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Inclusive education in higher education: challenges and opportunities

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ABSTRACT

Implementing the principles of inclusive education within higher education can be challenging. Inclusive education was originally developed for younger students, prior to its application within higher education. However, as more students with disabilities successfully complete their early schooling, the need to move towards inclusive practices within higher education has increased. The purpose of this article is to offer thoughts on inclusive practices within higher education. The paper is organised into three sections: a description of the current situation of inclusive education in relation to students with disabilities in higher education; a review of the literature focused on students with disabilities and on faculty members within higher education; and a discussion of how moving the university towards an inclusive setting requires designing policies, strategies, processes and actions that contribute to ensuring the success of all the students.

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Introduction: the context for inclusion within institutes of higher education

Inclusive education can be defined as an educational approach proposing schools in which all the students can participate and all are treated like valuable school members. It is an educational philosophy and practice that aims to improve the learning and active participation of all the students in a common educational context. Inclusive education is conceived of as an unfinished process and a belief system that poses a challenge to any situation of exclusion (Ainscow 1998; Sapon-Shevin 2003).

Inclusive education is recognised as a basic human right and the basis for a fair and equitable society (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education 2012; Forlin 2013). An ethical component is also considered (Reindal 2016). Inclusive education focuses on the need to provide a high-quality educational response for all students, increasing the practices that lead to full participation (Ainscow 2015; Messiou et al. 2016). Within the inclusive philosophy, diversity is conceived in a broad sense comprising the different capabilities, gender differences and differences in social and cultural origin. These differences are seen as a benefit rather than as a problem. The belief is that all students, without exception, should benefit from high-quality learning and enjoy full participation in the educational system.

Inclusive education was developed and implemented within educational settings prior to higher education. However, for some years, inclusive principles and practices have been making inroads into university agendas, policies, and teaching and learning practices. In the context of higher education, there is still a long way to go before we can claim full inclusion, and many challenges must be addressed to align educational practices with the principles of inclusive education.

The purpose of this article is to address the current state of inclusion in higher education with regard to students with special educational needs, specifically students with disabilities. The work is organised around three sections. First, an introduction to the topic considering: the increase of the students with disabilities in the university with an examination of policies, a discussion of the principles of inclusive education and an overview of the social model of disability. This section helps to contextualise how higher education is currently responding to students with disabilities. The second section reviews the literature on higher education, inclusive education and disabilities. The studies in these sections are organised around the findings regarding students and faculty. The third section discusses the social and educational impacts of inclusion within the university. The paper concludes by exploring the policies, strategies, processes and actions that contribute to ensuring the success of all the students.

Inclusive education in higher education: ensuring students' access, participation and success

Many have called for increased inclusivity within universities, claiming that it should be the university's responsibility to respond to the needs of all students (Fuller, Bradley, and Healey 2004; Doughty and Allan 2008; Prowse 2009). Indeed, Gairín and Suárez (2014) conclude that inclusivity is a hallmark of a quality university.

Yet, moving towards the principles of inclusive education is a challenge in higher education. We only need to go back a decade to verify that the contemporary higher education classroom is very different from its predecessors; and while we cannot explain this simply by the fact that today's students are different a common trait in the current university is the increasing diversity among students. Thomas (2016) proposed that participation in the university is broader due to the progressive incorporation of collectives that were traditionally marginalised from higher education including students of different nationalities, ages, cultures, socio-economic situations or capabilities. This growing diversity, which is transforming the classrooms, has gained increasing scientific protagonism and there are more investigations examining how higher education is responding to this new situation. Many of these studies focus on non-traditional groups, including students who need additional support, who, depending on the country, may be students with disabilities, students from minority cultural groups and/or students from a low socio-economic origin (Weedon and Riddell 2016). A growing number of studies focus on the analysis of the experiences of students with disabilities at the university (Claiborne et al. 2010; Leyser et al. 2011; Gibson 2012; Moriña, Cortés-Vega, and Molina 2015).

With regard to this collective, the number of students with disabilities within higher education continues to increase year after year (Pumfrey 2008; Liasidou 2014; Seale et al. 2015). The approval of statements and regulations aimed at promoting inclusion may have influenced this increase in students. The Convention of the Rights of People with Disabilities

(UN 2006) pointed out the obligation to ensure that people with disabilities have access – without discrimination and within the same conditions as the rest – to higher education, professional training, adult education and lifelong learning. The European Union is committed to inclusive education within the framework of higher education. For this purpose, the creation of support plans and services that improve access and educational inclusion of non-traditional students was proposed in the *European Strategy 2010–2020* (European Commission 2010). In other countries, such as Australia, the United States or the United Kingdom, proceedings of discrimination have been approved to guarantee the right to education in the university for persons with disabilities.

A significant number of countries have launched actions to make universities more accessible for people with disabilities, becoming progressively more committed to the processes of inclusion (Barnes 2007; Jacklin et al. 2007). In response to these laws and policies, many universities have established offices to support the educational needs of students with disabilities, have incorporated the use of new technologies and/or have implemented inclusive educational practices. However, the existence of these actions is insufficient to ensure the right of the students to quality education, without discrimination and based on the principles of inclusive education. Recently, several studies (Quinn 2013; Gibson 2015; Thomas 2016; Wilson et al. 2016) concluded that it is not enough to guarantee diverse students access to education, it is also necessary to provide appropriate support to ensure their inclusion. As has been reported (Wessel et al. 2009; Quinn 2013; Lombardi, Murray, and Kowitt 2016), students with disabilities are at greater risk of prematurely dropping out of universities in comparison to students without disabilities. Therefore, it is necessary to design policies and strategies that encourage students to remain in the university and complete their degree courses successfully.

In order to guarantee equal opportunities and facilitate the inclusion of students with disabilities, it is necessary to incorporate the principles of inclusive education and universal design for learning into university policies and practices based on the social model of disability. Inclusive education postulates the right to full participation and quality education guaranteed to all university students. Diversity is valued in inclusive educational contexts, which foresees design of accessible educational projects, taking into account the different ways of learning and anticipating possible needs that may arise.

The social model, postulates that society, and in this case the university, generates the barriers that hinder the inclusion of university students with disabilities; arguing that the practices, attitudes and policies of the social context generate the barriers and/or supports that influence access and participation (Oliver 1990). According to the social model, disability is not a personal tragedy or an abnormality and there is no need to cure the 'disease'. Barriers to success are a form of discrimination and oppression and universities should avoid the use of medical labels to identify students with disabilities and they should make efforts to establish inclusive teaching strategies to support student success (Matthews 2009). In contrast, the medical model considers disability as an 'individual problem' (Armstrong and Barton 1999). From the perspective of the social model, higher education must restructure the educational experience so that all the students can participate.

Current research on higher education, inclusive education and disability

At present, research on higher education, disabilities and inclusive education is focused mainly on two areas: students with disabilities and faculty members. For this review, the

studies were selected from relevant professional journals of higher education (e.g. *Higher Education, Studies in Special Education, Teaching in Higher Education*) and specific journals of special educational needs (e.g. *Disability and Society, European Journal of Special Need Education, International Journal of Inclusive Education*). Key words for the search were 'higher education', 'disability', 'students with disability' and 'inclusive education'. The review looked at investigations after the year 2000.

The works that are cited in this article do not represent all the existing ones in this line of research. To keep the focus of the article, I selected only those investigations that were most relevant for the analysis, and often selected a single representative study for a given topic. Finally, some cited works are not research but are theoretical in nature.

Most of studies revolve around the students themselves. Three primary areas have been examined: the barriers and aids identified by students with disabilities; the transitions from educational stages prior to higher education towards this formative stage; and students' concern about whether or not disclose their disability if it is 'invisible'. Many of these studies were qualitative that sought to hear amplify student voices.

Studies about faculty members, although not as numerous, address three topics: analysing the attitudes of the faculty members towards students with disabilities; the faculty members' need for training; and the use of universal design for learning.

Students with disabilities

The largest group of research studies examined the voice of the students (see Table 1) as they identify both the barriers and the supports in their university experiences (Shevlin, Kenny, and Mcneela 2004; Jacklin et al. 2007; Claiborne et al. 2010; Hopkins 2011; Mullins and Preyde 2013; Moriña, López, and Molina 2015). In this summary, we have chosen to look at the experiences of students with disabilities as a whole, rather than examining individual disability areas. Regarding the barriers, the most important obstacle identified was the negative attitudes displayed by faculty members. In many cases, the students stated that the professor doubted they had a disability, did not adapt the teaching projects and questioned their capacity to study in the university. Additional challenges reported by students with disabilities included: architectural barriers; inaccessible information and technology; rules and policies that are not actually enforced (e.g. the exam schedules and formats were not adapted, class attendance was not facilitated for students with difficulties derived from their disability); or methodologies that do not favour inclusion (e.g. only providing master classes without any interaction between the students and the faculty, technological resources – identified as an aid – were not used) (Mullins and Preyde 2013; Strnadová, Hájková, and Květoňová 2015).

These students' paths are frequently very difficult, somewhat like an obstacle course and students even define themselves as survivors and long-distance runners (Moriña 2015). Their eventual performance is similar to that of the rest of the students, but in all cases, they reported that this implies a greater investment of effort and time (Skinner 2004). Students with disabilities commonly report that they feel they have to work harder than other students because they have to manage both their disability and their studies (Seale et al. 2015).

It is interesting to note that many of the barriers identified by students with disabilities are also shared by other students (e.g. the difficulties with learning when faculty are inflexible or not empathetic; when the professor uses exclusively master classes to teach, without any kind of additional resources or personal interaction) (Madriaga et al. 2010). Nevertheless,

Table 1. Students' voice (barriers and facilitators).

Article citations	Target populations	Key research findings
Claiborne et al. (2010)	Four students with disabilities; 7 faculty members; 3 staff; 3 students without disabilities	Barriers to access and resources; non-accessible technology, negative attitudes of the faculty
Gibson (2012)	5 students with disabilities	Facilitators: Positive impact of friendships, peer support networks, significant education contacts and studying
Jacklin et al. (2007)	192 students with disabilities	Mostly positive experiences Negative experiences: lack of support
Hopkins (2011)	6 students with disabilities	Physical, attitudinal, social, cultural and political barriers
Madriaga et al. (2010)	172 students with disabilities 312 students without disabilities	Students with disabilities confront barriers of access in their learning and assessment, there are similar difficulties they share with non-disabled students
Moriña (2015)	44 students with disabilities	Barriers: fear of disclosing the disability, doing twice as much to get half as far Facilitator: personal skills
Moriña, López, and Molina (2015)	44 students with disabilities	Barriers: Faculty and staff's negative attitude, inadequate use of PowerPoint, ruling on disability is not enforced, professor is not informed about or trained in disabilities Facilitator: curricular adaptations
Mullins and Preyde (2013)	10 students with invisible disabilities	Barriers: negative social culture, negative attitudes; organisational aspects, desire to have a visible manifestation of their disability (reduce public questions about the validity of their disability)
Prowse (2009)	44 students with disabilities	Higher education as an opportunity; need to replace labels
Riddell, Tinklin, and Wilson (2004)	56 students with disabilities	Barriers: teaching methodologies, assessment and professional development of the faculty
Seale et al. (2015)	175 students with disabilities	Barriers: technological resources are not appropriate or effective Students have to manage both their disability and their studies
Shevlin, Kenny, and Mcneela (2004)	32 students with disabilities	Barriers: physical in nature, negative attitudes, assessment not adapted Facilitator: disability support office
Skinner (2004)	20 students with learning disabilities	Facilitators: support from family, friends, instructors, and/or academic support personnel; Importance of perseverance; academic accommodations
Strnadová, Hájková, and Květoňová (2015)	34 students with disabilities	Barriers: institutional, negative attitudinal, and disability-specific barriers Facilitators: family support, peer support, support provided by assistants, personal strategies (assertiveness, self-determination, etc.)

for people with disabilities, these issues may be even more complex and may need additional support to solve.

Although less present in the literature, there are also studies describing a series of facilitators to support students with disabilities within the university. Among the supportive factors are: family support to study in the university (Riddell, Tinklin, and Wilson 2004; Skinner 2004), friendships and peer support networks, counting on close people who encourage them and assist them in their studies (Riddell, Tinklin, and Wilson 2004; Gibson 2012); help from certain faculty and staff who believe in them, facilitating the necessary adjustments, technologies that facilitate learning, such as the use of digital blackboards, adapted software (Seale et al. 2015); disability support offices (Riddell, Tinklin, and Wilson 2004); or personal support, referring to the students' own personal strategies implemented to deal with their difficulties (Prowse 2009; Moriña 2015).

Other studies have focused (Table 2), although to a lesser extent, on exploring the transition processes from secondary education to the university (Eckes and Ochoa 2005; Gill 2007; Garrison-Wade 2012; Patrick and Wessel 2013). These works have described both the difficulties encountered with and ideas for improvement of the transition of students with disabilities. These studies concluded that, for people with disabilities, the transition processes to the university are fragile and can easily be compromised. The transition to post-secondary education is a period when more vulnerabilities are revealed, which can lead to students dropping out of the university. This stage is a difficult one for many students, but it may be especially challenging for those with disabilities because of academic and social adjustment issues (Jacklin et al. 2007; Fuller et al. 2009; Fordyce et al. 2013; Hong 2015; Lovet et al. 2015; Wessel et al. 2015). The transition process influences the beginning of the students' experience within higher education and sets a tone for involvement which often continues until graduation. The main source of difficulty in the transition lies in the fact that the student

Table 2. Students' voice (transition processes).

Article citations	Target populations	Key research findings
Fordyce et al. (2013)	30 students who are deaf or hard of hearing	Need to improve the transition processes
Fuller et al. (2009)	35 students with disabilities	Barriers: untrained faculty and negative attitudes
Garrison-Wade (2012)	59 students with disabilities 6 disability resource coordinators	Barriers: negative attitudes Facilitators: self-determination; planning efforts; post-secondary supports (networking and mentoring)
Getzel and Thoma (2008)	34 students with disabilities	Transition (a) problem solving, (b) understanding one's disability, (c) goal-setting, and (d) self-management as critical skills that students need to be effective self-advocates to secure needed supports and services.
Hong (2015)	16 students with disabilities	Barriers: faculty perception, fit of advisors; peer image and social pressure; college stressors; quality of support services
Lombardi, Murray, and Kowitt (2016)	200 students with disabilities	Certain relationship types can make meaningful differences in positively affecting college experiences of students with disabilities, and illustrate the importance of considering types of relationships and quality of social support in future research on social networks
Patrick and Wessel (2013)	12 students with disabilities	Faculty mentor was crucial in their transition; Faculty, staff, and administrators should recognise the importance of providing individualised support to students with disabilities; difficult academic transition to college
Wessel et al. (2015)	10 students who used a wheelchair 4 parents	Students were able to self-advocate well. Students in wheelchairs need to learn how to be vocal about their needs, the process of becoming a self-advocate; Essential support from the disability office during the first year, the most difficult moment

must often adapt to new organisational, educational and social contexts (Thomas 2008). When they arrive at the university, the needs of students with disabilities are similar to those they had in high school, except now they have to be more self-directed in managing their own lives (Getzel and Thoma 2008; Hong 2015). In addition, many students do not know which support services are available or what legal rights they have.

A successful transition during the first year seems to be critical to the student's ultimate retention and success (Goodman and Pascarella 2006). Tinto (1988) found that the first six weeks are particularly crucial because it is the period in which students are most susceptible and sensitive to feelings of marginalisation. Wessel et al. (2009) also found that the dropout rate was highest for students with disabilities during the first weeks of the semester. The main source of difficulty in transition lies in the fact that the student must often adapt to new organisational, educational and social contexts (Thomas 2008). Kochhar-Bryant and colleagues (Kochhar-Bryant, Bassett, and Webb 2009) refer to the transition from secondary to post-secondary settings as a *transition cliff* for people with disabilities when many may feel disconnected from the university community (Getzel and Thoma 2008; Hong 2015).

Studies show that many universities have begun to implement some form of intervention to increase retention during the first year of university (Upcraft, Gardner, and Barefoot 2005). There also seem to be some key factors that help in the transition processes, including self-awareness, self-determination and support, self-management, adequate preparation for university and assistance technology (Garrison-Wade 2012). Also, networking and relationships with their fellow students (Jacklin et al. 2007; Crosling, Thomas, and Headney 2008; Lombardi, Murray, and Kowitt 2016) and mentoring (by students of the last courses or by faculty members) were critical for achieving experiences of success in the university (Patrick and Wessel 2013). Getzel (2008) stated that students with disabilities benefit from faculty that have increased awareness and knowledge of the characteristics and needs of students with disabilities, and from faculty that insert concepts of universal design into their instruction. Communication with tutors and other staff members is also a key issue for a successful transition process (Beck and Davidson 2001). Other aspects such as peer support, academic support and academic accommodations are also considered as protective factors (Hartley 2010).

A third theme analysed in other investigations refers to hidden disabilities (see Table 3), with regard to whether or not to disclose a disability. In these studies, 'invisible' disabilities

Table 3. Students' voice (hidden disabilities).

Article citations	Target populations	key research findings
Hadjikakou and Hartas (2008)	15 students with disabilities	Dilemma about disclosing or not disclosing the disability, staff not well trained in disabilities, no teaching adaptations
Lourens and Swartz (2016)	Deans and faculty members 23 students with visual disability	University: reactive responses The politics of visibility and invisibility are central to the experience of disability; fear of being stigmatised
Martin (2010)	54 students with disabilities	Not disclosing the disability because prior experience caused harm; need for training of the staff
Mullins and Preyde (2013)	10 students with invisible disabilities	Social barriers related to negative social attitudes; other people questioned the validity of their invisible disabilities; effects of stigma; decisions not disclose their disability

refer to disabilities that have no physical manifestation and cannot be readily identified by others (Mullins and Preyde 2013). According to Gibson (2012), people with invisible disabilities think that having this type of disability has affected them negatively in their university studies. In this author's study (Moriña 2015), the university students felt that the academic staff and the other students questioned the validity of their disabilities because they were not visible. In many cases, they even had to present additional documents to demonstrate their disability. This was emotionally very difficult for them and made them feel less legitimate. Many university students indicated that they preferred not to disclose their disability and did so only in their closest relationships or when it was necessary, for example, when they needed some kind of adaptation or, as Prowse (2009) states, to obtain economic support, as in the case of free college tuition.

Students' perceptions about hidden disabilities is closely related to the concept of 'normality' and they may choose non-disclosure if they desire to be considered and treated with 'normality' (Riddell, Tinklin, and Wilson 2004; Claiborne et al. 2010; Hong 2015). They may also choose not to share their disability if they feel that disclosure would place them at a disadvantage or they the fear being stigmatised or labelled (Martin 2010; Lourens and Swartz 2016); or simply because they think they have no special needs or disability (Hadjikakou and Hartas 2008). In general, these students, with either a visible or an invisible disability, may not want to be identified with a disability (Barnes 2007). As some studies explain, requesting some type of aid does not imply that they do not want to be treated like any other peer (Riddell, Tinklin, and Wilson 2004).

Research on faculty's response to students with disabilities

Regarding investigations of the faculty (Table 4), the three topics that usually appear are: attitudes of the faculty members towards students with disabilities; faculty training in disability issues and inclusive education; and putting into practice universal design for learning strategies.

Some studies on attitudes deserve special mention, such as that of Lombardi, Vukovic, and Sala-Bars (2015), in which they measured and compared the attitudes of faculty members in Spain, Canada and the United States. In this work, it was concluded that the academic staff showed a positive attitude towards disabilities and, although they valued the strategies of inclusive education in theory, they did not implement them in practice. Similar results were reached in the investigations of Cook, Rumrill, and Tankersley (2009) and Zhang et al. (2010). Interestingly, these results do not coincide with the opinions of the students with disabilities (discussed earlier) who identified the attitudes of the faculty members towards them as the most significant barrier in their careers (Collins 2000; Hong and Himmel 2009; Coriale, Larson, and Robertson 2012).

The second issue related to the faculty is the need for training and sensitisation towards disabilities. Several studies have focused on training university professors in the field of disability (Debrand and Salzberg 2005; Hockings, Brett, and Terentjevs 2012; Lovet et al. 2015; Moriña, Cortés-Vega, and Molina 2015). Training the faculty to (more appropriately or effectively) respond to the needs of the students with disabilities is critical for higher education (Lovet et al. 2015). Some universities have already taken on this challenge and have designed awareness training programmes and prepared their academic staff for this undertaking. Worthy of mention, for example, are the Teachability (2002) proposal in Scotland

Table 4. Faculty.

Article citations	Target populations	Key research findings
Black, Weinberg, and Brodwin (2014)	73 faculty members	Faculty incorporate guidelines for universal design in their instruction to help create a more inclusive educational environment for students with disabilities; faculty require training in the principles of universal design
Cook, Rumrill, and Tankersley (2009)	307 faculty members	Issues related to law, Universal Design for Instruction, and disability characteristics were important but were not being addressed satisfactorily Issues related to willingness to provide accommodations were neither highly important nor being addressed satisfactorily
Coriale, Larson, and Robertson (2012)	1 student with cerebral palsy 1 assistant	The presence of an assistant influences interpersonal dynamics between students and faculty negative attitudes of the faculty members
Davies, Schelly, and Spooner (2013)	63 faculty	Instructors who received training reported a positive change in their use of universal design learning strategies
Debrand and Salzberg (2005)	420 members of the Association on Higher Education and disability (USA)	A critical factor for the success of the students is the faculty. Positive effects of training the teaching staff in disabilities
Hitch, Macfarlane, and Nihill (2015)	38 Australian universities 42 staff and Deans	A minority of Australian universities refer to inclusive teaching or UDL in their policies and procedures
Hong and Himmel (2009)	116 faculty members	Attitudes of the faculty members towards students with disabilities as the most significant barrier in their careers
Lombardi and Murray (2011)	112 faculty members	Disability-related training may positively affect faculty attitudes towards disabilities and inclusive instruction
Lombardi, Vukovic, and Sala-Bars (2015)	1195 faculty members	The majority of faculty receive little to no training in effective teaching practices that will benefit diverse learners, including students with disabilities
Lovet et al. (2015)	5 faculty members	Universal Design for Instruction for inclusion Barriers: transition from high school to college, being unaware that the student has a disability, insufficient disability support staff, inadequate training
Moriña, Cortés-Vega, and Molina (2015) Zhang et al. (2010)	44 student with disabilities 206 faculty members	Faculty not informed about or trained in disability Need for training Improving the faculty's personal beliefs may be essential for students with disabilities

(University of Strathclyde), the materials designed by Healey and colleagues (Healey et al. 2001) in England (University of Gloucestershire) and Debrand and Salzberg (2005) proposal in the United States (Utah State University). In some of the studies, it is concluded that the attitude of the faculty members improved after they had been trained and had more experience in how to respond to the needs of the students with disabilities (Lombardi and Murray 2011; Murray, Lombardi, and Wren 2011; Hong 2015).

A last issue referring to the teaching faculty is linked to universal design for learning, training in this aspect and its practical implementation in university classrooms. Universal design for learning is an approach to teaching that is characterised by the proactive design and use of inclusive strategies that benefit *all* the students. That is, the range of possible learning needs of the students is anticipated, designing curricula with everyone in mind, for

example, providing information in various formats at the same time (e.g. printed and online books). University students with disabilities have reported that they benefit from the academic staff who apply the principles of the universal design for learning (McGuire and Scott 2006; Hitch, Macfarlane, and Nihill 2015).

The findings show that if the faculty members used the universal design, then the changes to be introduced in the syllabuses for students with disabilities (e.g. adaptations of the materials, methodologies or assessments), including the most common ones – extended exam time and note-taking services – would not be necessary (Lombardi, Murray, and Gerdes 2011). In addition, it is argued that the universal design for learning benefits all students, with or without disabilities (i.e. handing out the PowerPoint notes, which have been designed using accessibility criteria, offering detailed assessment criteria through headings or providing a virtual environment of the subject with online resources so students can access the electronic material whenever they need it). However, faculty are not usually trained and do not incorporate universal design for learning into their instruction (Davies, Schelly, and Spooner 2013; Black, Weinberg, and Brodwin 2014; Hitch, Macfarlane, and Nihill 2015).

Higher education as an opportunity: context that contributes to social and educational inclusion

Although some students with disabilities have had to deal with difficult university trajectories, the university also represents opportunities for empowerment, social and occupational inclusion (Fuller, Bradley, and Healey 2004; Wehman 2006; Cook, Rumrill, and Tankersley 2009; Shaw 2009; Johnson and Nord 2011; Papay and Griffin 2013).

Some university students with disabilities even argue that going to the university should be strongly encouraged for people with disabilities, as it is a way to improve their quality of life and to expand their occupational prospects (Moriña 2015). This experience can increase their opportunities to get and keep a job, to obtain higher revenues and achieve an independent life. Moriña (2015) and Weldon and Riddell (2007), found that students with disabilities value higher education as a positive experience because it provided them with a normalised context which they wished to continue. In some cases, the university experience is seen as an opportunity that strengthens them personally in the face of the difficulties derived from their disability, which they encounter every day in their lives. In the case of disabilities that are due to external events, the importance granted to the university is even greater, because, as they state, the fact of studying university courses motivates and encourages them and also serves as an escape to overcome the difficulties associated with their disability (Moriña 2015).

A university education is a powerful tool for these university students to reinvent themselves and revalidate an identity that may have been impaired in other educational stages (Prowse 2009). It could even be stated that many university students with disabilities are resilient people, as they have had to face adverse situations and overcome barriers (Zakour and Gillespie 2013).

However, not only students with disabilities benefit from the experience in higher education, but also the teaching and learning processes are enriched by having diverse students in the classrooms. In this sense, the presence of students with disabilities helps build a better university.

Conclusions: policies, strategies, processes and actions to develop an inclusive education

We conclude by exploring some policies, strategies, processes and actions that can contribute to ensuring the success of all the students. We believe that a series of transformations, both at the institutional level and in the classroom practices, could be considered in higher education to move towards a more inclusive university.

First, university spaces should be fully accessible, with no physical barriers of any type. In this context, it is crucial that spaces be based on the universal design principle so that environments are accessible to all users (Powell 2013).

Second, universities should consider the especially sensitive transition of students with disabilities during their first year and even the first weeks of attendance. The university should be proactive action in transition planning to avoid early leaving and to foster academic success for students with disabilities (Fordyce et al. 2013). Strategies might include special orientation sessions, tutorials (e.g. assigning a student in a higher year or an instructor as a counsellor) or having reference persons or groups related to the disability among the faculty

Finally, higher education should support training the faculty, not only in the discipline they teach and investigate, but also in how to teach. Instructional and methodological strategies to address the needs of students with disabilities should be mandatory for all personnel. Faculty members should be sensitised, informed and trained in how to carry out inclusive pedagogy and universal designs for learning (Pliner and Johnson 2004; Spratt and Florian 2015).

In conclusion, it is not enough for the university to guarantee access to students with disabilities. Its policies and practices must be revised to ensure that education is inclusive – guaranteeing that *all* the students can participate fully and that *all* can benefit from a process of quality teaching and learning.

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Notes on contributor

Anabel Morriña is an associated professor in inclusive education. Her research interests are inclusive education, disability, higher education, teacher/Faculty training and Qualitative methods.

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