lesjø 2014). Historically, Western culture's vision of disability has been accompanied by prejudices and negative attitudes towards people with disabilities (Sartori 2010). At the same time, theoretical models of inclusive education and their transference to universities have led to the design of policies and programmes attempting to increase the inclusion and participation of people with disabilities in university education. Booth and Ainscow (2004) define inclusion as a set of processes whose purpose is to increase and strengthen students' development and participation in culture, curricula and school communities, thereby creating ties and relationships that are the consequence of the social interactions experienced in these settings. The study presented in this paper aims to determine, by means of a case study, whether the incorporation of students with intellectual impairments into a university programme has caused a change in social representations regarding disability in the university community.

Inclusive education has developed considerably in recent decades. A number of social movements have enabled us to advance towards greater inclusiveness in university institutions, from both gender and race perspectives, and also in the area of disability. Thus access to universities for people with disabilities is now recognised in numerous national legal directives and international documents (O'Connor et al. 2012). For example in the USA, the Higher

Education Opportunity Act (2008) defined specific strategies for increasing the inclusion of students with intellectual impairments in universities (Lee 2009). In Australia and the UK the Disability Standards for Education (2005) and the Equality Act (2010) established anti-discrimination measures in post-compulsory education (O'Connor et al. 2012). In Ireland the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2015-2019) aimed amongst other things to increase the participation of students with intellectual impairments in higher education (Corby, Taggart and Cousins 2018). In Spain, the *Ley Orgánica de Universidades* (Organic Law on University Education, 2001) and the *Ley General de Derechos de las Personas con Discapacidad y de su Inclusión Social* (General Law on the Rights of Persons with Disability and their Social Inclusion, 2013) stipulated the guaranteeing of equal opportunities in university access for students with disabilities (Rodríguez, Izuzquiza and Cabrera 2020). Lastly, in Chile, Law 20.422 (República de Chile 2010) set out the Regulations on Equality of Opportunities and Social Inclusion for People with Disabilities, numbering amongst its basic principles a form of higher education that facilitates access and adopts measures to ensure the continuance and progress of disabled students at university.

Despite these advances, people with intellectual impairments are still one of the social groups with the greatest difficulty in gaining access to higher education (O'Connor et al. 2012). Since the late 1980s university programmes designed for students with intellectual impairments have been set up in countries such as Canada (Uditsky and Hughson 2012), Australia (Rillota, Arthur and Hutchinson 2018), the USA (Plotner and Marshal 2015), Finland (Saloviita 2000), Ireland (O'Connor et al. 2012) and Spain (Rodríguez, Izuzquiza and Cabrera 2020). There is ample evidence of the positive impact of university education on students' quality of life, for example the recognition of their rights as a social minority; development of self-esteem and professional skills (Hart et al. 2006; Izuzquiza 2012); enhanced insertion in the labour market

(Grigal and Dwyre 2010; Moswela and Mukhopadhyay 2011; Izuzquiza and Rodríguez 2016); increased self-knowledge and development of meaningful social networks (Plotner and May 2017; Uditsky and Hughson 2012); growth in personal maturity (Uditsky and Hughson 2012); and advances in learning (Lynch and Getzel 2013). Further, Kubiak (2015), analysing the university community, recognised its identification of the multiplicity and complexity of different ways of learning. Thus the impact of these programmes on the university community results in improvement in expectations of these students' performance (Hart et al. 2006); the opening up of areas of diversity and interaction (Zacarías et al. 2015); and changes in perceptions and attitudes towards people with disability, produced by the experience of participation and involvement in a range of programmes, from the standpoint of social responsibility (Izuzquiza and Rodríguez 2016). These studies confirm that the university can be an appropriate setting for students with intellectual impairments to receive post-compulsory education and training favouring their social inclusion and labour market insertion (Izuzquiza and Rodríguez 2016).

Despite this positive impact, political, cultural, physical, cognitive and pedagogical barriers have also been found affecting the real inclusion of students with intellectual impairments. While a number of studies have examined the opinions of the educational community on the inclusion of people with intellectual impairments in universities (Hart et al. 2006; Kubiak 2017; Rodríguez, Izuzquiza, and Cabrera 2020; Spassiani et al. 2017), there are none analysing these from the perspective of social representations. Bearing in mind, as we previously noted, the importance of the latter in analysing attitudes, prejudices and the establishment of barriers, it seems that this type of study can afford valuable knowledge towards building more effective inclusive education in universities. Thus, the study presented here has the following objectives: (1) to identify the social representations constructed around

people with intellectual impairments and their participation in universities among the members of the university community in a Chilean institution offering a programme for students with intellectual impairments; and (2) to determine the changes in the interactions underlying the behaviour of the university community towards people with intellectual impairments on the basis of the representational field of constructed subjectivities.

## **Method**

Consistent with the objectives of the study, we scrutinize social representations from a qualitative perspective, with a phenomenological design centred on the participants' perceptions, taking a Chilean university programme for students with intellectual impairments as a case study. In-depth interviews with different groups from the university community were used as the research technique.

The study was assessed favourably by the ethical committee of the coordinating institution. Ethical issues are extremely important in the field of research with human beings, and particularly in that of disability. Following the ethical code of the American Psychological Association (APA 2003) the principles of confidentiality, respect for participants, informed consent and participants' access to study results were applied. Also, in accordance with the methodological design, the researchers endeavoured not to condition in any way the education community's image of students with intellectual impairments. Consistent with the view of research as an essential means of transforming education and society, the results, conclusions and recommendations were shared with those in charge of the programme and other relevant academic staff at the university involved in the case study.

### *Context of the study*

Since the 1980s Chilean higher education has advanced towards more inclusive models, attempting to ensure access for students from different socio-economic backgrounds and historically excluded groups (Ahumada and Mora 2020; Ocampo 2014), and endeavouring to overcome the traditional selective, homogenous approach, designed for elite education (Paz 2020). Progress in this direction can now be seen, with the appearance of special admissions systems, student recruitment procedures aimed at boosting equal opportunities in university access exams, and the creation of bodies such as the Inclusive Higher Education Networks (RESI in their Spanish initials) in various regions of the country. Funding for programmes and actions fostering inclusion in Chilean universities come both from the National Disability Service and from Education Ministry aid for students with good academic performance; thus they do not expressly take the special case of students with intellectual impairments into account. The 2015 National Disability Survey (ENDISC II) found that among students with impairments in higher education, 9.1% finished their courses, while 5.9% did not.

In the field of university autonomy, Chilean universities are able to create specific qualifications for students with intellectual impairments, as in the case study presented here.

For the purposes of this study the Labour Skills Diploma, a social and labour training programme designed for young people with intellectual impairments in the Faculty of Education and Social Sciences at a Chilean university, was chosen. The programme began in 2006, with the aim of offering university access to students with intellectual impairments having the basic academic and socio-emotional competencies needed to study in a normal setting such as a university. The objectives of the programme were to enhance the cognitive,



emotional and social development of young people with intellectual impairments, strengthen their self-esteem, autonomy and social skills, and develop specific working skills through personalised training responding to their abilities and interests.

The study lasted three years, over the six academic semesters of a programme comprising 26 modules, eight optional areas, five optional specialisations and three specialised internships, and including the subjects of Personal Development, Autonomy, Language and Communication, Mathematical Competencies, IT, Specialities, Speciality Selections and Specialised Work Experience. The first stage of the programme, taking place over the first semesters, was conceived as an active exploration of skills and interests through an approach to various areas of knowledge.

The second year (third and fourth semesters) developed specific, practical work skills in more depth through training in one of the specialisations offered by the programme: (a) administrative assistant; (b) early childhood education assistant; (c) greenhouses and gardens; (d) veterinary assistant; and (e) catering assistant.

Lastly, the programme included specialised internships in companies and institutions where the different specialisations were practised, beginning in the fourth semester and continuing through the fifth and sixth, and gradually increasing in frequency in order to ease the student's adaptation to the workplace. Also, throughout the programme, students could take part in artistic, cultural and sports workshops offered to all students by the university. The programme's entry requirements were that candidates were 18 or over, had completed middle school in an inclusive setting or its equivalent in special needs education, and had a medical and psychological record demonstrating that their behaviour and autonomy were compatible with life in an open university environment.

At the time of the study 402 students had previously graduated from the programme and 141 students were enrolled on it, divided among centres in the Metropolitan Region (Santiago campus), the Fifth Region (Viña del Mar campus), and the Eighth Region (Concepción campus) of Chile, each campus having three groups of students.

Hart et al. (2006) identified various models of inclusion in universities for people with intellectual impairments, summarised thus: (a) the separate model, in which students participate only in activities with other students with disability; (b) the mixed model, in which students participate in activities with people without disabilities, at the same time as carrying out others with classmates with intellectual impairments; (c) the individual inclusive model, in which regular courses are adapted so that students with intellectual impairments can take them fully with non-disabled students. The Diploma in Labour Skills, at the university featured in the case study, could be included in the mixed model, since the students enrolled on it took modules of their own but also participated in other university activities with non-disabled students.

### ***Participants***

The sample comprised 15 people, among them 2 senior managers, 3 academic managers, 2 lecturers and 8 undergraduate students in the Education and Social Sciences Faculty where the course for students with intellectual impairments was offered. 3 participants were men and 12 women. The mean age was 20 among students, and 49 for the other groups of participants. Thus all the participants played different roles in the faculty where the programme was carried out. Participants were chosen through an intentional sample.

### *Instrument*

An in-depth interview with a specially designed script was used as the data-gathering instrument. When designing and scripting the instrument we employed a set of categories taken from Moscovici's (1976) definition of social representations:

- (1) Dimension of information: the dimension relating to the organisation of a particular group's knowledge regarding a social object; in this case intellectual impairments, the inclusive model, rights and duties, public policy and accessibility to higher education.
- (2) The dimension of the field of representation: the dimension relating to the visualisation of content in terms of positive and negative properties, ideological factors, the image and circumscribed social model of the inclusion of people with intellectual impairments in universities.
- (3) Dimension of attitudes: this refers to the favourable or unfavourable orientations or attitudes expressed towards the object of the social representation, in particular actual relations with people with intellectual impairments in the framework of relationships among the academic and student community, barriers and support.

The interview was validated by four experts, two with experience in carrying out university training programmes for young people with intellectual impairments, and two with experience in qualitative research in the field of disability. Also a pilot study was performed with four people from the participating groups in order to test the clarity of the questions. The validation and pilot study resulted in the definition of a script of 19 wide-ranging, open questions contextualised within the three dimensions described above.

## ***Procedure***

Firstly the university and the heads of the training programme for students with intellectual impairments were contacted and informed of the objectives and scope of the study. Once authorization was obtained, the programme managers contacted participants fulfilling the features of the population under study, thereby completing the sample. Seven interviews were carried out face-to-face and eight over the telephone, with an average duration of 50 minutes. Some interviews had to be administered over the telephone due to closure of the university during the civil disorders Chile was experiencing at the time. All the interviews, with the participants' consent, were recorded and complemented with written notes. Finally, on completion of the interviews, their content was analysed. The IT program Maxqda 2020 was used for the qualitative analysis.

## **Results**

Taking into account the study dimensions chosen, the results enabled us to identify the following categories and subcategories emerging from the discourse analysis: (1) Information: Knowledge of public policy and Knowledge of inclusion approach; (2) Representation: Image of intellectual impairments and Interactions with students with intellectual impairments; (3) Attitudes: Barriers, Factors easing inclusion and Improvements.

## *Analysis by categories*

### *Field of information*

In most participants we observed knowledge stemming from traditional descriptive concepts of intellectual impairments, featuring a vision of reduced capacities or limitations requiring differential treatment, the use of simple language, adaptation of premises and a more caring or understanding approach to the academic challenges of university education: ‘Obviously with them you have to treat them differently according to their way of expressing themselves and the skills they have’ (manager 1); ‘We still need to adapt the specific forms of support to the system and the person and the institution itself: teaching colleagues, the casino, university spaces, people in charge of them, etc.’ (senior manager 2).

This differential view in participants’ discourse revealed a concept of diversity based on integration (as opposed to a model of inclusion focusing on the context and barriers), thus associating the programme with the role of a space for training or skills development in autonomy and labour competencies: ‘... they incorporate students with different abilities so that they can achieve autonomy and study to get a job’ (student 1); ‘I relate it to the integration of people with different abilities, it’s not that they’re different as people, it’s difficult to explain’ (student 2). This discourse is based, then, on a model of integrating people with disability, rather than one of inclusion featuring the transformation of the environment for a more inclusive form of university education.

Regarding the regulations on inclusive university education, participants were not aware of the legal framework (in Chile, Law no. 20.422 setting out the Regulations on Equality of Opportunities and Social Inclusion of People with Disability in Higher Education), and it

was confused with the regulations referring to non-university education and labour inclusion. It was notable that this confusion was present not only among students but also those in management positions; for example manager 1, who stated: ‘The government has the law of inclusion, obliging companies to have a minimum number for inclusion in work positions’; while student 1 affirmed that ‘There are laws in Chile that try to integrate all human beings belonging to our society so that they can study or work without being excluded’.

With respect to the recognition of the right to education, there was more awareness among managers, final year students and lecturers, while those in the first years of their degrees had less knowledge of the subject. Common opinions on the absence of regulations concerning access and permanence at university were identified in references to the lack of public policy on inclusion of students with intellectual impairments and their right to higher education: ‘The topics of access and disability are not on the table and this seems to me completely contradictory. It’s unacceptable that someone with some kind of limitation can’t have access to a different type of education’ (senior manager 1). Also, among students, there emerged ideas and information associated with the human rights view of education as a universal right, open to all, featuring access to education without limits or distinctions. For example, student 7 stated: ‘If we have the opportunity, it seems right to me that they should too. I don’t even see it as an issue’.

### *Field of representation*

An image of students with intellectual impairments constructed on the basis of factors differentiating them from other students was notable in interviewees’ discourse. Participants referred to their different pace of learning, reduced abilities for autonomous learning

development, and the requirement for a different type of treatment, particularly in the case of senior managers, academic managers and lecturers: ‘They’re obviously students with a different condition, but through the programme they gradually get involved in university activities and life, which means that sometimes you don’t even notice the difference’ (student 3); ‘Despite the advances and all the international recommendations, the protectionist approach continues, with social behaviour that doesn’t change, like thinking that they’re people with limited abilities’ (lecturer 3); ‘Obviously with them you have to treat them differently according to their way of expressing themselves and the skills they have’ (manager 1).

At the same time, some students’ discourse revealed a differential concept in which ‘normality’ in the faculty could be broadened to include students with intellectual impairments: ‘... a girl with Down’s syndrome joined in a conversation I was having with some friends and showed us that, despite everything, she was a normal person’ (Student 1). However, this representation did not coincide with the inclusive approach, since it was still couched in terms of the value of diversity, in this case with reference to what is or is not normal in a specific context.

Participants assessed the programme positively in terms of interaction between members of the university community with and without disability. Students saw it as an experience contributing to their education and personal development: ‘I think it’s really enriching to get to know people who are different because in this way we can learn from each other and change our opinions about things’ (Student 1); ‘I think they’re as capable as us but they learn in a different way, doing something more didactic, not formulas and reports but didactic’; ‘They’re so happy, I’d like to be like them, I really wish I was like that’ (Student 8).

Among lecturers, academic managers and senior managers the positive assessment was constructed from the perspective of reinterpreting their own experience of diversity. They also

related the programme to the construction of the institution's educational project, in pedagogic and strategic terms. Thus lecturer 4 stated: 'It's amazing how this experience enables those of us who're around these young people to change our mentality, attitudes, tolerance, acceptance, and so on. Sometimes I think that the teachers and students on the different courses gain more than they do. It's fantastic'. Similarly, according to manager 1: 'In broadening your mind, in seeing different people, in seeing that they have strengths that maybe you don't have and you have to empower them from this angle; tolerance'. Regarding the education of university teaching staff through participation in this type of programme, senior manager 2 affirmed that 'you discover a concept of pedagogy that's much more holistic, and this ends up affecting you as an authority and as a person'.

Similarly, all participants evaluated very highly the existence of the programme as an opportunity that other higher education institutions should also offer, affirming that this should not be the exception among universities: 'It's difficult to quantify the benefits and achievements. From education for all to the struggle for inclusion, for the students on the programme and their families' (lecturer 3); 'I was thrilled to speak about the programme, to talk about our work, about what they've achieved. I've seen many, many cases where the achievements have been really incredible' (manager 2).

The students stated that they had observed a high level of commitment among the teams leading the programme, valuing strongly their efforts to promote collaboration and interaction with the university community. For example student 2 stated that: 'The teachers are always willing to help them, they talk to everyone else, they encourage them to talk to all the other people'. However, the students themselves highlighted the need to boost education on subjects associated with intellectual impairments in universities, with the aim of creating more inclusive participatory interactions: 'If we saw and had information on how to relate to them it would be



a mutual aid, it would be useful for them and for us, the university would be like the infrastructure and the tools, but it's people who make the spaces' (Student 4).

### *Field of attitudes*

On the one hand, participants referred to the attitudes of the political institutions with regard to funding for university programmes for people with intellectual impairments. According to some managers this did not seem to be a priority in education policy for equal opportunities: 'Unfortunately they're expensive programmes, which makes them exclusive from the start' (manager 2); 'It's not a topic of concern on the public agenda, it hasn't been on the political agenda, I'm not aware of any serious public policies designed to deal with a subject like this' (senior manager 1).

Turning to attitudes and interpersonal skills, participants mentioned some people who had difficulties relating to people with intellectual impairments stemming from lack of knowledge of how to create ties with them or from their non-acceptance of difference: 'It doesn't bother me that suddenly they shout or speak louder, but there are people it does bother and they stop and leave' (student 8); 'They know how to include themselves, it's us who have the problem' (student 5). Also personal interactions encountered barriers in attitudes and procedures from the institution itself, which, according to lecturers and managers, did not sufficiently promote the creation of shared areas of inclusion: 'It's still not fully-fledged inclusion, they're areas, usually in the corridors, the casino, and so on, but not in academic or university activities' (lecturer 1); 'There's coexistence, but not mixed up, as they say. You see them, you come across them in the corridors, even at lunch they ask things, but we don't have classes together' (manager 1).

Overall, however, in the area of social and skills development, participants' attitudes towards the programme were positive. Some defined it thus: '... they're enabled to do things in the university: learn, achieve their objectives and in that way become autonomous in an area that's protected and familiar to the students' (student 1); 'It opens up experiences of social development to them, of understanding of life, autonomy. ...It gives them dignity' (lecturer 4); 'It helps them feel competent, to have a wider network of friends, to project themselves as people who contributes to society' (manager 1).

Regarding suggestions for improvements in the academic programme, all participant groups noted the urgent need to boost the visibility of these programmes. Both students and lecturers noted the need for this and similar programmes to be more widely known and their importance promoted, in the same way as other university courses: 'They should send you a mail, tell you that these people are getting degrees and do something for them, know more. Instead of it all being so hidden, because by hiding it you discriminate against them. Yesterday in the social media it wasn't mentioned that they were getting their diplomas, my friend wasn't mentioned, but engineering was'; 'It's a silent programme, they want to include them but they keep them apart' (student 8); 'The programme should be given more visibility, for example in academic extension activities, like for instance little jobs inside the university. We should make it known throughout the university and in other faculties. I think it could be much bigger, I'd like to see the diploma they get being recognised as an external qualification for getting a job, in all companies' (higher manager 1). Underlying this discourse are the tensions and inconsistencies of the institution itself with regard to inclusive education. An innovative inclusive programme has been created for students with intellectual impairments, while at the same time this programme is not made visible to the university community.

Another potential improvement that emerged was the need to make academic spaces

more inclusive. Participants stated that the programme functioned inclusively among the students with disability themselves but not in relation to the people studying on other courses at the same university. Thus lecturer 3 proposed ‘Creating joint activities, for example taking part in general modules, having optional subjects together or working with students on other courses in activities that create relationships with their surroundings’ (lecturer 3). Likewise, student 3 stated that ‘I’d like them to be able to get to know our classes and for us to know theirs’.

Lastly, the managers noted the need for these programmes to be recognised and promoted as state-regulated and certified university qualifications, in addition to their being recognised by the private sector and the labour market. ‘This is not a diploma, it doesn’t lead to a degree [referring to the qualification obtained]. Our idea is that they can go out into the working world with more and better tools, which means that they should be people who can integrate themselves in the working world in the future [by means of an official qualification]’ (manager 2).

## **Discussion**

Our results confirmed the findings of previous studies on the beneficial impacts, for the university community, of education that includes students with intellectual impairments; namely: the recognition of diversity and its contribution to a plural society (Hart et al. 2006); the opening up of areas of diversity and interaction (Zacaría et al. 2015); and certain changes in perceptions and attitudes towards people with disability (Izuzquiza and Rodríguez 2016). However, the most important results of this study are those showing the difficulties and deficiencies of the programme in realising truly effective inclusive education. In the discussion

we attempt to analyse and interpret the following significant results: Firstly, the conceptualisation of intellectual impairments based on the medical-rehabilitating model. Secondly, the willingness of the educational community to advance towards conceptualisations of intellectual impairments that are more oriented towards inclusion. Thirdly, the need, in participants' opinions, to make changes towards a model of inclusive education for people with intellectual impairments in universities at different levels. Fourthly, the conclusion that the programme offers neither inclusive processes nor the foundations for a model of inclusive education, although this may be its aim. These results suggest that it is necessary to advance towards more inclusive university education, eliminating existing barriers (Genova 2015), and staffed by educators trained to make their teaching accessible to all students. Models fostering more inclusive education, such as universal design for learning (UDL, Rose and Meyer, 2002), can guide education practice in universities, promoting multiple means of representation (variedad de formas en la presentación del contenido de las asignaturas a los estudiantes, por ejemplo mediante uso de videos, presentaciones, objetos, etc.), multiple means of expression and action (variedad de enfoques del proceso de enseñanza y aprendizaje que promueven distintas formas de expresion en los estudiantes, por ejemplo a través del trabajo cooperativo, investigaciones personales, etc.), and multiple means of engagement (variedad en el uso de técnicas e instrumentos de evaluación del aprendizaje y del progreso de los estudiantes, por ejemplo pruebas orales, exámenes escritos, juego de roles, etc.). The applications, orientations and recommendations of this approach help put into practice the principles of inclusion, diversity and equity in university classrooms (Burgstahler 2020).

The study of inclusion in universities from the perspective of the social representations model enables us to become aware of factors that afford greater comprehension of social interactions and of real, effective inclusive participation in this particular setting. Thus we can

affirm, as mentioned above, that conceptualisations of the intellectual impairments of the students on the university programme studied were associated with a medical-rehabilitatory paradigm; that is, the incorporation of university programmes for students with intellectual impairments has no reason to incur a change in the educational model or in interpersonal relationships among members of the university community. Rodríguez and Ferreira (2010) note the persistence of an image of intellectual impairments that shows the influence of social stigmas in universities, and argue that representations of subjects with different capacities – subjects who find themselves in situations of disability or with lower competences – are still shaped by ideas based on traditional, normative models. While this image of intellectual impairments is associated with a historic approach based on deficits (Baquetero 2015), it is also possible to find other causal factors, such as the lack of training of university teaching staff or the presence of prejudices among academics and students regarding the abilities and potentials of people with disabilities (Cerrillo, Izuzquiza and Egidio 2013).

Secondly, we observed the openness of students participating in activities linked to the programme to the deconstruction of the concept of disability within their university, valuing highly the programme's contribution to this necessary transition. Thus the results reveal student demand for a new approach to the phenomenon, highlighting the need to integrate more contemporary concepts of intellectual impairments into a new path of institutional development that would promote equity, quality and respect for differences, and which would take shape not solely in declarations of principles but also in the actual implementation of an inclusive university curriculum at all levels and in all programmes. Thus it is necessary to effect a shift towards discourses that raise consciousness, dismantle prejudices and eliminate all representations that deny diversity (Tapia and Manosalva 2012), in addition to shaping new languages consistent with this social transformation (Maturana 1997). Despite the prevalence

among participants of discourses centred on deficiency and based on the rehabilitatory model, we observed that the university community held attitudes favourable to transforming the concept of intellectual impairments and inclusive education in universities, along with the willingness needed for this change.

Analysis of the results also revealed the need, stated by participants, to move towards a model of inclusive university education for people with intellectual impairments on various levels: through education policies prioritising inclusive education as an essential feature of social justice, thereby promoting a firm, clear discourse on the adaptation and accessibility of university education to this group; through the development of innovative educational initiatives in the universities themselves that would create areas for dialogue and inclusive participation; and through the training of teaching staff and students in more equitable interaction, based not only on respect for differences but also on what people of all different types and abilities have in common. In this sense other studies (that is, Björnsdóttir 2017) also confirm the potentially positive impact of the creation of spaces for joint work and mutual aid among students both with and without intellectual impairments in the same faculty. The creation of university programmes for students with intellectual impairments is an opportunity to advance towards inclusive models of teaching and management in universities (Maltseva and Boyko 2017), as long as they are not isolated and invisible ‘niches.’ It is necessary to value diversity as a desirable quality of the university community which should be fomented through education and training (Rodriguez, Izuzquiza and Cabrera 2020), inclusive organisational culture (Bell et al. 2019), and the adoption of clear theoretical models (inclusion as a right) that are consistent with educational policy and the language used. If this does not occur, these programmes will not only be limited to isolated experiences in a few faculties, but will also

clearly reveal the inconsistencies of the university education system itself. We may speak, in that case, of disabling societal structures in universities (Lourens and Swartz 2016).

This study sheds light on these inconsistencies, since we found no concrete evidence either of processes of inclusion or of an inclusive educational model accompanied by training enabling changes in academics' and students' construction of social representations of university participation among youth with intellectual impairments, produced by their experience of relationships on training programmes designed for this group of students. Although the programme can be seen as an endeavour towards change, it needs to move, in Bourdieu's (2000) words, out of the conceptual realm towards the exercise of a new concept of social space, one that would be expressed in inclusive practices leading to progressive changes in the structure of the paradigms underpinning the institutional model of education: an approach that could be transferred to and introjected in the various university spaces and be adopted by members of the academic and student community to transform the construction of social representations of participation in universities of young people with intellectual impairments.

This study was designed to give voice to the main actors in the area of inclusive education in a university incorporating people with intellectual impairments amongst its students. From the standpoint of the inclusive model, the students with intellectual and other disabilities themselves should also be taken into consideration, as in other studies (Corby, Taggart and Cousins 2018; Moriña, Molina and Cortés-Vega 2017; Rodríguez, Izuzquiza and Cabrera 2020) – but also the other members of the university community. Otherwise, this line of research will not be inclusive either. Thus this study opens up new lines of research encompassing more widely the attitudes and perceptions of the whole university community towards inclusive education. This approach is essential, since quality standards defining

inclusive programmes for students with intellectual impairments (Grigal, Hart and Weir 2011) directly or indirectly involve the entire university community.

Certain limitations of this study should also be underscored. Due to its design, centred on a case study, the results are not necessarily transferable to all other university settings and contexts, although they do enable us to delineate important factors for inclusivity in university programmes for students with intellectual impairments. Thus it is necessary to consider the cultural and contextual factors of each setting if we wish to understand social representations in the university community in greater depth. Further, the sample of each group could have been wider, thereby favouring a greater triangulation of results.

Lastly we should also remark that a process of research does not only involve the identification of a problem and the search for explanations of it, but also possibility of generating reflection and contributing guidelines for effectively developing more inclusive programmes. Hence we should note the following: The fundamental importance of setting up programmes that uphold the inclusive education model as one of the keystones of institutional development in universities. Firstly, the need to reorganise the curriculum and the social spaces of the different university degrees that incorporate university programmes for people with intellectual impairments, thereby favouring joint work and interaction on an equal footing. Secondly, the importance of setting up permanent initiatives of in-service training on inclusive education for managers, teaching staff and the whole university community, thereby sustaining changes in social representations through coherent training based on the right of all to education. And thirdly, the need to incorporate content on and competencies in inclusion of people with disabilities in all university degrees, particularly with regard to institutional congruence in universities offering courses for students with intellectual impairments. If we bear in mind the current worldwide appearance of programmes for and research into inclusive



university education for students with intellectual impairments, these recommendations can be transferred and adapted to different contexts on an international level, aiming for a more inclusive education, and therefore more inclusive and democratic society.

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