



Universidad Autónoma
de Madrid

Biblos-e Archivo
Repositorio Institucional UAM

Repositorio Institucional de la Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

<https://repositorio.uam.es>

Esta es la **versión de autor** del artículo publicado en:
This is an **author produced version** of a paper published in:

Disability & Society, 36.3 (2021): 376-398

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2020.1745758>

Copyright: © 2020 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

El acceso a la versión del editor puede requerir la suscripción del recurso

Access to the published version may require subscription

“This is an Accepted Manuscript version of the following article, accepted for publication in Disability & Society. Rodríguez Herrero, P., Izuzquiza Gasset, D., & Cabrera Garcia, A. (2021). Inclusive education at a Spanish University: the voice of students with intellectual disability. 36(3), 376–398. 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.”

Rodríguez Herrero, P., Izuzquiza Gasset, D., & Cabrera García, A. (2021). Inclusive Education at a Spanish University: The Voice of Students with Intellectual Disability. *Disability & Society*, 36(3), 376-398. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2020.1745758>

Pablo Rodríguez Herrero

Department of Pedagogy, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain

pablo.rodriguez@uam.es

Dolores Izuzquiza Gasset

Fundación Prodis, Spain

lolaizuzquiza@fundacionprodis.org

Andrés Cabrera García

Fundación Prodis, Spain

andrescabrera@fundacionprodis.org

Inclusive Education at a Spanish University: The Voice of Students with Intellectual Disability

Abstract: Providing an inclusive education to students with intellectual disability in higher education is an emerging challenge. This paper presents the results of a research study that analyses the perceptions of graduates from the Promotor Programme (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain). The study follows a phenomenological design and employs qualitative research methodology. Two focus groups are conducted, with 14 participants in total. The participants' perspective is structured around the following categories: (a) Quality of life and training received; (b) barriers encountered; (c) supports received; and (b) lecturers' competences. In general, participants give their experience a positive

assessment in relation to aspects such as social inclusion, professional and personal development or self-esteem. The study's conclusions highlight the convenience of an inclusive and qualitative research design that will serve to hear the voices of persons with intellectual disability, as well as their perception of the positive impact of university education on their lives.

Keywords: Inclusive education; university; postsecondary education; intellectual disability; perceptions.

Introduction

Inclusive education is a right for persons with disability, and a key element in their labour market inclusion and participation in society, as defined by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations 2006). From a social perspective, it is an ethical imperative of any democratic society. However, the concept of inclusion does not only apply to compulsory education, but also to postsecondary and higher education. This right has been recognized by many countries through specific legislation (O'Connor et al. 2012). In the United States, the Higher Education Opportunity Act (2008) outlined specific measures to promote the inclusion of students with intellectual disability (Lee 2009). In turn, Australia and the UK have passed anti-discrimination legislation that has effects on post-compulsory education; respectively, the Disability Standards for Education (2005) and the Equality Act (2010) (O'Connor et al. 2012). In Ireland, the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 aims at increasing the degree of participation of people with intellectual disability in higher education (Corby, Taggart and Cousins 2018). Finally, in Spain, the *Ley Orgánica de Universidades* (Organic Law of University Education) (2001) and the *Ley General de Derechos de las Personas con Discapacidad y de su Inclusión Social* (General Act of Rights of Persons

with Disability and their Social Inclusion) (2013) guarantee equality of opportunity to university students and staff with disability.

In spite of these improvements, people with intellectual disability (this term is used in line with the supportive social model of the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities 2010) still encounter larger barriers when accessing higher education than students with other types of disability (O'Connor et al. 2012). To help overcome them, there have been a number of specific initiatives launched at universities themselves, mainly in English-speaking countries (Izuzquiza and Rodríguez 2016), such as (a) Canada, with University of Alberta's On Campus Programme (1987) (Uditsky and Hughson 2012); (b) Australia, where the Up the Hill project has been developed at Flinders University since 1990 (Rillota, Arthur and Hutchinson 2018); or (c) the US, with the creation of the Consortium for Postsecondary Education for Individuals with Developmental Disabilities (Plotner and Marshall 2015). Later, similar projects were created in other countries such as Finland, which followed the Canadian model (Saloviita 2000) in developing the Kampus Programme, and Ireland, with Trinity College Dublin's 2-year-long Certificate in Arts, Science and Inclusive Applied Practice, created in 2005 (O'Connor et al. 2012).

Meanwhile, in Spanish speaking countries, the first programme that enabled students with intellectual disability to receive tertiary education at university was the Promotor Programme -described in detail in the following pages- offered since 2004 by Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (Spain) in collaboration with Prodis Foundation 2. Later, other experiences would follow, both in Spain and Latin America. In Europe, the Strategic Plan Europe 2020 has contributed to extending the Promotor Programme experience to other Spanish universities. In Chile, the Universidad Central has been developing the Profudis programme since 2004.

These programmes and projects can be understood according to a variety of models of educational inclusion of students with intellectual disability in higher education (Hart et al. 2006): (a) Substantially separate model: Students participate only in learning activities with other students with intellectual disability; (b) Mixed/hybrid model: Students participate in some classes or activities with people without intellectual disability, and also participate in others together with classmates with intellectual disability; (c): Inclusive individual support model: Regular degree courses are adapted so that a student with intellectual disability may be able to follow classes together with students without intellectual disability. The Promentor Programme can be identified as a case of the mixed model of inclusion in university studies. In turn, Grigal, Hart and Weir (2011) have identified eight quality standards for inclusive programmes for students with intellectual disability: academic access, career development, campus membership, self-determination, integration with college systems and practices, coordination and collaboration, sustainability, and ongoing evaluation.

Despite an increase in the number of inclusive higher education programmes for students with intellectual disability -over 220 just in the United States, as identified by Plotner and Marshall (2015)- scientific research has yet to study them in such a way that will enable the creation of new, evidence-based programmes (Grigal, Hart and Weir 2013). However, research does suggest that such programmes can have a positive impact on different levels. They enrich the academic community (Jones et al. 2016; Ryan and Struths 2004), improve competency-based learning (Corby, Taggart and Cousins 2018), generate profound changes in the personal and social identities of people with intellectual disability (Borland and James 1999; Wilson et al. 2012), contribute to their personal maturity (Uditsky and Hughson 2012), improve their social relations and their ability to build friendships (Corby, Taggart and Cousins 2018; Plotner and May 2017; Rillota,

Arthur and Hutchinson 2018), improve self-determination (Rillota, Arthur and Hutchinson 2018), and enhance their employability (Grigal and Dwyre 2010; Sannicandro et al. 2018).

Moreover, some of these studies seek to identify the voice of the people with intellectual disability in order to better understand the impact of these higher education programmes on their education. In a study conducted in the Republic of Ireland, Spassiani et al. (2017) investigated how students with intellectual disability perceived their experience in the university, the support they were offered and the barriers they encountered. The authors found that: turning universities into more inclusive environments for people with intellectual disability also helped other students with other types of disabilities; one of the positive factors most stressed by participants was socialisation and establishing new friendships; most of the barriers that students encountered were physical; and the fact that students with intellectual disability were listened to and taken into account is a key factor in improving their empowerment, autonomy and control over their lives. Corby et al.'s research (2018) aims to explore the lived experiences and investigate the meanings that people with intellectual disability construct based on their experience in postsecondary and higher education, also in the Republic of Ireland, through interviews with 27 students. Participants highlight the impact of these experiences on their learning, focusing on the development of competencies, life-chances and autonomy, on the improvement of their self-esteem and, finally, on enhanced social relations. In their study, Rillota, Arthur and Hutchinson (2018) also attend to the perceptions of students with intellectual disability and their mentors. Their research was conducted in the framework of the Up the Hill Project (Flanders University, Australia), which follows the inclusive individual support model (Hart et al. 2006). The study identifies student social relations and self-determination as the main

benefits, and suggests areas of improvement, such as teacher training in inclusive competencies, or the relation with the wider university community.

However, this new approach that seeks to focus on hearing the voices of students with intellectual disability has not yet been applied in inclusive higher education programmes in non-English-speaking countries. As regards the Promentor Programme (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid), discussed at length in this paper, previous studies (i.e. Izuzquiza and Rodríguez 2016) have already discussed its impact, and highlighted its contribution to the graduates' employability and quality of life, as well as to the academic community's understanding of diversity. However, this research does not attempt to incorporate the students' voices by focusing on their perspective. And yet, according to Abbot and McConkey (2006), people with intellectual disability are able to communicate their experiences, identify barriers (Genova 2015) and describe ways of reducing them. Moreover, their right to make decisions on programmes that concern them has been recognized by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations 2006), and is a factor which in itself can foster the feeling of inclusion at university for people with disabilities (Lourens and Swartz 2016). With this fact as its starting point, this study focuses on the students of the Promentor Programme's perspective and seeks to understand their perceptions of their training experience in an inclusive higher education course.

Method

Research design

The study follows a phenomenological approach, as it seeks to unveil the meanings attached by participants to a given experience, namely, their education in a university environment. The choice of a qualitative research method enables a more respectful, rigorous and open analysis of the voices, experiences, thoughts and feelings of students with intellectual disability in relation to their university training (Moriña, Moliña and Cortés-Vega 2017; Nind and Vinha 2014). However, unlike other qualitative research designs, that aim to obtain results that can be generalized, this one focuses on participants' subjective experiences (Marshall and Rossman 2016). In this framework, focus groups have been chosen as the main research technique. Furthermore, content analysis is complemented with quantitative data bearing on each subject's participation, as well as on the number of text segments in each category, code and focus group.

Ethical issues of the research are taken into consideration following the criteria stated by the American Psychological Association (APA) Ethics Code (2003), in relation to confidentiality, respect for participants, informed consent or participant access to research findings. Furthermore, the study follows other positive experiences (Hall 2013; Salmon, García Iriarte and Burns 2017; O'Brien, McConkey and García Iriarte 2014) in adopting an inclusive research design, which seeks to give voice to people with intellectual disability not only as participants, but also as members of the research team. Specifically, four first-year students of the Promotor Programme joined the research project and contributed to the development of the research instrument that was used in the focus groups.

Categories of analysis

Selection of the categories of analysis is based on a number of theoretical models that underpin this research, namely the development of inclusive education (i.e. Booth and Ainscow 2002; Echeita 2017; Plotner and Marshall 2015), the model of quality of life (Schalock and Verdugo 2002) and the supports model (American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities 2010). The 4 categories of analysis are:

- (1) Quality of life and training: Impact of inclusive education on quality of life.
- (2) Barriers: Contextual limitations that hinder the students' accessibility.
- (3) Supports received: Ability to identify and assess the importance of the supports received at home and university.
- (4) Lecturer competences: Areas of competence that serve to articulate knowledge, procedures and attitudes that are essential to attend to diversity in an inclusive context.

These categories are open to emerging associated codes, which serve to specify open questions associated to the categories, and hence foster participation of the persons with the greatest support needs. The categories are chosen in accordance to the findings of previous research on the same topic (Corby, Taggart and Cousins 2018; Rillota, Arthur and Hutchinson 2018), always trying to offer a structure that will be comprehensive of the views of the graduates on their higher education experience.

Research context. The Promentor Programme

The context of the investigation is the certificate Promentor Programme, offered by Universidad Autónoma de Madrid in partnership with Prodis Foundation, a non-profit organization that aims at improving the quality of life of people with intellectual disability and their families. The Promentor Programme is the first Spanish university course adapted to students with intellectual disability, and a pioneer programme in Europe (Izuzquiza and Rodríguez 2016). It was created in 2004 as a pilot experience offered to 8 students, and is supported by the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid – Prodis Foundation sponsored chair.

The main objective of the Promentor Programme is to provide an inclusive university education environment for training students in personal competencies (i.e. values education, emotional education, social skills and self-acceptance) and professional skills to enhance their employability. Any student with intellectual disability can apply for the course in person, through their families or other institutions. The Promentor Programme staff conduct an interview with the person with intellectual disability and their family, and an academic competency test designed to assess their ability to meet the basic requirements of the course modules. The information gathered in the interview and the competency test is then appraised jointly on the basis of the criteria set out in a rubric assessing whether the candidate meets the minimum standards for the academic, social and emotional competencies needed to undertake the Promentor Programme. No prior qualifications are required to apply for the course. Students in the Promentor Programme follow a two-year syllabus (120 credits, which is equivalent to 1.200 hours of teaching) at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid Faculty of Teacher Training and Education. Each group consists of 15 students with intellectual disability. As to the faculty, it is

composed of lecturers in the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid Department of Didactics and Theory of Education and of Specific Didactics, as well as professionals in the field of intellectual disability, members of Prodis Foundation.

As mentioned above, the Promentor Programme follows a mixed model of inclusion in the university environment (Hart et al. 2006). Students enrolled in the programme study their modules in a group together with other students with intellectual disability; however, they join students without intellectual disability from Education degrees both by attending some of their classes, and also by working with them through learning communities. The programme curriculum includes both competences linked to the specific subjects (Table 1), and cross-curricular ones related to self-determination, social and emotional skills or social and professional responsibility. The modules are the same for all students. In the Practicum students participate actively in their choice of a venue, in accordance with their interests and preferences. Previously, in the ‘Professional Profiles’ module, students have begun analysing professional profiles they are interested in and which can guide their choice of a venue for work experience.

Table 1

The educational methodologies adopted in the course, and its assessment criteria and techniques, are adapted to each student’s assistance needs. To finish the course successfully and achieve the ‘Diploma for Training Young People with Intellectual Disability for Work’, awarded by the university, students must pass all the modules. It is envisaged that there may be some students that do not pass the course, mainly for reasons of attitude or due to integration difficulties in a complex, open environment like the university. In these cases the Promentor Programme staff can place the students in

training programmes with other organisations better adapted to their needs. There have been few such cases so far, however.

As to the results of the programme, 175 young adults with intellectual disability have graduated from the creation of the program until 2018. Furthermore, until 2016, a high percentage of graduates (82%) had been employed in the labour market of Madrid's Autonomous Community (Izuzquiza and Rodríguez 2016), thanks to the support given by Prodis Foundation's Supported Employment Service to graduates. Other studies (Izuzquiza 2012), have shown the programme's positive impact on the academic community, raising awareness of diversity as a social value.

Participants

Participants in the study are people with intellectual disability who have graduated from the certificate Promotor Programme (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid). They were selected through purposeful sampling. 20 graduates of the Promotor Programme (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid) were contacted through their tutors. In this initial contact, the aim of the study was announced, as well as the voluntary character of their participation. The final number of participants is 14, split into two groups of 7 members. All the participants have an intellectual disability that has been recognized by an official certification of disability. According to psychopedagogic assessment prior to entering the programme, all of them have a mild disability (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The participants were divided into two focus groups following a heterogeneity criterion. In the first group there are 2 men and 5 women aged from 22 to 44, all graduates from 2007-2017. In the second there are 4 men and 3 women aged from 25 to 33, who graduated between 2008 and 2015. In each group there are 4 participants working in

normal jobs and 3 in protected jobs. In this way, despite the difficulty of reaching the study population, the group composition tries to give voice to the diversity of students that have graduated from the Promentor Programme.

Techniques and Instrument

The study is conducted using focus groups, a qualitative research method commonly utilized in social and educational research, and which seeks to create a space of opinion where knowledge is constructed collectively from individual opinions. This technique has been chosen bearing in mind both the goal of the study and the social group involved in it. As to the former, the study focuses on the students' experiences in order to understand the phenomenon of inclusive education from their perspective. Therefore, the priority is to understand the social and collective representation built from these experiences. As to the students with intellectual disability, the cognitive and communicative challenges they face as participants has to be addressed by the research design. In this sense, qualitative methods are more easily adaptable to the participants' support needs, thereby giving them a voice that has been highly limited in other socio-educational research projects (Jones 2007).

The research instrument (Supplemental Online Material) is a list of guiding questions that has been drafted following Universal Design for Learning Guidelines (CAST 2011), including the following accessibility features: (a) Questions offer an alternative formulation that follows criteria of accessible reading; (b) pictograms are included in order to facilitate visual access to the content; and (c) a glossary is included in order to clarify any necessary terms. These features have been included attending to participant characteristics and their diverse abilities and support needs.

The instrument has been validated in a process that included the four students with intellectual disability in the research team, two experts in qualitative research and two experts in inclusive education. Furthermore, the different guiding questions included (Table 2) have been assessed for clarity and relevance.

Table 2

Data collection

The focus groups met in the head office of Prodis Foundation (Madrid, Spain). The moderators -two members of the research team- began each session with an introduction in which they announced the aims of the study and asked participants for consent to record their voices. Next, the different guiding questions on the outline were asked, occasionally clarifying a specific item or raising further questions upon hearing participants' comments. The moderators attempted to obtain every participant's point of view on the different topics addressed by the questions. At the end of each session, they reminded participants of the value of the study, and thanked them for participating. In all, two 60-minute-long sessions were conducted, with a gap of seven days between them. Upon completion of the two sessions, the recordings were transcribed and the texts were analysed using MAXQDA 18.

Data analysis

The software-assisted content analysis comprises the following stages: (1) The content is reviewed and text segments are assigned to the categories of analysis; (2) codes for the

different categories are identified; (3) the codes are analysed contrastively and for saturation; (4) from the codes and categories, the students' perceptions are identified and assessed. Data triangulation is ensured by (a) having two independent focus groups and (b) selecting students from different graduating classes of the programme. Owing to its phenomenological design, the study's internal validity is not based on its ability to obtain results that can be generalized but, rather, on its comparability and transferability to other contexts.

Results

Participant contributions

As can be seen in Table 3, participants made an average of 38 contributions each. The less active participant made 9 contributions, whereas the most active made 72.

Table 3

Analysis of categories and codes

The content analysis identifies a number of codes associated to the main categories:

- a) Quality of life and training: 'Emotional impact', 'Learning experiences', 'Social relations', 'Models of inclusion at university' and 'Labour market inclusion'.
- b) Barriers: 'Campus' and 'Physical barriers'.
- c) Support received: 'Academic community' and 'Family'.

- d) Lecturer competences: ‘Relationship with lecturers’ and ‘Teaching methodology’.

Table 4 shows the number of text segments analysed, classified by code and category.

Table 4

The codes with a higher saturation are, in this order: (1) ‘Academic community’, (2) ‘Teaching methodology’, and (3) ‘Learning experiences’. On the contrary, those with a lower number of codified text segments are (1) ‘Campus’ and (2) ‘Physical barriers’.

Quality of life and training (1)

Emotional impact. The first emotional impact recalled by several participants comes upon admission to the university course itself. News of admission to the programme is described as ‘very exciting’ (p1), ‘a happy and touching moment’ (p7). There is also a sense of pride attached to starting higher education: ‘I was (for my grandparents) the first grandchild at university’ (p7). Fears related to the new experience are also mentioned. P4, for instance, describes that ‘(in a situation like this) I get anxious and cry’. P7 states that ‘I felt insecure and that was hard’.

The emotional impact of being part of university is indeed one of the most relevant aspects of participant perspective. When asked to summarise their experience in a single word, they mention terms such as ‘exciting’ (p5), ‘intense’ (p8) or ‘a dream’ (p14). A salient moment in the students’ memories is their graduation day, an event shared with

family and professionals that marked the completion of their university education. Of special relevance are the references made by several participants to family members and their reactions during the graduation ceremony. For instance, p12 reports that '(her mother) was deeply moved (...). She burst into tears as soon as she saw me'. Allusions are also made to the programme's lecturers and staff: 'I believe that the project's professionals are the ones who have the best time, and are proud of us' (p10). Moreover, 'I have seen (p10 mentions several lecturers) cry, but cry from joy'.

Learning experiences. The learning experiences described by participants exhibit a high degree of heterogeneity. Special references are made to cross-curricular learning experiences in relation to emotional competence, personal maturity, social skills or the development of moral values.

For instance, one participant claims that '(a module) specially helped me to experience introspection and become conscious of my own feelings' (p8). Another participant (p4) comments that the training received allowed her to 'learn the meaning of empathy, see the common good and not just the good of one single person'. In relation to emotional competence, personal maturity is also mentioned: 'I believe that we have become more mature in the last two years' (p1); '(This experience) helped me grow as a person, learn social and ethical values and manage my feelings' (p8). Finally, participants also refer to social skills such as 'communication' (p12) and overcoming 'shyness' (p9).

Social relations. The improvement of social relations is one of the main benefits of a university education, according to the students' perspective. This can also be observed in the Promentor Programme class: 'The first graduating class was a tightly knit group, and I made a lot of friends' (p1); 'here, everybody knows each other' (p3). There is also

reference to an improvement in the relations with people without intellectual disability: 'In those two years at university I felt valued by my lecturers, my classmates and by other students without disability that studied other courses (...) Playing basketball made me get along with them' (p8). Similarly, p10 claims that he 'got along with them (students without intellectual disability), and that was one thing I got out of the programme (...). Having a disability or not was not important; we had a great time together'. Another example of developing social relations in a university environment is voluntary work through the university. As one of the participants shares, 'I signed up for a voluntary work experience with seniors and really enjoyed the experience because they tell you stories about the time when they were kids' (p11).

Models of inclusion at university. In relation to the main models of inclusion at university, as defined above (Hart et al. 2006) participants are asked whether they would prefer a hybrid model as the Promentor Programme, or an inclusive individual support programme. Several participants choose the former, as 'it's easier -if you have a problem, or feel anxious, the teacher (tutor) is there to help you' (p7). Having specialist teacher-tutors is also highly valued, as is the case with p1: '(It's easier to learn) with teachers who have been trained to teach students with disabilities. But this doesn't mean that the modules are less demanding than for students without intellectual disability'. Other participants suggest improvements to this model; for instance, making it longer, or supplementing the curriculum with specialized mini-courses, as 'changes to the pace of coursework are often welcome' (p1).

On the other hand, participants generally believe that this type of programme should be exported to other universities: 'I would say that it's a unique experience: it's good for persons with disability but it's only taught here. It would be great if it was also

offered in other countries'. And further: 'It would be good that, since all people are diverse, similar programmes would be offered across the country' (p8).

Labour market inclusion. One of the key modules in the programme is the Practicum, because of its role in preparing the students for entry to the labour market. It is several participants' favourite module (for instance, p5 and p6). Moreover, participants also claim that one of the most important contributions of a university education is 'getting a job' (p11). In many cases, completing a higher education programme enabled this: 'I am currently working in (he mentions a car manufacturer) (...) I believe that studying at university makes you better qualified' (p13). Among the competences developed during their studies, participants mention the relational ones: '(It has helped me to) relate (adequately) to my (current) workmates' (p11).

The participants' perspective suggests the relevance of associating university courses to supports targeted at securing job placements, so that graduates may be able to apply the competences they have developed at university.

Barriers (2)

Campus. Among other barriers, participants highlight the challenges posed by university facilities that do not necessarily provide supports in order to facilitate the students' cognitive accessibility. For instance, p. 1 mentions the difficulty of using the university's photocopying machines.

In their comments, other participants show an awareness of the complexity of such an open environment as a university: 'If you go outside, what happens there is your problem, but when you're here (in a protected environment such as the head office of

Prodis Foundation) you will always be supported if anything goes wrong' (p3). In participant 4's words, 'it felt like a labyrinth'.

Physical barriers. The physical accessibility of the university buildings where they studied is also a recurring concern for participants. P13 comments that '(in his group) there were two students with impaired physical mobility; they were able to graduate, but they could hardly believe it (given the obstacles they had to face)'. P10 also believes that 'it is very difficult for students in wheelchairs'. Overall, barriers related to mobility are also relevant to people with intellectual disability who, in certain circumstances, may also show support needs in relation to physical access to university buildings.

Supports received (3)

Academic community. The academic community and its relationship with the Promentor Programme students corresponds to the code with the highest saturation, as was previously mentioned (Table 4). It is included in the category, 'Supports received', due to its positive role in supporting student educational inclusion. When asked whether they had felt treated by the university differently than other students, the unanimous answer is no. According to p6, 'having intellectual disability hasn't made us feel any different'. 'They have seen me just as I am', said p13. Reference is also made to the right to an inclusive education at university: 'Persons with Down syndrome also have the right to study there (at university)' (p12).

Overall, participants are very satisfied with their relationship with the academic community, especially with the other students and their lecturers. At the same time, the university environment is described as one that can be inclusive and therefore adequate

for students with intellectual disability. In some cases, the comparison with previous educational stages was a telling one. P2, when asked to compare the ease of studying at university versus high school, in what regards inclusion and social relations, answers that ‘obviously it was easier at university. People are much more mature at university than in high school’.

Family. Family emerges as an important code, not only as a provider of supports, but also in what respects the influence of the university experience in the way students with intellectual disability are perceived within their family environments. Indeed, family is connected to an improvement in the students’ self-concept, and hence self-esteem: ‘The majority of persons like us are inspired by the idea of studying at university because they want to be just like their siblings, have their same opportunities’ (p10). Another participant (p14) recounts that ‘when, for instance, my sister graduated in 2007, I didn’t feel altogether well during the ceremony... I thought that I also wanted to graduate one day, and eventually I was able to’. Statements such as this one reveal how educational equity related to diversity stemming from a disability can contribute to an improvement in the quality of family life for all its members.

Lecturer competences (4)

Relation with lecturers. The two groups’ collective perspective describes a positive relationship with the lecturers of the Promentor Programme. Indeed, students feel that they received an inclusive treatment: ‘The lecturers accepted me just as I am’ (p12); ‘having disability hasn’t made us feel different’ (p1); ‘we have been treated as normal persons’ (p13). At the same time, they claim that their needs were addressed: ‘Teachers

would adapt to our needs' (p10); 'I have felt the lecturer's support, as I find it difficult to study and memorise content' (p14). Interestingly, one of the participants (p10) raises the question of the lecturer's own perception: 'I wonder how the teachers feel when teaching people with intellectual disability'.

Teaching methodology. Lecturer methodology is generally perceived as an enabling factor of learning, especially in those classes where students with and without intellectual disability learn together about cross-curricular topics such as emotional competence. In the words of p7: '(In that class), my favourite, we were mixed with some Teacher Training students, and we discussed emotions'. 'We participated actively', adds p3. In this and other modules, participants value student-centred methodologies. However, they also appreciate when modules follow a clear structure: '(My favourite module) was one in which I was able to organise myself very well' (p9); 'the lecturer would give us lots of notes, and they were adapted' (p10). Sometimes, teaching methodology is identified as a barrier to learning, especially whenever they are rigid, monotonous or lecturer-centred: 'Not all the teachers were the same' (p13); 'in some modules there were very few changes; we were always doing the same' (p1).

Discussion

Research results offer significant implications in relation to both methodological aspects and the analysis of participants' view of their university experience. Consistent with the findings of other authors (Abbot and McConkey 2006; Nind and Vinha 2014), the results of the two focus groups support the claim that qualitative research methods are valid in

order to capture the voice of people with intellectual disability in the field of educational research.

By their very nature, focus groups allow the instrument to adapt to each participant's support needs, so that even those participants with greater comprehension difficulties have been able to participate in the study. Such inclusiveness would have doubtlessly been harder using quantitative research methods, owing to the greater rigidity of the techniques and instruments employed. Still, despite the possibility of moderating the discussion in a flexible way, the participation data (Table 3) nonetheless reflect a heterogeneity in participants' support needs and communication skills. This is of course one of the limitations of focus groups, even if, overall, this method has been effective in capturing the voice of all participants -albeit to different degrees- as well as construct a collective representation of their university experience.

Another significant issue in relation to research methodology is the study's inclusive design. In this respect, having four students with intellectual disability participate in the research team at the stage of drafting the questions helped to ensure the rigour and effectiveness of the research process. Indeed, their questions and suggestions were especially relevant in the process of creating the research instrument. For instance, the questions, 'Do you believe that university is prepared to welcome students with disability? Why or why not?' and 'What were your favourite and least favourite modules like?' were drafted in response to their comments. The experience of this study is in line with other research that has attempted to utilize inclusive research designs by incorporating people with their intellectual disability in their respective research groups (Hall 2013; Salmon, García Iriarte and Burns 2017; O'Brien, McConkey and García Iriarte 2014). However, this study presents the limitation of incorporating the input of people with intellectual disability only at the moment of designing the research instrument. The

positive contribution of such input suggests that it would be interesting to include it in other stages of the process as well, such as defining the problem, participating in chairing focus groups or interpreting results.

In what regards participant perspective, there are relevant conclusions associated to each category of analysis. In relation to ‘Quality of life and training’, the findings suggest that, in agreement with other studies (Borland and James 1999; Spassiani et al. 2017; Wilson et al. 2012), students perceive that inclusive higher education has the power of bringing about significant changes in students’ social and personal identities. According to this view, higher education provides an environment that enables their development of life competences. Such findings are consistent with the perception of students with intellectual disability that have been educated in other programmes (McKay et al. 2015). In this sense, an inclusive education can contribute to developing competences such as personal maturity, or improving social relations (Carroll, Herman and Wickizer 2012; Corby, Taggart and Cousins 2018).

Moreover, the research findings also suggest that there is a strong link between higher education and labour market inclusion of students with intellectual disability. Indeed, graduates from the Promentor Programme identified the development of job skills and employability as two of the programme’s most significant contributions. As mentioned, before, the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid – Prodis Foundation sponsored chair supports the programme by helping graduates to secure employment. Overall, it is crucial that inclusive higher education studies for students with intellectual disability be associated with job placement programmes that may allow the graduates to continue developing the competences learnt at university.

A particularly revealing result is the low saturation of the category, ‘Barriers’. Overall, the positive assessment of the programme overshadows the different obstacles

posed by the context. However, participants reveal some important cues for building a more inclusive university. For instance, they refer to both physical and cognitive barriers that coincide with the comments made by students with disability in other studies (Spassiani et al. 2017; Strnadová, Hájková and Kvetonová 2015). A rigid teaching methodology may also act as a barrier to learning, especially when student-focused instruction is not favoured. Therefore, there is a need for reflection and action aimed at eliminating barriers to diversity in higher education, and such process should incorporate the views of the most vulnerable groups of students, such as persons with disability.

The most significant code in terms of the text segments analysed is ‘Academic community’, included in the category, ‘Supports received’. This suggests that university environments are indeed an appropriate educational setting for students with intellectual disability. The experience of the Promentor Programme shows that university’s cultural richness, greater opportunities and greater maturity of students compared to previous educational stages all contribute to the students’ successful educational inclusion. These results are consistent with those of other studies, such as O’Connor et al. (2012) or Izuzquiza (2012). In the same category, the indirect effects of the students’ university experience on their family environments are also noteworthy, especially as regards the relationship between siblings with and without intellectual disability which, from adolescence, is often defined by unbalanced roles and responsibilities (Begum and Blacher 2011). In this respect, the participant responses reveal that the university experience of students with intellectual disability may contribute to establishing relationships between siblings that are both more equal and appropriate to their biological age.

Finally, an analysis of the category, ‘Lecturer competences’, reveals that students are satisfied with being taught by specialists in inclusive education, who work as tutors,

in addition to lecturers that specialize in the different modules of the course. This combination belongs to mixed models of inclusive education for people with intellectual disability (Hart et al. 2006), which favour processes and methodologies that enhance inclusion. Indeed, participants value very highly the possibility of studying alongside other students without intellectual disability in their faculty. Moreover, student responses show that some lecturers do not employ learner-centred methodologies. As has been suggested in other studies (Rillota, Arthur and Hutchinson 2018), lecturers need to be trained in inclusive competencies.

In terms of the eight areas of quality practice for postsecondary inclusive programmes defined by Grigal et al. (2011), student views emphasize the significance of academic access, career development, campus membership, and integration with college systems and practices. Participants' positive assessment of their experience in higher education is also consistent with the findings of previous research that also focused on hearing the students' voices (Corby, Taggart and Cousins 2018; Rillota, Arthur and Hutchinson 2018). Nevertheless, there are some differences with the responses obtained from students in the Up the Hill Project (Flinders University, Australia), as published by Rillota, Arthur and Hutchinson (2018). That study identified the improvement of student self-determination as one of the main benefits of a university education, and the fact that most social relations of students with intellectual disability are limited to their relationship with their mentors as one of the weaknesses of the experience. According to our research, however, the improvement in student self-determination is not considered to be one of the main benefits and, on the other hand, social relations with the entire academic community -including classmates with and without intellectual disability- are valued highly. This discrepancy might be explained by differences in the respective models of university inclusion of students with intellectual disability (Hart et al. 2006). Whereas the

Up the Hill Project follows an inclusive individual support model, in which students make decisions about their curriculum and join regular modules, the Promentor Programme (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain), follows a mixed model, which may result in a smaller benefit as regards self-determination, but which promotes stable relations with persons with and without disability, as students are integrated in a permanent group of classmates.

The comparison between the findings of this study, as well as others that focus on the students' voice (Corby, Taggart and Cousins 2018; Rillota, Arthur and Hutchinson 2018), with research on higher education experiences of students with other types of disabilities (Hopkins 2011; Moriña, Moliña and Cortés-Vega 2017), is a telling one. Whereas students with intellectual disability tend to show a positive perspective on their experiences -notwithstanding their identification of barriers and challenges- students with other disabilities are more likely to associate their experience with attitudes of discrimination, oppression or barriers that are hard to overcome (Hopkins 2011; Moriña, Moliña and Cortés-Vega 2017). This could be explained by the differences in the access to higher education in both groups of students. Owing to greater difficulty of access, students with intellectual disability tend to join specific university programmes that include a number of supports tailored to their needs (O'Connor et al. 2012), resulting in more controlled experiences. On the other hand, for various reasons students with other types of disability often gain access to higher education through ordinary channels without seeking help from university support units for people with disabilities (Moriña, López-Gavira and Morgado 2017), and therefore lack such supports.

From the previous conclusions, three significant implications emerge. (1) Firstly, this study confirms that, from a student perspective, university environments can be adequate for the education of students with intellectual disability at the postsecondary

stage; therefore, the creation of evidence-based inclusive higher education programmes should be encouraged. (2) As the programmes are implemented, university lecturers should receive training in inclusive education, so that they may utilize teaching methodologies that foster inclusion in their classrooms. (3) Finally, higher education institutions must take into account the voice of vulnerable groups of students in order to effectively eliminate existing barriers.

This study also includes some limitations that entail challenges for future research. The research was conducted in a specific university context and programme, and while the findings obtained can raise questions beyond this context, it would be necessary to conduct a comparative analysis of different programmes of the same type at the international level. Moreover, such an analysis should also focus on the three models of educational inclusion in postsecondary education (Hart et al. 2006), in order to identify the strengths and weaknesses of each. Also, the participation of the co-researchers with intellectual disability was limited to some phases of the study and could have been extended to others, such as chairing focus groups or interpreting results. The main reason why their participation was limited to these phases was that this study represents the team's first foray into the inclusive approach to research. It is hoped that in future studies the participation of young people with intellectual disability as researchers will be greater. Overall, however, the results of this study invite further research on the inclusion of students with intellectual disability in tertiary education, in a way that will attend to all voices involved, including their own.

References

- Abbott, S., and McConkey, R. 2006. "The barriers to social inclusion as perceived by people with intellectual disabilities." *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities* 10: 275-287.
- American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities 2010. *Intellectual disability: Definition, classification, and systems of supports (11th Edition)*. Washington: AAIDD.
- American Psychiatric Association 2013. *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed.)*. Washington, DC: APA.
- American Psychological Association 2003. *Ethical principles of psychologist and code of conduct*. Washington: APA.
- Begum, G., and Blacher, J. 2011. "The siblings relationship of adolescents with and without intellectual disabilities." *Research in Developmental Disabilities: A Multidisciplinary Journal* 32 (5): 1580-1588.
- Booth, T., and Ainscow, M. 2002. *Index for inclusion. Developing leaning and participation in schools (2nded)*. Manchester: CSIE.
- Borland, J., and James, S. 1999. "The learning experience of students with disabilities in higher education: a case study of a UK university." *Disability & Society* 14: 85-101.
- CAST 2011. *Universal Design for Learning. Guidelines Version 2.0*. Wakefield, MA: CAST.
- Corby, D., Taggart, L., and Cousins, W. 2018. "The lived experience of people with intellectual disabilities in post-secondary or higher education." *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities*. Advanced Online Publication. Epub ahead of print.

- Echeita, G. 2017. "Educación inclusiva. Sonrisas y lágrimas." *Aula Abierta* 46: 17-24.
- Genova, A. 2015. "Barriers to inclusive education in Greece, Spain and Lithuania: results from emancipatory disability research." *Disability & Society* 30 (7): 1042-1054.
- Grigal, M., and Dwyre, A. 2010. "Employment activities and outcomes of college-based transition programs for students with intellectual disabilities." In *Think College Insight Brief, Issue no 3*. Boston, MA: Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts.
- Grigal, M., Hart, D., and Weir, C. 2011. *Framing the future: A standards-based conceptual framework for research and practice in inclusive higher education (Think College Insight Brief 10)*. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Boston, Institute for Community Inclusion.
- Grigal, M., Hart, D., and Weir, C. 2013. "Postsecondary education for people with intellectual disability: Current issues and critical challenges." *Inclusion* 1 (1): 50-63.
- Hall, S. A. 2013. "Including people with intellectual disabilities in qualitative research." *Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research* 7: 128-142.
- Hart, D., Grigal, M., Sax, C., Martínez, D., and Will, M. 2006. "Postsecondary education options for students with intellectual disabilities." *Research to Practice* 45 (3): 56-87.
- Hopkins, L. 2011. "The path of least resistance: A voice-relational analysis of disabled students' experiences of discrimination in English universities." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 15: 711-727.
- Izuzquiza, D. 2012. "El valor de la inclusión educativa de jóvenes con discapacidad intelectual en las instituciones de educación superior: el Programa Promentor." *Bordón* 64 (1): 109-125.

- Izuzquiza, D., and Rodríguez, P. 2016. "Inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in university. Results of the Promentor Program (UAM-PRODIS)." *Siglo Cero: Revista Española sobre Discapacidad Intelectual* 47 (4): 27-43.
- Jenkinson, J. C. 1989. "Research design in the experimental study of intellectual disability." *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education* 36 (2): 69-84.
- Jones, M. 2007. "An ethnographic exploration of narrative methodologies to promote the voice of students with disabilities." *Journal of Ethnographic and Qualitative Research* 2: 32-40.
- Jones, M., Harrison, B., Harp, B., and Sheppard-Jones, K. 2016. "Teaching college students with intellectual disability: What faculty members say about the experience." *Inclusion* 4 (2): 89-108.
- Lee, S. 2009. *Overview of the Federal Higher Education Opportunity Act. Think College*. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Boston, Institute for Community Inclusion.
- Lourens, H., and Swartz, L. 2016. "Experiences of visually impaired students in higher education: bodily perspectives on inclusive education." *Disability & Society* 31 (2): 240-251.
- Marshall, C., and Rossman, G. B. 2016. *Design in qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- McKay, D., Banner, R., Sherif, V., and Rhodes, A. 2015. "Learning, independence and relationships: The impact of supported higher education on students with intellectual disabilities." *Human Development Institute* 143: 1-4.

- Moriña, A., López-Gavira, R., and Morgado, B. 2017. "How do Spanish disability support offices contribute to inclusive education in the university?" *Disability & Society* 32 (10): 1608-1626.
- Moriña, A., Molina, V., and Cortés-Vega, D. 2017. "Voices of Spanish students with disabilities: willpower and effort to survive university." *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 33 (4): 481-494.
- Nind, M., and Vinha H. 2014. "Doing research inclusively: bridges to multiple possibilities in inclusive research." *British Journal of Learning Disabilities* 42: 102-109
- O'Bren, P., McConkey, and García Iriarte, E. 2014. "Co-researching with people who have intellectual disabilities: insights from a national survey." *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities* 27: 65-75.
- O'Connor, B., Kubiak, J., Espiner, D., and O'Brien, P. 2012. "Lecturer responses to the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities auditing undergraduate classes." *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities* 9 (4): 247-256.
- Plotner, A., and Marshall, K. 2015. "Postsecondary education programs for students with an intellectual disability: Facilitators and barriers to implementation." *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities* 53 (1): 58-69.
- Plotner, A., and May, C. 2017. "A comparison of the college experience for students with and without disabilities." *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities*. Advanced Online Publication. Epub ahead of print.
- Rillotta, F., Arthur, J., and Hutchinson, C. 2018. "Inclusive university experience in Australia: perspectives of students with intellectual disability and their mentors." *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities*. Advanced Online Publication. Epub ahead of print.

- Ryan, J., and Struths, J. 2004. "University education for all? Barriers to full inclusion of students with disabilities in Australian universities." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 8: 73-90.
- Salmon, N., García Iriarte, E., and Burns, E. Q. 2017. "Research active programs: a pilot inclusive research curriculum in higher education." *International Journal of Research & Method in Education* 40 (2): 181-200.
- Saloviita, T. 2000. "An inclusive adult education program for students with mild to severe developmental disabilities: experiences from a pilot project in Finland." *Developmental Disabilities Bulletin* 28: 27-39.
- Sannicandro, T., Parish, S., Fournier, S., Mitra, M., and Paiewonsky, M. 2018. "Employment, income, and SSI effects of postsecondary education for people with intellectual disability." *American Journal on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities* 123 (5): 412-425.
- Schalock, R. L., and Verdugo, M. A. 2002. *Quality of life for human service practitioners*. Washington, DC: American Association on Mental Retardation.
- Spassiani, N., Murchadha, N., Cline, M., Biddulph, K., Conradie, P., Costello, F., Cox, L., Daly, E., Daly, O., Middleton, C., McCabe, K., Philips, M., Soraghan, S., and Tully, K. 2017. "Likes, dislikes, supports and barriers: the experience of students with disabilities in university in Ireland." *Disability & Society* 32 (6): 892-912.
- Strnadová, I., Hájková, V., and Kvetonová, L. 2015. "Voices of university students with disabilities: Inclusive education on the tertiary level – A reality or distant dream?" *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 19 (10): 1080-1095.
- Uditsky, B., and Hughson, E. 2012. "Inclusive postsecondary education: an evidence-based moral imperative." *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities* 9: 298-302.

United Nations 2006. *The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. New York: United Nations.

Wilson, H., Bialk, P., Freeze, T. B., Freeze, R., and Lutfiyya, Z. M. 2012. "Heidi's and Philip's Stories: Transitions to Post-secondary Education." *British Journal of Learning Disabilities* 40 (2): 87-93.

Table 1

The Promentor Programme course structure. Source: Promentor Programme

First year	Credits	Second year	Credits
Communication and customer service	5	Labour relations	5
English I	5	Information management and data treatment	5
Technology for Business I	5	Technology for business II	5
Social Value Development	5	Culture, society and development	5
Business organization	5	English II	5
Professional profiles	5	Emotional development II	5
Motor skills and their relation to sport I	5	Motor skills and their relation to sport II	5
Professional competences	5	Quality of life	5
Applied calculus	5	Practicum	15
Emotional development I	5	End-of-certificate paper	5
Foundations of learning	5		
Neurocognitive fundamentals of learning	5		
Total	60		60

Note: 1 credit is equivalent to 10 hours of teaching

Table 2

Focus group data collection instrument

Quality of life and training	
Option 1	Option 2
If you had to describe your time at university, what would you say?	What was your time at university like?
Let's talk about your expectations before starting the programme. Have they been fulfilled?	Have your dreams been fulfilled at university?
How has a university education contributed to your professional and personal development?	How has university education helped you?
If you had to choose one thing you have learnt at university, what would it be?	Say one thing you have learnt at university
Barriers	
Option 1	Option 2
What were the main barriers you have encountered?	What was the hardest thing for you at university?
How did the university address those barriers?	How were those difficulties overcome?
Do you believe that university is prepared to welcome students with disability? Why or why not?	Is university prepared for differently abled students? Why or why not?

Let's talk about friends you made at university. What did they study? What was the relationship like?	Did you make friends at university? What did they study? What things did you do together?
-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Supports received

Option 1	Option 2
Did you feel supported by the university and the teachers?	Did the university and the teachers help you?
Whenever you needed help, what did you do? Who did you ask?	When you asked for help, what did you do? Who did you ask?
Do you believe that the supports were enough, or there should have been more? Why?	Did you receive a lot or little help? Why?

Lecturer competences

Option 1	Option 2
What were your favourite and least favourite modules like?	What was your favourite module? And the least favourite ones?
How do you think that classes could be improved?	What would your perfect class be like?
How would you describe your relationship with your lecturers?	How did you feel when you talked with the lecturers?
What are the lecturers' teaching style?	How do the lecturers teach?
Do you feel that lecturers have treated you in the same way as other students without intellectual disability from the same university? In what things have you felt it?	Have you been treated in the same way as other students, or differently because of having a disability? In what things have you felt it?

Note: Option 2 refers to an alternative formulation that follows criteria of accessible reading

Table 3

Contribution frequency and percentage

Participant	Number of contributions	Percentage
1	58	26.50%
2	36	17.60%
3	34	16.60%
4	28	13.70%
5	9	4.40%
6	20	9.80%
7	19	9.30%
Group 1 Total	204	100%
8	51	15.60%
9	29	8.90%
10	72	22.10%
11	51	15.60%
12	41	12.60%
13	38	11.70%
14	44	13.50%
Group 2 Total	326	100%

Table 4

Text segments by code

Code-Category	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Total
Emotional impact - Quality of life and training	6	4	10
Learning experiences - Quality of life and training	3	10	13
Social relations - Quality of life and training	3	8	11
Models of inclusion at university - Quality of life and training	6	3	9
Labour market inclusion - Quality of life and training	3	4	7
Campus - Barriers	3	0	3
Physical barriers - Barriers	0	3	3
Academic community - Supports received	10	9	19
Family - Supports received	3	3	6
Relation with lecturers - Lecturer competences	3	7	10
Teaching methodology - Lecturer competences	8	6	14
Total	48	57	105