

# **Pre-Print Series in EU Digital and Social Policy**

**1/24**

**Promoting autonomy and  
employment of individuals with  
intellectual disability: the role of  
universities**

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## **PROMOTING AUTONOMY AND EMPLOYMENT OF INDIVIDUALS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY: THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES<sup>1</sup>**

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Cita sugerida: Juana Morcillo & Juan Bornman, *Promoting autonomy and employment of individuals with intellectual disability: the role of universities*, 1/24 Preprints Series in EU Digital and Social Policy, Center for European Studies “Luis Ortega Álvarez”- Jean Monnet Center of Excellence, 2024.

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<sup>1</sup> Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

## Abstract

A positive correlation exists between having a university degree and being employed. However, the opportunity to earn a university degree is challenging for students with intellectual disability, as universities are typically not adapted to their unique higher education needs. This negatively impacts their employment opportunities and, consequently, also their autonomy, because employment is often a driver of important life decisions. In response, the University of Castilla-La Mancha in Spain embarked on a programme ‘Incluye e Inserta UCLM’ (‘Inclusion and Labour Insertion at UCLM’) to accommodate students with intellectual disabilities through implementing an accessible university qualification for them. Universities are knowledge-generating centres and should also fulfil a social function. To do so, universities must be in contact with society to determine societal needs and provide some solutions. The abovementioned socially responsive university programme offers students with intellectual disabilities a unique opportunity to fulfill their academic and personal growth

## Summary

<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b> .....	3
<b>2. SPAIN: DOMESTIC LAW AND UNIVERSITY RULES</b> .....	6
<b>3. SOUTH AFRICA: DOMESTIC LAW AND UNIVERSITY RULES</b> .....	6
<b>4. RESEARCH METHODS AND DESIGN</b> .....	7
4.1. Setting .....	8
4.2. Study population and sampling strategy .....	8
4.3. Intervention .....	8
4.4. Data collection .....	9
4.5. Data analysis.....	9
4.6. Ethical considerations .....	10
<b>5. RESULTS</b> .....	10
5.1. Cycle 1: 2018/2019 .....	10
5.2. Cycle 2: 2019/2020 .....	11
5.3. Cycle 3: 2020/2021 .....	14
<b>6. DISCUSSION</b> .....	16
<b>7. CONCLUSION</b> .....	18
<b>8. REFERENCES</b> .....	18

## 1. INTRODUCTION

All over the world, the perception exists that a university degree positively affects one’s employment opportunities across different business sectors.

Similarly, getting a university degree is beneficial for the around one billion people – 15% of the world’s population – who live with some type of disability (WHO & World Bank, 2011). However, in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) like South Africa, 90% of persons with disabilities of working age are unemployed, whereas in high-income countries (HICs) like Spain, it is between 50% and 70% (UN, 2018). In Spain, young people with disabilities face the highest unemployment rate (56,4%) (ODISMET, 2019). Beyond their physical, mental, or sensory impairments, multiple factors contribute to the

inclusion barriers they face, such as less access to education and employment, fewer socioeconomic opportunities, disability stigma and discrimination, a lack of political, and poor implementation of relevant policies (Maart et al., 2019; Tripney et al., 2019; Visagie et al., 2017).

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), explicitly mentions the right to work for persons with disabilities (UN, 2006), and both the text of the CRPD and its Optional Protocol was ratified by Spain and South Africa in 2007. The CRPD is the first legally binding international human rights instrument for persons with disabilities, and offers signatory states the mechanisms for preventing discrimination and protecting these persons' rights.

Goal 8 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) “Decent Work and Economic Growth” aims to promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, and emphasizes decent and productive employment for all, including individuals with disabilities (UN, 2016). The SDGs focus on enhancing economic development, environmental sustainability, and social inclusion both in HICs and LMICs (Richardson et al., 2019). University education can offer persons with intellectual disabilities the opportunity to find decent employment (i.e., a market-related salary with promotion opportunities) in a context of social inclusion and, thereby, contribute to the economic growth of a country.

In addition to international policies and frameworks (such as the CRPD and SDGs), country-specific initiatives that aim to enhance the employment of persons with disabilities also exist, e.g., the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 which is used by the European Commission. In Spain, “España Digital 2025” puts forward a cross-cutting strategy, aligned with the 2021-2030 Strategy and the SDGs, to contribute to closing the digital divides in access and use of digital technologies. This means equipping the current and future workforce with new skills to adapt and respond to new labour market conditions, to reduce unemployment, and to increase labour productivity, in vulnerable groups, such as persons with disabilities. The global economic crisis had a particularly negative impact on the younger population. Therefore, reducing youth unemployment should be one of the most pressing focus areas for public institutions.

In South Africa, a comprehensive, inclusive legal framework exists, aiming to enhance the lives of all citizens, including those with disabilities (Du Plessis, 2017). This includes, amongst others White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities which focuses on improving access to services and employment opportunities; the Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998 which mandates employers to increase employment opportunities for persons with disabilities by encouraging recruitment, retainment, and continuing skills development through learnerships; the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act of 2000, which aims to ensure the prevention, prohibition, and elimination of unfair discrimination (e.g. inaccessible work environments, verbal or physical harassment or intimidation of persons with disabilities in the workplace); and the Skills Development Act of 1998, which creates formal employment opportunities through qualifications and learnerships, by providing learnerships and tax benefits (Schneider & Nkoli, 2011). Although these policies thus exist, most persons with disabilities do not meet employer's minimum productivity requirements, due to diverse reasons including poor education, limited training, and a lack of reasonable accommodations. Employers also consider employing persons with disability as causing additional financial burdens and opt to rather ensure social security benefits (i.e.,

disability grants) for them. This practice perpetuates the exclusion of persons with disabilities in employment.

Apart from these macro-level barriers that negatively impact on employment of persons with disability (e.g., poor policy implementation, employer attitudes and limited education and accommodations), several micro-level barriers also exist (e.g., poor health, and the severity of disability (Maart et al., 2019; McKenzie, 2021; Morwane et al., 2021). In this paper, we focus on the lack of access to education – and specifically education at the university level – as a significant contributor the limited employment of persons with disability.

The CRPD (UN, 2006) mandates inclusive education throughout a person's life, and as such, provides a directive for increased access to higher education and training, including universities.

Universities are decisive agents in the social inclusion of persons with disabilities. Research highlights the value of shared training, socialisation, learning and growth opportunities between students with and without disabilities. Furthermore, when students with intellectual disabilities are taught general professional skills at university (such as social skills, public speaking, information technology or economics), their autonomy, personal growth, and employment opportunities are significantly enhanced. For example, the 2019 Observatory on Disability and the Labour Market in Spain (ODISMET) report, comparing 16–64-year-olds with disability to their peers without disability, showed that 5,1% of persons with disability had no formal education, compared to 0,4% of those without disability. Moreover, 21,3% of persons with disability reported primary school education as their highest academic qualification, compared to 8,2% of peers without disability. For secondary education, the numbers were similar, with 56,9% for persons with disability, compared to 57% of those without disability. For university education, only 16,8% of persons with disability had received a university degree, compared to 34,4% without a disability. Regarding disability type, the ODISMET (2019) report showed that 29.4% of persons with intellectual disabilities in Spain had no form of formal education, compared to the relatively low number of individuals with physical (2,8%), visual (2%), and hearing disabilities (3,2%).

Although similar statistics are not available for South Africa, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET, 2015a) estimated that approximately 500 000 children with disabilities who were of school going age, were not in school. The census data are aligned to this finding and Statistics South Africa (2014), reported that when considering individuals with disabilities who were 20 years of age and older, more than 40% had never attended school, approximately 5% had received some basic education, while only 17% had completed high school.

There is a direct correlation between education and employability: the chance of finding employment increases with better education; and better qualifications almost guarantee employment. The ODISMET (2019) also reported that without any formal education, a person's economic activity rate is low (4,9%), increasing to 20% with primary education, almost doubling with secondary education (38,2%) and further increasing with university education (52,5%).

These data ought to make us rethink whether all the necessary avenues are being explored and strategies implemented for persons with disabilities to access and benefit from education. Concrete actions must be taken to reverse the current situation and

improve the educational outcomes and, consequently, the employability of these young people.

Therefore, this study focusses on the evaluation of a university programme for individuals with intellectual disabilities due to their specific vulnerability in the higher education scene, since they do not have the ability to learn at the same pace as neurotypical students (Shree & Shukla, 2016). It also presents some of the positive effects on persons with intellectual disabilities after completing an academic year at the university; not only from an educational point of view, but also from a personal and social one.

## **2. SPAIN: DOMESTIC LAW AND UNIVERSITY RULES**

In the case of Spain, Article 14 of the Spanish Constitution of 1978 recognises equality before the law, forbidding any kind of discrimination. Article 49 of the Constitution, in relation to persons with disabilities, orders the public authorities to provide the specialised care required and the special protection to enjoy their rights. The constitutional approach is based on the medical paradigm. But this paradigm was overcome when, sometime later, the concept of accessibility and ‘independent life’ emerged. The premise of the elimination of physical and social barriers gave rise to a demand for ‘universal accessibility’ not only of environments, but also of products and services. The regulatory adaptation to the CRPD brought about the new paradigm according to which universal accessibility ought to be articulated to life. In this sense, the General Act of 2013 on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and their Social Inclusion introduces substantial changes in the regulatory framework on the rights of persons with disabilities.

Regarding the university framework, the 24<sup>th</sup> additional provision, section 5, of Organic Law 4/2007 of the 12<sup>th</sup> of April, amending the Organic Law on Universities, indicates that “[a]ll study plans proposed by universities must take into account that training for any professional activities is to be conducted respecting and promoting human rights and the principles of universal accessibility and design for all.” In this regard, the abovementioned General Act of 2013 states that the Government shall encourage universities to consider measures for the development of the curricula of its degree courses to include education in the broader scope of ‘design for all’.

## **3. SOUTH AFRICA: DOMESTIC LAW AND UNIVERSITY RULES**

Section 29 of the South African Constitution (Act 108 of 1996) grants the right to education to all her citizens (Republic of South Africa, 1996). This is supported by the Higher Education Act no. 1 of 1997 (South Africa, 1997), an inclusive education act, which stipulates that universities must redress past inequalities in their admissions policy, so that no student is unfairly discriminated against. Furthermore, Education White Paper 3 (Transformation of the Higher Education System), which emphasises equal access and non-discrimination, is generally regarded as the South African government’s first attempt to address the lack of access to and equity in higher education. The White Paper also advocates for the transformation of the higher education by calling for the support of students with disabilities (including those with intellectual disabilities) across the higher education system (Department of Education, 1997; FOTIM 2011). The most recent South African disability policy in the Department of Higher Education and Training is the

Strategic Disability Policy Framework (Republic of South Africa 2018), which acknowledges the need for including persons with disability in post-school education. As such, it provides a framework aimed at accelerating access and success for this population. Students with disabilities who meet the educational requirements should therefore be allowed to apply to any university of their choice in South Africa, based on their preferred degree. This plan addresses the academic cycle of a student, from enrolment to successful graduation. However, only approximately 1% of the total student enrolment in public universities in South Africa were students with disabilities (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015). One aspect that might possibly contribute to this, is the poor quality of basic education offered to children with disability (Ramaahlo, Tönsing & Bornman, 2018). It is interesting that South Africa has detailed legislation to address inclusion, but insufficient implementation. This could possibly be related to factors such as inadequate knowledge about inclusive education, limited knowledge and skills regarding the implementation of inclusive education, restricted educational and teacher support as well as insufficient facilities and resources – after almost three decades of inclusive education many children with disabilities still attend ‘segregated’ special schools (Bornman, 2017; Donohue & Bornman, 2014).

From the above discussion it is therefore clear that the employment and education of students with disability ought to be seen as a human rights issue (Lyner-Cleophas, 2019) and requires collaboration between multiple sectors such as labour, education, social development, etc. This view is supported in the CRPD, and is thus binding on the signatory countries, such as Spain and South Africa. Both countries have domesticated the CRPD and have additional legislation that mandates and guides both employment and education.

This paper aims to showcase how all universities, including South African ones, can promote autonomy and employment for persons with disability – and specifically for those with intellectual disabilities – using an accessible university qualification offered to these students. A case study from Spain is used, as similar South African examples do not yet exist. The *Incluye e Inserta UCLM* (Inclusion and Labour Insertion at UCLM) is a university degree programme to promote the employment of persons with intellectual disabilities ([www.incluyeeinsertauclm.es](http://www.incluyeeinsertauclm.es)).<sup>2</sup> This programme aims to not only comply with the minimum legal standards required in Spain, but rather, to ensure that the University of Castilla-La Mancha (UCLM) is a socially responsible institution that goes beyond what the law mandates by making decisions in favour of inclusion. The purpose of the research is thus to describe the outcomes of this programme by analyzing the perception of the main recipients of the programme (i.e., students themselves), thereby allowing comments on the efficacy of their training.

#### 4. RESEARCH METHODS AND DESIGN

This study used a descriptive design, employing surveys (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), which were collected during three different time cycles (Cycle 1 in the 2018/2019 academic year, Cycle 2 in 2019/2020 and Cycle 3 in 2020/2021).

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<sup>2</sup> A video, with testimonials from students in the programme can be viewed here:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g5xsEhFV5\\_g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g5xsEhFV5_g)

#### 4.1. Setting

This study was conducted at the University of Castilla-La Mancha (UCLM) in Spain as part of the inclusion and labour insertion programme. UCLM is a public University, with approximately 25.700 students (included around 300 with disabilities) distributed across four main campuses (Albacete, Cuenca, Ciudad Real and Toledo). The UCLM Disability Unit supports those students with disability who have self-disclosed, depending on the disability type. This specific programme came about when the UCLM won a competition sponsored by the ONCE Foundation and the European Social Fund, together with 20 other universities in Spain. The main aim of this programme is to facilitate the inclusion of persons with intellectual disabilities into the labour market.

#### 4.2. Study population and sampling strategy

The group is relatively small (15-20) and comprise full-time students between 18 and 30 years of age, with an intellectual disability equal to or greater than 33%. In Spain, this degree provides the formal condition of “person with disability” for legal purposes. All students in the programme were invited to participate in the survey. Participation (completing the evaluation form) was voluntary, and students could withdraw at any time without negative consequences.

In total, all 52 students enrolled in the programme participated in the study (N=52). This comprised 17 (11 males and 6 females) in the first cycle of the research (but the second intake of students), 15 (7 males and 8 females) in the second cycle (third student intake), and 20 (10 males and 10 females) in the third cycle (fourth student intake). In total, 80% of the 52 students included in the study had a low educational level and come from families with a medium-low socio-economic status. The remaining 20%, who had a medium-high socio-economic status, had reached a higher educational level, and presented with more appropriate behaviour in the programme.

#### 4.3. Intervention

The duration of the programme is one academic year (October to June), equivalent to 45 academic credits. It is an interdisciplinary programme, with six faculties on the UCLM’s Albacete campus (law, education, labour relations, economic, humanities and informatics) and two on the Talavera campus (health and social sciences) participating. Lectures are from Monday to Thursday and use an accessible teaching methodology regarding format and content, based on the principles of universal design of learning. Universal design attempts to develop products and environments that can be used by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without adaptation or specialised design (Love et al., 2019). The programme includes theoretical classes and practical workshops where lecturers and other professionals teach topics related to broader life skills, such as how to use the internet, how to protect personal data, how to access the public service, how to face a job interview. *Entrepreneurship and Disability* was one of the first courses offered as part of the programme. This course demonstrated that motivation to start a business does not differ between students with and without disabilities (Barba-Sánchez et al., 2019; Muñoz et al., 2019).

The programme aimed to provide students with different ways to express their learning through adequate motivation. All students have a reference tutor, whose function it is to



accompany and guide the students and their families during their formative stage of the programme to ensure optimal benefits from the programme. To encourage participation, solidarity and volunteering, students can do an internship at the university itself, or at any of the collaborating companies.

The second cycle of the research coincided with the global Covid-19 pandemic, when universities worldwide had to rapidly transition from in-person to online teaching and learning modalities, which required alterations to course materials and the type of instruction students received (e.g., from in-person instruction to a more remote and/or asynchronous instruction) (Aristovnik, et al., 2020). Similarly, this programme was adapted employing the Microsoft Team Platform (Caporale & Morcillo, 2019).

In addition to the main objectives of this programme, it is also built with the underlying principles involving the university in the social inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities through training, and improving their employability, while simultaneously providing these students with the necessary skills to increase their chances of accessing jobs and employment (e.g., responsibility, teamwork, leadership, entrepreneurship, etc.). The programme further aims to collaborate with the employment services of the region, and with the business sector for internships and job placement in public and private companies, to provide comprehensive and personalised training. These actions reinforce the social responsibility of universities towards persons with disabilities and universities' involvement in addressing new social challenges.

#### **4.4. Data collection**

This research only commenced after the first intake of students in 2017. Therefore, although we refer to the first cycle of this research, it ought to be kept in mind that this refers to the second intake of students. The first cycle refers to the 2018/2019 academic year, the second cycle to the 2019/2020 academic year, and the third cycle to the 2020/21 academic year.

The global Covid-19 pandemic appeared during the second cycle and that created a great change and challenge for these students, with the rapid transition to following online lessons. Therefore, the assessment of the second cycle focused on the change that the pandemic brought on for learning.

For the first and third cycle, data was collected using a custom-designed face-to-face questionnaire, while an online questionnaire was used for the second cycle, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Strict Covid-19 protocols (e.g., hand sanitising, facial masks, and social distancing) were followed for the face-to-face data collection in the third cycle. A questionnaire (face-to-face or online, both adapted to the easy-to-read format) was used. Questionnaires were useful for these students as it allowed them to practice their reading and writing skills. The content of the questionnaire focussed the student's perceptions of their self-directed learning based on their experiences in the programme and included outcomes such as satisfaction, pass rates, facilitators, challenges, etc. (Wilson, 2012).

#### **4.5. Data analysis**

The students' tutor, a psychologist who collaborates in the programme, assisted with data capture. Descriptive statistics, including frequency distribution, average, as well as

bar graphs and pie-charts were compiled as visual aids, and used to interpret quantitative data.

#### 4.6. Ethical considerations

Before recruitment commenced, ethics approval was obtained from the relevant institution. Informed consent letters were sent to potential participants with full details and instructions about the project. All participants were of legal age and had sufficient capacity to consent. The content of the questionnaire, translated into easy reading, and they were reminded that participation was voluntary, and that they could discontinue at any time without any negative consequences.

### 5. RESULTS

The results are provided according to the three different cycles.

#### 5.1. Cycle 1: 2018/2019

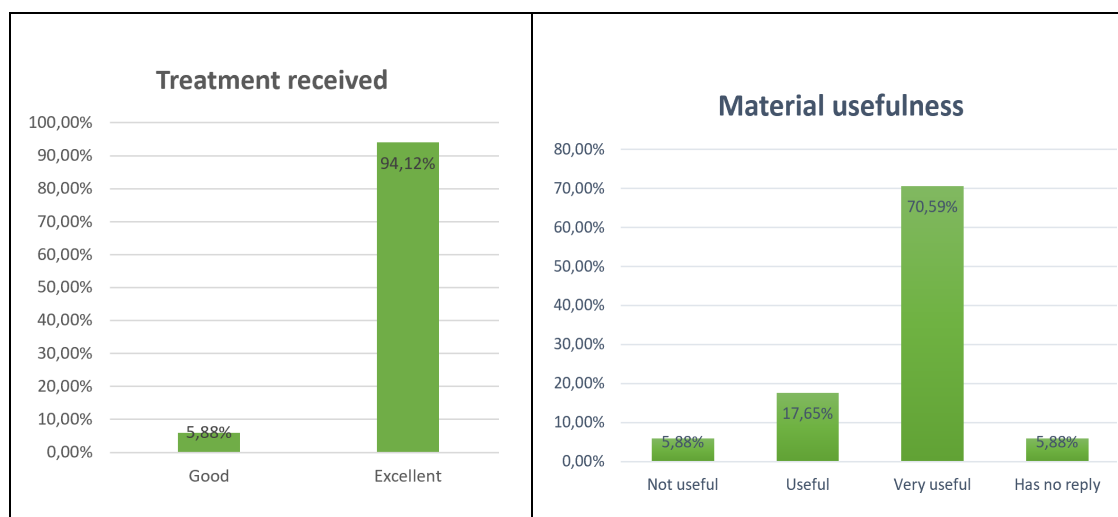
As shown in Table 1, 94,12% of the student's perceived the course content to be of interest for their training (interesting or very interesting) and 82,36% stated that they experienced no or little difficulty in learning the contents. In total, 94,12% of the students stated that they would recommend the course to their friends. Finally, they experienced the course positively, favouring their involvement and satisfaction with training, and evaluating the course with a score of 8,7 out of 10.

**Table 1: Student perceptions regarding course content: Cycle 1 (N=17)**



The survey scales were developed by the students' psychologist tutor, who also ensured that the survey was reliable. Regarding the teaching staff, Table 2 shows that 94,12% of students indicated that they had received excellent treatment highlighting the involvement of the teachers in the preparation of the contents. In total, 88,24% valued the usefulness of the material for making the contents of the subjects more understandable.

**Table 2: Student perceptions regarding teaching staff and material: Cycle 1 (N=17)**



There was a very positive assessment of all courses included in the programme, but those with more practical content (such as technology, sports or English) were evaluated most favourably. Likewise, students highly valued the shared spaces and the inclusive classes with their fellow university students without disability. The classroom mood and the group cohesion favoured learning dynamics and friendships outside class time. Among the main barriers that were mentioned, was the initial limitations that hindered autonomy such as their own impairment or the family overprotection. As for future expectations, the students wanted to continue training, working, or maintaining a connection to the university in some way because that reinforced their self-esteem.

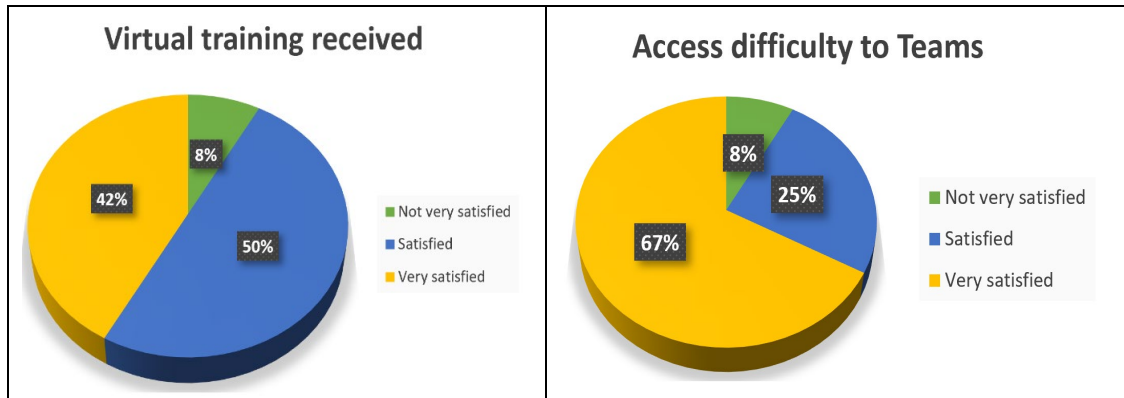
## 5.2. Cycle 2: 2019/2020

As alluded to earlier, due to the peculiarity of the state of alarm and the lockdown caused by Covid-19, the teaching methodology changed in this cycle. Face-to-face lessons were replaced by online lessons on the Microsoft Teams platform, as lecturers efficiently adapted the content of the subjects, and it was opportune for students in this cycle to complete a questionnaire reflecting on this new method of teaching. The transition to online learning was facilitated by the fact that 80% of students owned a computer, and 100% owned a mobile phone. All the students expressed satisfaction with the information they received regarding the unfolding Covid-19 pandemic, and with the transition from face-to-face to online classes.

Table 3 shows the student's satisfaction with virtual training overall (92% stated that they were satisfied or very satisfied) and with the specific format employed (i.e.,

Microsoft Teams), with 92% stating that they were very satisfied or satisfied with how easy it was to access Teams.

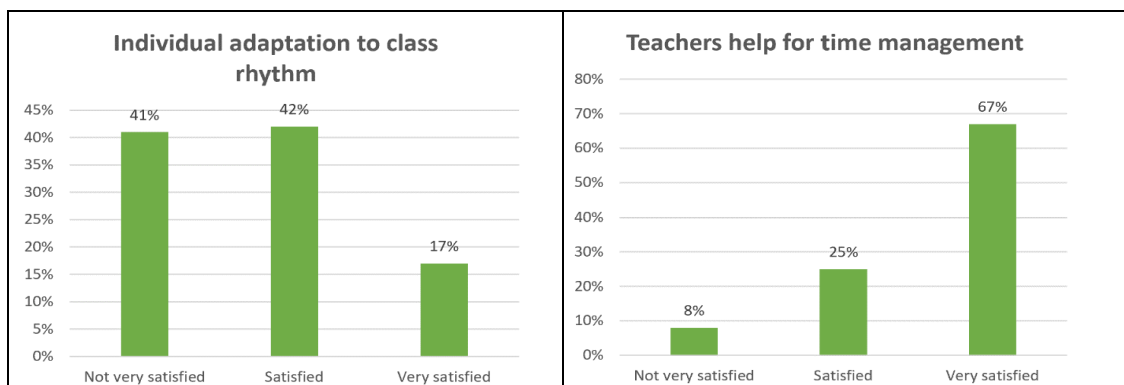
**Table 3: Student perceptions regarding virtual training and access difficulty to Teams platform: Cycle 2 (N=15)**

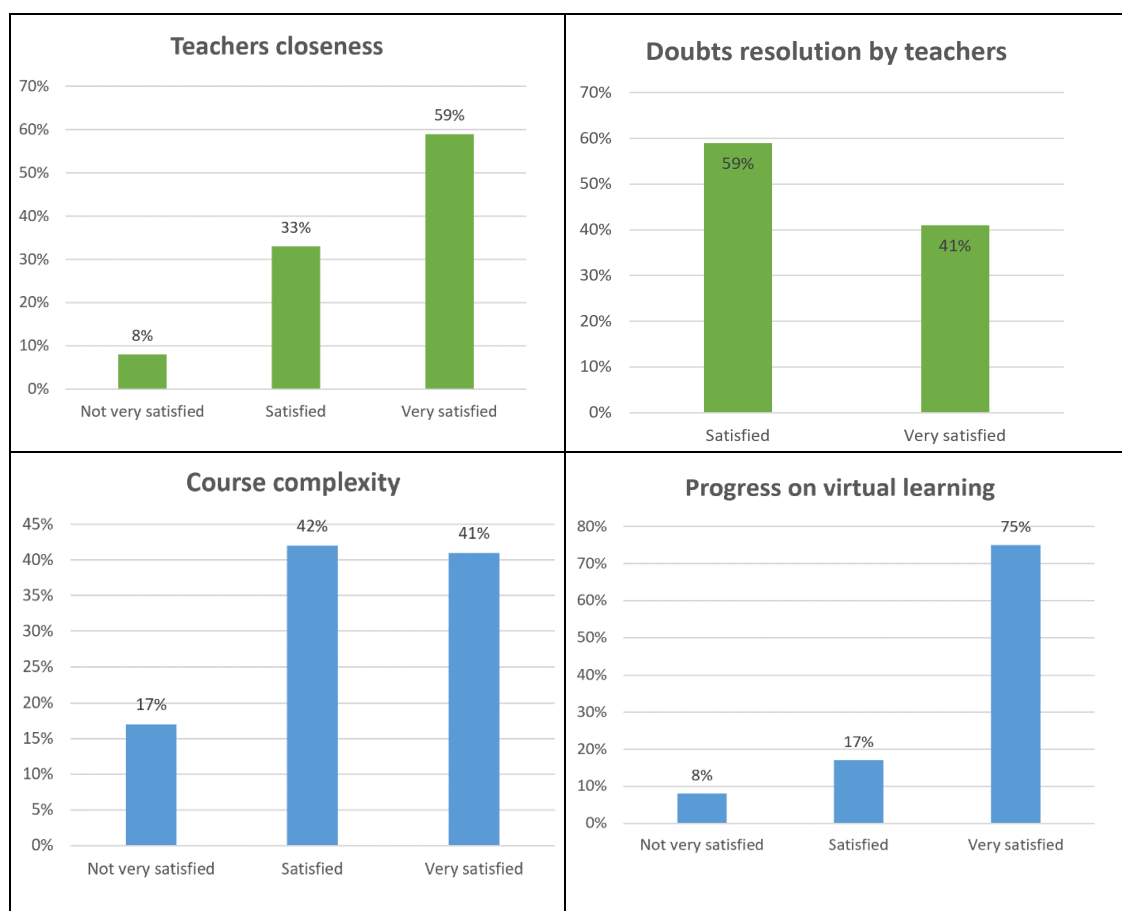


Students needed to make adaptations to transition to online learning as shown in Table 4. In total 41% of the students were not satisfied with their own individual adaptations to work at home in the online format. Despite this, 92% were either very satisfied or satisfied with the help they received from the lecturers regarding time management, and 92% also perceived their lecturers as being “close” despite online learning (i.e., teachers were available at any time to answer questions, they created innovative and amusing online activities and they put more effort into this very complicated situation). All (100%) were satisfied or very satisfied with the support from lecturers in resolving their questions and addressing their doubts.

On the other hand, the pass rates were also good, which led to an important conclusion: with appropriate training, adapted to the needs of these students, many educational barriers (even regarding complex issues) can be overcome.

**Table 4: Student perceptions regarding online aspects: Cycle 2 (N=15)**

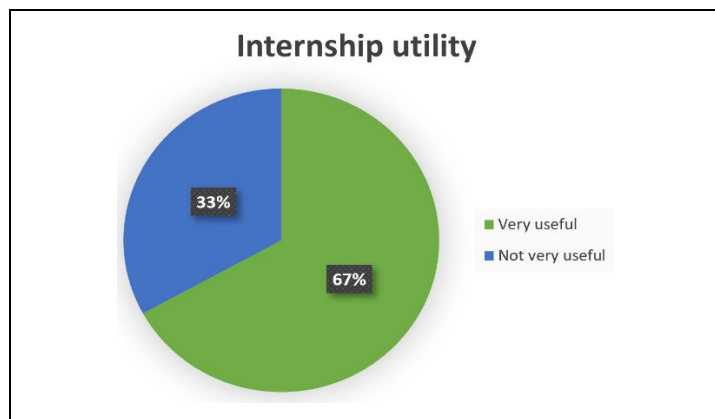




In general, despite the initial difficulty, students considered online learning to be an enriching experience, that offered them the opportunity to learn how to use more technological tools in a hands-on manner, and to be more autonomous in the virtual field, without losing the real purpose of these classes. Table 4 shows that only 8% were not satisfied with their progress during online learning. All students agreed that, despite the advantages of online learning, given the option of returning to the university in-person, they would choose it without question., where students reportedly missed interacting with lecturers and classmates in a more intimate way than a screen allows.

All internships were delayed due to Covid-19. Table 5 shows that, despite this, 67% still perceived internships as being very useful. Regarding what they would like to do after the course, many students explained that they would want to keep learning about different subjects such as administration or computer science. Some students stated that they would like to start working, possibly at the place where they did their internships, or provide other services, such as working at a crèche/pre-school, or becoming waiters.

**Table 5: Student perceptions regarding internships: Cycle 2 (N=15)**



In conclusion, the students in the second cycle believed that, given the circumstances generated by the Covid-19, the online option was positive, and that it allowed a better follow-up, even if the relationship between classmates and lecturers was weakened. In their opinion, online learning was very interesting and useful for future employment opportunities. The fact that they had been at the university and had experienced a shared environment much different to what they are used to, helped them to develop new abilities – such as participating more frequently in class, connecting with others, or improving their autonomy. With this reasoning, they rated this course highly. It is worth highlighting one of the most relevant indicators analysed in this survey, namely whether the students would recommend this course to others. Everyone answered affirmatively, which means that this course has been successfully organised and developed.

### 5.3. Cycle 3: 2020/2021

Table 6 shows that students expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the activities carried out, where the tasks were adequate and adapted to the learning rhythm of students in 86% of the cases. Satisfaction levels decreased respecting to the established timetable and the spaces used to teach the course, aspects that must be considered when planning the next academic year. Despite this, 90% stated that the course did not have a high degree of difficulty, meaning that students could complete the course with ease.

As for teaching staff, there was a high degree of satisfaction directed at the reception of the lecturers towards the students and at the usefulness of the contents developed, highlighting the amenity of the classes, where all students stated being happy with their classmates. Eighty-four percent showed a high level of satisfaction with the treatment received by the lecturers, and the contact mechanisms the lectures used to resolve possible challenges. All students rated this training course highly, with a score of 8,73/10.

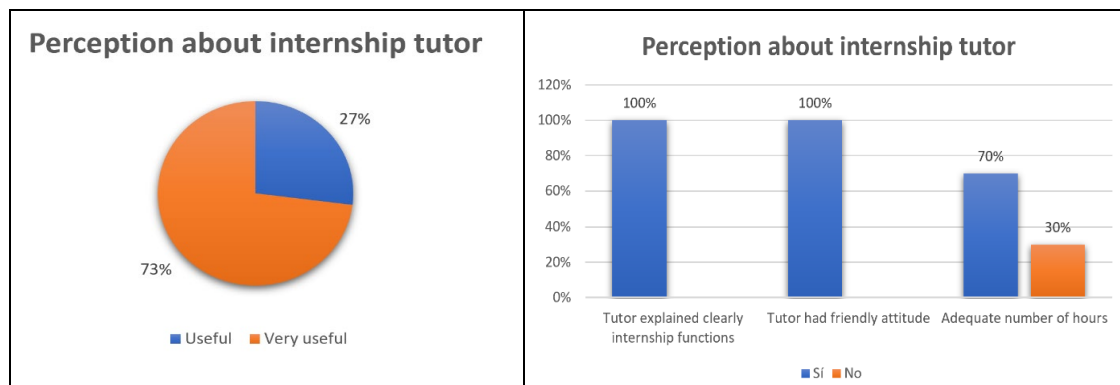
**Table 6: Student perceptions regarding both learning aspects and teachers: Cycle 3 (N=20)**



Students valued internships as being very useful, since they equipped them with the tools necessary to facilitate searching for employment. Students' impression about tutors was very good, since tutors explained the functions and tasks required in the internships adequately, assisting students to learn step-by-step, and solving all their doubts when needed. The number of hours spent in internships seemed adequate, although in some

cases, students would have liked to spend some more time in internships, as it had been such an enriching experience. Students thought that, if the internships had lasted longer, they would have been able to learn more. Most were satisfied with their internship placement, but in some cases, they would have liked to do them in a different service company (i.e., the *El Corte Inglés*), or in the university cafeteria or in reprography. In general, the internship was rated extremely positively with a score of 9,1/10.

**Table 7: Student perceptions regarding internships: Cycle 3 (N=20)**



Finally, students were asked whether they would recommend the course to others, and to provide an overall satisfaction rating. These items are important indicators of whether students felt comfortable in the training, and whether they valued it and experienced it positively.

As in the second cycle, all students said that they would recommend this course to others, without hesitation, so that they too could enjoy the same opportunity to develop their future. As for the second question, an average score of 8,5/10 was allotted. Despite many students providing a 10/10 score, some provided scores between 7 and 9, with one student allocating a score of 5/10. Regarding the future of the students after the course, many of them showed interest in continuing their education or finding a job, either where their internship took place or in other services such as shops. It could be said that, in general, the students gave very positive evaluations of how the course influenced them both personally and professionally.

## 6. DISCUSSION

Intersectionality was used as the torchlight framing this discussion as it guides the understanding of the deeper issues related to the current research by examining the situations and relationships resulting from multiple forms of discrimination. This discrimination, based on interconnected personal characteristics that interact with each other and that cannot be disentangled, create unique forms of disadvantage (Atewologun, 2018; De Beco, 2017; Kim et al., 2020). Examples are the type of disability (having an intellectual disability), gender (being a woman with a disability), age (being a young person with a disability), race (being a Black person with a disability), or socio-economic status (being a poor person with a disability). These individuals need access to education as it could act as a protective factor against the discrimination, they often face.



The current study shows that the UCLM programme held many positive outcomes for students with intellectual disabilities. The results offer specific outcomes that could assist other universities, where no similar programmes exist, to develop their own.

Attitudes and beliefs of society in general, and lecturers in particular, inform teaching ideas and practices which impact on the inclusion of students with disability. Lecturers are perceived as one of the most prominent factors for encouraging or hindering inclusive higher education (Benkohila et al., 2020). Their beliefs also impact on the ethos of the lecturing spaces and attitudes of students without disability. In our study, students mostly experienced lecturers as positive towards them, willing to make accommodations and additional preparations. Similarly, other studies also indicated lecturers' openness to consider including students with intellectual disabilities in their classes (Fekete, 2013; Hinds & Mather, 2008; Van Loan, 2013), although negative reports also exist (Gaad & Almotairi, 2013).

One of the first aspects that ought to be considered is the learning environment. Our results demonstrated that inclusive classes of students with and without disabilities in shared spaces, were rated more favourably. As it is known that context shapes experience, lecturers should be equipped to accommodate students with disability as an initial step in ensuring inclusion. Lecturers in the US described specific approaches such as using videos, clear explanations, and modelling as beneficial for accommodating students with intellectual impairments (Hall et al., 2021). There have also been studies that describe the use of universal design for learning principles for high school learners with intellectual disability, but there is a paucity of research around the use of universal design at university level (Jones et al., 2016; Love et al., 2019).

Regarding content and medium of instruction, this study showed that courses and modules offered to these students ought to carefully consider the content provided, with courses including more practical content (such as technology, sport or English) being rated more favourably. Given the situation derived from the global Covid-19 pandemic, encouraging results towards e-learning was reported since telematic training, since it allowed students to develop new skills, and improve their future employment opportunities. While e-learning is often offered as the panacea for education, and specifically for students with disability due to its flexibility, adaptability towards it is often not the case. While e-learning allows for multiple formats of engagement, expression, and representation, many websites and e-learning platforms do not adhere to universal design principles, making them inaccessible to students with disabilities (Maboe, 2020). Accessibility and usability components should be investigated to reduce digital and social divides and the subsequent marginalisation of students with disability.

Internships are often regarded as a bridge between education and employment, and their value in preparing students for the world of work is known (Takahashi et al., 2018). The students in our study considered internships as extremely valuable and useful for their future, but recommend increasing the amount of time spent in internship.

Barriers to higher education for students with intellectual disabilities are multifactorial. Our research reported on both intrinsic barriers (i.e., barriers related to the person a result of their impairment or family overprotection which hinder their autonomy), and extrinsic barriers (i.e., barriers related to factors outside of the person such as negative attitudes of employers). Moreover, the transactional relationship between the intrinsic and extrinsic barriers should also be alluded to as they act both as causes and consequences of each other. In other words, because of the specific disability

(intrinsic barrier), the individual does not have the opportunity to obtain a university qualification, thereby restricting employment (extrinsic barrier). Likewise, negative attitudes and myths (extrinsic barriers) create reduced expectations and opportunities for self-improvement while fuelling learned helplessness in persons with disability (intrinsic barrier). Similarly, Khayat-zadeh-Mahani et al., (2020) advocate for cross-sectorial collaboration that involves policy makers, employers, persons with disability and broader society. In this sense, universities ought to raise awareness and train lecturers and other stakeholders in this regard, incentivising them to create employment opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities, e.g., through considered internships.

Universities stand at the core of fostering social inclusion beyond school. All universities should become places that foster social inclusion by building accessible environments that allow everyone to develop their full human potential, including students with intellectual disabilities. If universities were to offer a well-planned sequence of academic courses, it could prepare students with intellectual disabilities for their future (Hall et al., 2021). It is necessary to act on the environment, products and services provided by universities so that everyone, including future generations, regardless of their age, sex, gender, abilities, or cultural background, can enjoy full and equal participating in how society is constructed.

The increasing awareness of equal opportunities ought to motivate universities to analyse and rethink their graduate attributes to ensure problem-solving graduates capable of building a progressively inclusive society. To face this challenge, it is critical to involve persons with disabilities in all spheres and phases of political decision-making and in the implementation of projects and programmes - from the beginning, since they are the best allies in identifying barriers that should be eliminated and facilitators that should be strengthened.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Universities are instrumental in assisting persons with disabilities, including those with intellectual disability, to gain higher education degrees that unlock more employment opportunities. Our study demonstrated how the *Incluye e Inserta UCLM* program is starting to dismantle the notion that the opportunity to earn a university degree is typically an unattainable dream for students with intellectual disabilities. It is hoped that by foregrounding the success of this program in developing the social and emotional skills required at workplaces for these students in Spain, it might start a wave of reform in other countries where students with intellectual disabilities still face discrimination and exclusion. A greater social conscience is needed to highlight that inclusion does not only concern persons with disability, but that it is an attitude of solidarity that allows all citizens equal access to services and opportunities offered by our society.

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