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Keys to Build an Inclusive University System: The Case of Spanish Public Universities

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Abstract: Sustainable Development Goals and the targets described in each of them can only be fully achieved with the commitment and involvement of universities. These institutions are the perfect environment to promote and enhance sustainable human development, in such a way that from their own structure and operation they favor the transition towards the building of peaceful, fair, and inclusive societies. To achieve the goals described in SDG4, universities must address three areas in a combined and parallel way: “Institutional Management and Governance”, “Education”, and “Leadership”. Following the development of four quantitative and qualitative studies that address these areas individually, the main common conclusions are presented, aimed at showing the path that the university system must follow to achieve these goals within 10 years. The results reveal the need to focus on the development of an inclusive university culture based on the foundations of each institution (mission, vision, and values), as well as the need to strengthen the link with the NGO sector. Similarly, this inclusive culture must be transversal in university strategic plans to ensure that all actions developed in this context are aligned with the precepts of the 2030 Agenda.

Keywords: inclusive education; equity; inclusion; SDG4; university



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1. Introduction University and Agenda 2030

The Sustainable Development Goals and the targets described in each of them (ONU 2015) can only be fully achieved with the commitment and involvement of universities (SDSN 2020). These institutions, through their traditional role and from the privileged position and reputation they enjoy, are identified as the ideal context to promote and to enhance sustainable human development. Moreover, from only their own structure and operation, they favour the transition towards the construction of peaceful, just, and inclusive societies (SDSN 2017).

The 2030 Agenda gives education a key role in two ways. Firstly, as a cross-cutting tool capable of channelling and responding to all the global challenges reflected in it. Secondly, as an end in itself (reflected in SDG4). This goal acknowledges the need to guarantee universal access to education throughout life for all people from the approach of inclusive education, which is based on the principles of equal opportunities, universal accessibility, design for all, and equity. Inclusive education underpins the international and national legal texts that define education as a public and fundamental good essential for promoting poverty eradication, equal opportunities, and social justice (Díaz-Vega et al. 2021).

For universities to move towards the educational model described in SDG4, three major areas must be addressed in a combined and parallel manner: institutional management and governance, education (described through the entire teaching-learning process), and leadership (SDSN 2017).

This article presents the keys to the construction of an inclusive university system based on two considerations.

The first one is from the perspective of the analysis of current policies in the Spanish University, taking into account the parameters that the United Nations Agenda 2030

establishes as a priority to achieve a truly inclusive education in university classrooms and, therefore, the achievement of SDG4 in higher education institutions, such as the existing relationship with the third sector and organized civil society, the institutional culture that should reflect the strategic plan of each university, and thirdly, the teaching and learning process itself which should be inclusive in two ways: guaranteeing in the classroom the full presence, participation, and achievement of students and, on the other hand, the creation of curricula permeated by the guiding principles of mainstreaming accessibility, equity, and non-discrimination to generate graduates committed to a diverse society (SDSN 2017). It is necessary to adopt this perspective over a purely empirical analysis of the situation, since only from the analysis of current policies can the strengths and weaknesses of the Spanish university system be detected in order to propose improvements to change the course of these policies. If policy tightens in universities in this area, and people with disabilities are admitted more readily, then that is the right time for empirical studies to measure the outcomes of changed policy.

The second consideration from which the present work is developed is from the empirical experience developed by the authors themselves, who in different works already published analyze one by one the aspects referred to by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network for the achievement of SDG4 in higher education institutions, as well as in other recent empirical works that highlight specific recommendations, such as those of Díaz-Vega et al. (2020, 2021), Moreno-Rodríguez et al. (2021), CERMI (2020), Madrid et al. (2020), or López-Bastias et al. (2020), as well as in technical documents of organizations, such as the United Nations, UNESCO, the Spanish Network for Sustainable Development, or the United Nations Development Program, aimed at the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the university environment.

2. The Spanish Public University on the Road to SDG4

Inclusion in the university framework is not only aimed at the management of diversity and its adequate attention of the educational needs of groups that have traditionally presented high rates of exclusion. Furthermore, it must respond to members of the educational community who, whether or not they have a disability, live and coexist in the same space and place. Inclusion in the university system is oriented towards society (Simón 2019) from two perspectives:

- On the one hand, from the perspective of inclusive education as a basis for making the presence, participation, and achievement of an educational success a reality for all people during all their lives (Ainscow 2019; ONU 2006).
- On the other hand, from the perspective of promoting inclusion as a social value necessary for cohesion and human development (IBE-UNESCO 2016).

In other words, the aim is for the university itself to be configured as an institution that promotes inclusion beyond its structural limits, becoming a social leader that, through its traditional functions (research, training, and transfer (Vallaey 2018)), promotes the values that today's society needs to guarantee social justice, equity, equal opportunities and, of course, non-discrimination of any of its members (CERMI 2020).

In order for universities to adequately respond to the task that the 2030 Agenda has entrusted to them, from the perspective of human development (ONU 2015; UNICEF 2019), the results obtained in recent empirical studies have been taken into account, as well as in technical documents that analyze the three areas included in the SDG4 (self-ref removed for peer-review). The main conclusions are reflected in this text, being essential for universities to strengthen the elements offered below to ensure that they can be considered as truly inclusive institutions within a period of 10 years.

Management and Institutional Governance: The study with the largest sample of participants in Spain is the one developed by Díaz-Vega et al. (2020), where a quantitative methodology with a non-experimental design (ex post facto) of a correlational nature was used. It was based on the questionnaire technique (designed ad hoc and with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.875) for the collection of information. In this sense, 33 of the 51 services of

the Network of Services for the Care of People with Disabilities in Spanish Universities (hereinafter SAPDU) participated (CRUE 2015). The results show the need to develop the following actions to favour the transition towards a truly inclusive, respectful, and welcoming university system for all people (self-ref removed for peer-review).

The Conference of Rectors of Spanish Universities (CRUE) should strengthen its commitment to the inclusion of people with disabilities by incorporating the SAPDU Network (CRUE 2015) into the sectoral network, created to address sustainable development in an integrated manner within the Conference of Rectors of Spanish Universities (following the steps of the Network of Gender Equality Units for University Excellence–RUIGE) (CRUE 2019).

In addition to the functions carried out by these two networks aimed at guaranteeing the rights of people with disabilities and women, it is easy to understand the need to find spaces for joint collaboration so that the SAPDU Network and RUIGEU can study and address the needs of people who are currently defined by double discrimination: women and disability. Related to this, regarding Arnau (2019) and CERMI (2020), is a field currently little or not attended to at all, which reflects one of the main weaknesses in the application of the human development model from the perspective of intersectionality.

The absence of the SAPDU Network in this sector limits the possibility of integrating the axis of inclusion of people with disabilities in a cross-cutting manner in the university policies and actions that are adopted in a coordinated and consensual manner to advance in the achievement of the goals set out in the 2030 Agenda. This prevents the necessary transformation of the university system from a more humanistic model, focused on people, and not so much on the business market (Barandiarán and Lloret 2017).

This deficit is also reflected in the three elements that define the essence of universities: mission, vision, and values (Universidad de Salamanca 2013) which, in turn, set the course for the strategic plans that each institution must follow in the medium to long term.

The fact that inclusion is reflected as an institution's own value allows it to be seen as a process and not as an end (UNESCO 2017), which increases the likelihood that the university will mainstream this value in its research, education, and social transfer functions, as advocated by IBE-UNESCO (2016) and Vallaey (2018), the latter in his direct allusion to university social responsibility.

In this way, bearing in mind that values are the pillar on which the mission and vision are based, it will allow universities to position themselves in favour of internal policies that are in tune with the inclusive culture. Furthermore, it will promote the adoption of internal policies and actions that truly guarantee the expansion of opportunities and capabilities necessary to promote the freedom of all members of society (Arnau 2019).

The reading that can be made of universities that do not explicitly include the inclusion of people with disabilities among their values, but do include it in their mission and vision, is that they move in a concept of developing inclusion as an end and not as a process. This is like the previous and "failed" models of the current capabilities approach developed by Sen (1988) which, in turn, nurtures the essence of human development led by the PNUD (1990).

Thus, the universities that do have a clear definition of inclusion in their values, mission, and vision are those that have assumed the necessary participation of their service for people with disabilities in the different phases that make up the planning, design, and development of their strategic plan. Although they are the least representative in the current Spanish panorama according to the results obtained in the first study reflected in this work, such universities are the ones that best integrate inclusion in their internal policy, actions, goals, and evaluation system in the area that concerns us.

In turn, the lack of an expert perspective on inclusion in the design and development of strategic plans greatly affects the very dimension of education—made up of the axes of teaching and learning—which is a key element in the entire human development process (UNESCO 2017).

Education: The teaching-learning process must be developed from the essence of inclusive education (Slee 2016), i.e., teaching in and from universal design to ensure that inclusion and the right to education are addressed transversally in the university system (Sánchez-Fuentes and Díez-Villoria 2015).

Having detected the gap in the supply of training processes aimed at developing specific competences in the field of human rights in general (ONU 1948) and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in particular (ONU 2006), both highlighted in the final report of the United Nations Decade (2005–2014) of Education for Sustainable Development (UNESCO 2014) and in the related documents produced since this period (Miñano and García-Haro 2020; Red Española para el Desarrollo Sostenible 2020), two alternatives are proposed to alleviate this shortcoming and weakness.

- Offer specific transversal training to all university graduates in universal accessibility and design for all (Moreno-Rodríguez et al. 2021). The Royal Decree 1393/2007, of 29 October, on Bachelor's Degrees, in its Article 3. 5 b) (Royal Decree 1393/2007 (BOE 2007)) establishes the general principles that should inspire the design of degree programs, emphasizing that all degree programs should contribute to the knowledge of the principles of universal accessibility and design for all, with the objective of ensuring a training that guarantees that university graduates have a perspective of inclusion. Regardless of the professional profile or branch of knowledge to which the students' degrees belong, they should be capable of applying the principles of Universal Design in their future profession, as is also set out in the Royal Legislative Decree 1/2013, of 29 November, approving the Revised Text of the General Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and their Social Inclusion (Royal Legislative Decree 1/2013 (BOE 2013)). This legal imperative is not reflected in current university curricula (Observatorio Universidad y Discapacidad 2012; Asociación Para la Solidaridad Comunitaria de las Personas con Diversidad Funcional y la Inclusión Social-SOLCOM 2011; Iglesias et al. 2011; Sánchez-Fuentes and Díez-Villoria 2015; Fundación Universia 2019; Madrid et al. 2020). In this sense, an ex post facto descriptive and comparative study was carried out with the participation of 1479 students from the Universidad Rey Juan Carlos with the aim of quantifying the impact of an online training programme, establishing a pre- and post-training comparison. After analysing the results obtained by applying the paired samples Student's *t*-test and the formulation of ANOVAs for the contrast of variances in the post-measurement, statistical significance was obtained in all the items that made up the data collection tool ($p = 0.000$) without detecting any correlation or significant differences related to the gender of the participants. This training has made it possible to achieve two fundamental objectives for the human development and inclusion of people with disabilities. Firstly, to modify attitudes and perceptions towards disability in the university environment, identified in previous studies as one of the main elements of exclusion and discrimination (Sandoval et al. 2019). Secondly, to qualify university graduates for the development of their future profession by integrating universal accessibility and design for all people from the start, contributing to the construction of fairer and more equitable institutions, communities, and societies (Madrid et al. 2020).
- On the other hand, there is a clear need to strengthen the relationship and joint collaboration between the disability services of Spanish public universities and the teaching and research staff who work in them (Díaz-Vega et al. 2020), highlighting the importance of the former orienting and training the latter in the knowledge of the reality of people with disabilities and in universal design for instruction, a tool that has proven its value in the process of inclusion of students with disabilities in the classroom, and of all students in general (Palmer and Caputo 2015; Sánchez-Fuentes 2013).

As the most revealing element, the report on Curricular Adaptation for University Students with Special Educational Needs (López-Bastías et al. 2020) is identified as a useful tool in two ways: the very structure of the tool favours the application of the Universal Design for Instruction (UDI) in the classroom by university teachers and, secondly, it makes

up for the lack of specific training in UDI for this group. Universal design for instruction, as an implementation of universal design for learning in the university environment, becomes a fundamental tool to guarantee inclusion and access to meaningful learning for all students, regardless of their characteristics or diversities.

These two actions therefore address the main barriers detected in the university environment that condition the inclusion process of people with disabilities identified and described by authors, such as [Díez-Villoria and Sánchez-Fuentes \(2015\)](#); [González and Roses \(2016\)](#); [Lombardi et al. \(2015\)](#); [Moriña et al. \(2019\)](#) and [Sala-Bars et al. \(2014\)](#), from a perspective that transcends the traditional elimination of physical barriers and access to information and communication, allowing universities to advance in the necessary precepts to be able to establish themselves as consolidated social leaders.

In the line of **social leadership**, a non-experimental design (ex post facto), with the aim of analysing the perception of the third sector (State federation of representatives of people with disabilities, State CERMI) regarding the university leadership that these institutions are currently developing in terms of inclusion, was carried out. The State CERMI describes that the alignment being carried out by universities with regard to the inclusion of people with disabilities is not sufficient for them to be described as welcoming, safe, and respectful spaces and contexts for this group. It also points out that the lack of cross-cutting internal policies is slowing down the transformation of the university fabric, to which must be added the absence of specific actions aimed at students and workers that promote the values and attitudes of an inclusive system. The results obtained after this study agree with those reflected by the services belonging to the SAPDU Network (self-ref removed for peer-review).

The State CERMI gives a score of 4 out of 10 to the role of social leader that the university fabric is currently developing at the national level, identifying, in the first place, the need to promote the depth of an inclusive university culture that is transmitted from the top of the hierarchical pyramid to the entire structure and strata that make up the university system through the commitment of the CRUE and the government teams of each institution.

In line with the data obtained in the studies carried out in the area of education described in previous paragraphs, it shows the need to reinforce the training of university teachers in universal design for instruction as an effective strategy for guaranteeing full inclusion in the classroom, while empowering the main actors who channel this right and eliminating the barriers that hinder the presence, participation, and achievement of the goals established for each subject and degree (self-ref removed for peer-review). Likewise, it highlights the need to guarantee that all university graduates have the necessary knowledge on universal accessibility and design for all, as set out in the RD on undergraduate degrees and in the General Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and their Social Inclusion and in the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ([ONU 2006](#)), regardless of the discipline, branch of knowledge, or professional outlet. That can lead to a global transition of society towards the principles of equal opportunities, equity, and social justice.

The promotion of specific lines of research aimed at developing proposals that enhance the autonomy, independence, and quality of life of people with disabilities is another essential element identified by the Third Sector, which evokes the social and transfer function that has traditionally been described in the literature on university social responsibility ([Vallaes 2018](#)).

Having detected these shortcomings, CERMI State concludes that the university must recover the essence of humanistic education, as [Barandiarán and Lloret \(2017\)](#) pointed out as an essential element for higher education institutions to be able to successfully face the call made by the UN.

3. Conclusions

After the joint analysis of the studies mentioned above, aimed at exploring how inclusion is being addressed from the three areas that the UN (SDSN 2017) identifies as essential to advance towards the achievement of the targets set out in SDG4, it is important to reinforce the commitment of Spanish public universities to inclusion through the following actions distributed in the three areas that have the potential to boost the transition towards the desired model, namely culture, policies, and actions (Gutiérrez-Ortega et al. 2018; Díaz-Vega et al. 2020). These recommendations are of interest not only for Spanish universities but for all higher education institutions in order to achieve a successful implementation of inclusion as a strategic axis.

In order to favour the creation of an inclusive culture, inclusion must be effectively integrated into the CRUE through the incorporation of the SAPDU Network into the sustainable development sector in order to strengthen the commitment made in 2018 (CRUE 2018). It is also vital to review the values, mission, and vision of each institution. Inclusion must form part of the values that underpin the work of universities, so that it is transversal and is evidenced by its articulation in the mission and vision of each institution (self-ref removed for peer-review). At present, diversity services are included in areas far removed from the sustainable development variable, such as student affairs or university culture. If inclusion as a factor is a constituent element of sustainable development, networks such as SAPDU need to be incorporated into the sustainable development sector. Otherwise, universities will be addressing inclusion as a value, but not as a policy or institutional culture.

At the same time, strengthening and redefining the mutual links and collaboration between universities and the third sector will enable the promotion of inclusive culture to be strengthened through the intersectoral and multi-stakeholder dialogue referred to in the guide drawn up to facilitate the path of universities in the development of the 2030 Agenda (SDSN 2017). It is therefore essential to strengthen relations between the university and the associative sector. Joining efforts to achieve the mainstreaming of inclusion in all university policy must be the common objective, so that the current system of collaboration, based on the provision of resources that has traditionally characterised the link between the two sectors, is abandoned (self-ref removed for peer-review). In this transformation process, special attention should be paid to the group of people with intellectual disabilities, who are less attended to and included in university life than other types of disability, due to the specific needs that characterise their functioning and academic performance, a situation that has been carried out from educational levels prior to university (CERMI 2020).

The policy dimension, evidenced through the university strategic plan, will be developed with the collaboration of the vehicles that currently mainstream inclusion in the institutions under analysis. In the same way that the CRUE must integrate the SAPDU NETWORK (CRUE 2015) into the sectoral one aimed at ensuring and promoting sustainable development, each university must incorporate the participation of its specialised unit in the commissions created to represent, debate, and decide on the content of the strategic plan to promote inclusive lines of action for all people. Furthermore, it is essential that universities have these services and provide them with sufficient resources, since they become the agents of development of the policy and culture of inclusion of higher education institutions.

Actions aimed at promoting the full inclusion of people with disabilities will be reinforced and enhanced by promoting cross-cutting training for university graduates in universal accessibility and design for all. These could be a part of formal and non-formal education, through the analysis of study plans from the perspective of human rights and the promotion of equity (SDSN 2020). It is necessary to address aspects such as inclusion, accessibility, or design for all as something more than soft skills, becoming a transversal part of the development of the curricula of the study plans.

Within this same dimension, attending to the training needs of university teachers is crucial to guarantee the elimination of barriers that hinder the presence, participation, and achievement of all students (Díez-Villoria and Sánchez-Fuentes 2015; González and Roses

2016; Lombardi et al. 2015; Morriña et al. 2019; Sala-Bars et al. 2014). To facilitate the role of inclusive agents that education professionals must play, it is proposed to strengthen the link between units specialising in the care of people with disabilities and teaching and research staff. Similarly, the development of tools, such as the report on Curricular Adaptation for University Students with Special Educational Needs (López-Bastías et al. 2020), allows information to be channelled and structured in a comprehensible way so that all teachers, regardless of their training or previous experience in the field of attention to educational needs in the university classroom, can manage safely and effectively.

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