

Accessibility at the University: Inclusive Dialogues as an Institutional Strategy

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: in 2023, University identified opportunities to improve the educational inclusion of people with disabilities, aligning with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Within this framework, we designed Inclusive Dialogue Instances (EDIs) as an institutional mechanism that enables students, teaching teams, and university authorities to manage supports and reasonable accommodations through agreements. This article presents preliminary results from the EDI implementation.

Methods: we used participatory action research with a qualitative approach to study the mechanisms' dynamics and outcomes over 18 months.

Results: we organized the results into three main areas: (1) strengthening educational trajectories—most participants made progress, and one graduated; (2) the production of inclusive communication materials and pedagogical guidelines; and (3) teacher training on inclusion. Through dialogic exchanges, we addressed 12 situations, resulting in 14 agreements on supports and reasonable accommodations. These efforts contributed to strengthening participants' educational trajectories, while also fostering the development of inclusive materials and their gradual integration into teacher training initiatives.

Discussion: the dialogic approach of the EDIs encourages the community to review its assumptions and practices, and to gradually transform institutional culture. In this framework, the entire educational community collectively engages in educational inclusion and shares responsibility.

Conclusions: this analysis finds ways to strengthen inclusive skills in disability and accessibility at the university and supports adding these perspectives to policies, practices, and culture.

Key words: academic accessibility, inclusion, higher education, people with disabilities.

Accesibilidad en la Universidad: diálogos inclusivos como dispositivo institucional

RESUMEN

Introducción: en 2023, la Universidad identificó oportunidades de mejora en inclusión educativa de personas con discapacidad, en línea con la Convención sobre los Derechos de las Personas con

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Discapacidad. En este marco se diseñaron los Espacios de Diálogos Inclusivos (EDI), un dispositivo institucional para gestionar apoyos y ajustes razonables mediante acuerdos entre estudiantes, equipos docentes y autoridades. El objetivo del artículo es presentar resultados preliminares de su implementación.

Métodos: se adoptó un diseño de investigación-acción-participativa con enfoque cualitativo, centrado en el análisis de las dinámicas y resultados del dispositivo durante 18 meses.

Resultados: los resultados se organizan en tres dimensiones: fortalecimiento de trayectorias, producción de materiales y formación docente y promoción de una cultura inclusiva. Se abordaron 12 situaciones mediante instancias dialógicas, generando 14 acuerdos de apoyos y ajustes razonables. La mayoría de las personas fortalecieron su trayectoria y una egresó. Asimismo, se elaboraron materiales de comunicación inclusiva y orientaciones pedagógicas, y se incorporaron progresivamente estas temáticas en propuestas de formación docente.

Discusión: la modalidad dialógica de los EDI promueve la revisión de supuestos y prácticas, así como la transformación progresiva de la cultura institucional. En este marco, la inclusión educativa se concibe como un proceso colectivo, que involucra a toda la comunidad educativa y fomenta la corresponsabilidad.

Conclusiones: este análisis preliminar de resultados de la implementación del dispositivo identifica oportunidades para fortalecer competencias profesionales inclusivas en materia de discapacidad y accesibilidad en la universidad, favoreciendo la transversalización de estas perspectivas en políticas, prácticas y cultura institucional.

Palabras clave: accesibilidad académica, inclusión, educación superior, personas con discapacidad.

INTRODUCTION

In a diagnostic assessment conducted in 2023, the University identified opportunities to improve the educational inclusion of persons with disabilities.¹ In this context, a collaborative effort was initiated among educational management areas to develop policies and projects aimed at enhancing accessibility, in accordance with the principles established in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.²⁻⁴

Promoting accessibility within the university involves identifying, eliminating, and/or minimizing barriers (physical, academic, communication-related, and attitudinal), as well as managing support measures and reasonable accommodations. *Support measures* are understood as actions that strengthen the educational institution's response to student diversity, whereas *reasonable accommodations* are agreed-upon modifications that promote equal opportunities for learning and participation without imposing a disproportionate or undue burden.

The *Inclusive Dialogue Spaces* (IDS) were established as an institutional accessibility strategy to manage support measures and reasonable accommodations that facilitate student learning and participation.²⁻⁴ They are implemented through mutual commitments among the requesting individual, faculty teams, and program authorities.

Although the institution has voluntary disability registration tools in place through its SIU Guaraní

academic management system, the strategy is activated in response to specific requests to safeguard data protection and student autonomy.

In line with the University's mission, the strategy seeks to strengthen existing inclusive initiatives within the institution.^{1,5} It also aims to mainstream the perspectives of disability and accessibility across university policies, practices, and culture.^{6,7} This brief communication aims to present preliminary results from the implementation of the IDS over an 18-month period.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A participatory action research (PAR) design with a qualitative approach was adopted, structured around continuous feedback cycles. The process began with an institutional assessment involving decision-makers, whose findings informed the co-design of a dialogic strategy involving students, faculty members, and academic authorities. Based on this process, agreements and inclusive strategies were developed through a collaborative methodology. During implementation, the engagement of strategic institutional areas was encouraged, facilitating critical reflection processes aimed at reviewing and strengthening the strategy. This iterative dynamic ensured the reciprocal reinforcement of knowledge production and action.

Data were analyzed using thematic categorization, which enabled the identification –through an accessibility lens– of key themes related to the support needs of

students requiring this type of guidance; the involvement of faculty teams and/or academic authorities; and the development of reasonable accommodations, collaboratively constructed through dialogue among members of the educational community.

The study was conducted in accordance with the principles established in the latest version of the Declaration of Helsinki. Personal data protection and confidentiality were ensured. For ethical reasons, the origin and specific reasons underlying each consultation were not described.

RESULTS

The results obtained during the implementation period analyzed can be grouped into three main dimensions: strengthening students' educational trajectories, developing dissemination materials and faculty training initiatives, and, consequently, progressively promoting an inclusive institutional culture.

Over the last 18 months, 12 consultations were received from students facing various barriers to learning and participation. Each situation was addressed through a dialogic approach, involving individual and/or group meetings among faculty teams, academic authorities, and students aimed at identifying specific support needs and collaboratively developing strategies. As a result, 14 agreements regarding support measures and reasonable accommodations were established, accompanied by follow-up schedules that allowed for ongoing adjustments. Eleven (11) of the twelve (12) individuals maintained and strengthened their academic trajectories at the university, and one (1) graduated during this period.

In addition, as a result of coordinated work across institutional areas, an information field was incorporated into the SIU Guaraní system, providing details about the strategy and contact information for requesting support, thereby increasing the institutional visibility of the initiative.

Furthermore, two types of materials were developed for the educational community: the Second Guide to Good Practices for Inclusive Communication: Accessibility and Disability and a series of Recommendations to Promote Student Learning and Participation, which currently address autism, hearing disabilities, dyslexia, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Both resources are based on up-to-date national and international evidence and can be adapted to specific needs and requests.

Educational inclusion topics have also been progressively incorporated into faculty development initiatives through the institutional course on Diversity and Gender and through specific content included in other training activities. In addition, the University offers a graduate program focused on the care of persons with disabilities and promotes the integration of these topics into other undergraduate and graduate curricula. These initiatives demonstrate progress while also highlighting opportunities to further strengthen inclusive competencies related to disability and accessibility.

Finally, the IDS bring into play diverse representations and conceptual models of disability that influence educational practices. Two non-mutually exclusive perspectives were identified among faculty members, program authorities, and students. On the one hand, there is openness to revisiting assumptions and incorporating inclusive strategies, as reflected in recurring comments such as *"I had never thought about it that way."* On the other hand, some conceptions associate support measures with reduced academic demands (reflected in expressions such as *"academic advantages"*) or raise concerns regarding students' capabilities and the maintenance of academic standards when reasonable accommodations are implemented.

Within this context, as noted by one administrative leader, the strategy *"creates space for questioning"* by providing a forum for listening and dialogue that challenges underlying assumptions about accessibility in higher education.

DISCUSSION

The IDS conceive inclusion as a process that involves the entire educational community, in which each individual assumes responsibility. The strategy aligns with approaches centered on individual educational needs⁸, with dialogue as a driver of institutional transformation⁹, and with critical perspectives that challenge models reproducing exclusion within higher education.^{10,11}

Inclusion policies in higher education must safeguard autonomy and data protection while avoiding paternalistic approaches. The findings suggest that the dialogic model constitutes an alternative to standardized protocols, as it enables the identification of specific support needs and addresses the diversity of educational trajectories and barriers experienced by students.

Consistent with the work of Paz-Maldonado¹², the implementation of the strategy and the involvement of multiple stakeholders underscore the importance of collectively building conditions that support student retention and participation. Moreover, the experience accumulated through each case generates learning that extends beyond individual situations and promotes the gradual and participatory transformation of institutional approaches to diversity.

The social representations emerging within the IDS reveal the coexistence of two disability models¹³. On the one hand, a medical model with paternalistic overtones persists, in which learning potential is perceived as limited and the provision of support is interpreted as a relaxation of academic requirements. Guided by principles of normalization and diagnosis, this perspective is more closely aligned with the integration paradigm than with that of inclusion. At the same time, evidence of a social and rights-based model is also present, reflected in the openness and willingness of faculty teams and academic authorities to implement support measures that facilitate the learning and participation of students who require them.

The experience highlights the need to promote the development of inclusive competencies throughout the

educational community, as well as to strengthen a notion of equity understood as the adaptation of conditions to enable the achievement of learning objectives, without lowering standards or generating undue institutional burden.

The progressive incorporation of these topics into faculty development initiatives represents a step forward in this direction. As Freitas¹⁴ warns, inclusion is not guaranteed merely by being mentioned; rather, it requires institutional commitment and sustained practices. Within this framework, Universal Design¹¹ is proposed as a guiding approach that broadens opportunities for participation.

The ongoing implementation and continuous review of the strategy follow the framework proposed by the Index for Inclusion⁷ by articulating three interrelated dimensions: policies, practices, and institutional culture. In the field of educational inclusion, these dimensions are mutually constitutive and transformative.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of implementing this institutional accessibility strategy indicate progress in addressing the opportunities for strengthening educational inclusion identified in a diagnostic study. Addressing individual situations through the IDS led to agreements regarding support measures and the strengthening of academic trajectories, while also fostering the development of educational resources and the progressive incorporation of these topics into faculty development initiatives.

As a dialogic space involving multiple stakeholders within the institutional community, the IDS promotes the gradual mainstreaming of an accessibility perspective while strengthening existing inclusive initiatives. Its dialogic dynamics help identify tensions, representations, and opportunities related to accessibility. Within this framework, opportunities were identified to further mainstream inclusive professional competencies related to disability and accessibility across the educational community.

This article serves as a precursor to a future publication focused on the perspectives of students who participated in the IDS. Bringing these voices forward will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the meanings and experiences of inclusion.

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