



# Lights and shadows in university students' perceptions of inclusion and diversity

## *Luces y sombras en la percepción del alumnado universitario acerca de la inclusión y la diversidad*

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### ABSTRACT

The ongoing increase in the number of students with barriers to presence, participation and learning who attend universities around the world requires reflection on the policies, cultures and practices that promote or hinder it. This mixed research, predominantly qualitative, aims to analyse these three elements from the perspective of students in the Galician University System. It is developed in three stages: a first quantitative stage, in which data is collected through a questionnaire applied to 296 students of Early Childhood Education (n = 132), Primary (n = 100), Social (n = 35) and Speech Therapy (n = 30); a second qualitative stage, in which the responses of 174 students (130 students of Primary Education and 44 of Early

Childhood Education) are analysed in an online discussion forum; and a final qualitative stage, through semi-structured interviews and elaboration of mind maps with a group of six students. The results showed the cross-analysis of the qualitative discourse and the quantitative assessments of the students, which allowed the elaboration of a mind map that reflects the facilitators (space for support, help and attention; fellowship and socialization; pedagogical, psychological and emotional support from the teacher; respectfulness and maturity) and barriers to inclusion at university (overcrowded classrooms; lack of individualization and adaptation of teaching; multitasking profile of the teacher; poorly adapted facilities). In conclusion, the historical and social evolution of inclusion generates diverse narratives and expectations that require a joint action of listening and responding to questions to understand and accept diversity. It is not a matter of approaching inclusion through policies that are distant from educational cultures and practices. Including learners with major diversities in classrooms is a major step forward, but it should not be hidden that inclusion is a process that affects the whole of society.

**Keywords:** inclusion, access to education, student diversity, equal education, higher education

## RESUMEN

El continuo aumento de alumnado con barreras para la presencia, participación y aprendizaje que acude a las universidades en todo el mundo, exige reflexionar sobre las políticas, culturas y prácticas que lo potencian o dificultan. Este artículo, de corte mixto con predominancia cualitativa, pretende analizar estos tres elementos desde la percepción del alumnado del Sistema Universitario de Galicia. El estudio se desarrolla en tres etapas: la primera cuantitativa, recogiendo datos mediante un cuestionario aplicado a 296 estudiantes de Grados en Educación Infantil (n = 132), Primaria (n = 100), Social (n = 35) y Logopedia (n = 30); la segunda cualitativa, analizando las respuestas de 174 estudiantes (130 de Grado en Educación Primaria y 44 de Infantil) en un foro de discusión online; y la tercera cualitativa, mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas y elaboración de mapas mentales con un grupo de seis estudiantes. Los resultados mostraron el análisis cruzado del discurso cualitativo y las valoraciones cuantitativas del alumnado, que permitió elaborar un mapa mental que refleja los facilitadores (espacio de apoyo, ayuda y atención; compañerismo y socialización; apoyo pedagógico, psicológico y emocional del docente; respeto y madurez) y barreras para la inclusión en la universidad (masificación de las aulas; falta de individualización y de adaptación de la docencia; perfil multitarea del docente; instalaciones poco adaptadas). En conclusión, la evolución histórica y social de la inclusión genera narrativas y expectativas diversas que requieren una acción conjunta de escucha y respuesta frente a los interrogantes para entender y aceptar la diversidad. No se trata de abordar la inclusión mediante políticas alejadas de las culturas y prácticas educativas. Incluir alumnado con diversidades mayores en las aulas es un gran avance, pero no se debe ocultar que la inclusión es un proceso que afecta a toda la sociedad.

**Palabras clave:** inclusión, acceso a la educación, diversidad de estudiantes, educación igualitaria, educación superior

## INTRODUCTION

Since the Salamanca Statement (United Nations Educational, Science and Culture Organization, UNESCO, 1994) there have been changes in Education Systems related to inclusion with different levels of application and implementation depending on the country (Magumise & Sefotho 2020). It keeps open the debate on what we mean by inclusive education (Paseka & Schwab, 2020) and how to respond, through this principle, to the diversity of students who face informative, bureaucratic, architectural, learning, personal and social barriers, which derive from different educational needs and learning demands (García-González et al., 2021). In spite of responding exclusively to those students who are at greater risk of segregation, marginalization, or school dropout because of their special educational needs, inclusive education must be addressed to all people regardless of their cultural, social, biological, affective, intellectual or any other characteristics (Ainscow 2020; Echeita 2017).

Education policy commitments to the principles of inclusive education and their concretisation in the form of treaties or laws are worthless if they are not translated into real educational practices, and if schooling rules and procedures that facilitate exclusion and segregation of learners and do not provide truly individualised attention in the classroom are maintained. Educational and social exclusion will persist as long as there is no further recognition of all excluded people (Bartolomé et al., 2021) and the emergence of new groups with barriers resulting from differentiated social phenomena (Salmi & D'Addio, 2021), such as armed conflicts or natural disasters.

One of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG4) of the 2023 Agenda focuses on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all (Ramos et al., 2021), including equal access for all men and women to quality technical, vocational, and higher education, including university education (UNESCO, 2017). University education must establish a balance between educational legislation, university legislation and legislation on disability, so that the very fact of implementing the social model of disability does not necessarily keep up with the development of university regulations, which can generate a situation of legal uncertainty for students and teachers, among other agents involved (Alcáin & Medina-García, 2017). Despite the benefits and support for this model (Collins et al., 2019), it still faces challenges such as the need to expand the variety and flexibility of university education, guarantee the quality and parity of the training

offer, provide access to information, and create communication networks, and improve staff effectiveness.

### **The university and the inclusive education of people with functional diversity**

Inclusion requires the development of actions and practices aimed at attending the diversity, building a sense of belonging and recognizing the value and dignity of all people (UNESCO, 2020). The universities' mission is education, Research and contribution to society, the latter being an element closely linked to social inclusion (Campos, 2021). Hence the relevance of the culture of inclusion as one of the quality indicators in higher education.

Higher education provides an opportunity for social mobility, in face of unemployment and precariousness through prestige, recognition and economic and financial remuneration (Comité Español de Representantes de Personas con Discapacidad, CERMI, 2020). Students from vulnerable backgrounds face economic and social barriers to university access, and likely academic, educational and/or cultural difficulties (Ramírez & Maturana, 2018; Salmi & D'Addio, 2021).

Increasing numbers of students with barriers to presence, participation, and learning attend universities around the world, which calls for reflection on the institutional policies, practices and structures that are promoted or ignored (Araneda-Guirriman et al., 2017). Despite the

Despite the adjustments required of universities to provide room for students with disabilities, the fulfilment of their rights is conditioned by the degree of accessibility of educational environments, which has led to actions aimed at reducing physical or access barriers to the curriculum (Sandoval et al., 2020). However, most Spanish universities have been designed to receive non-disabled students this can be noticed both in the physical structures and in the curricular designs, methodologies, and training of teaching and administrative staff (García-González et al., 2021).

This paper focuses on analysing inclusion, specifically, university students' perceptions of how inclusive policies (plans and programmes), cultures (values, shared beliefs) and practices (actions, such as ways of teaching, organising the classroom and assessing learning) are developed at the university (Fernández-Blázquez et al., 2022). To this end, the objectives are: (a) to deepen the students' vision of the university and the processes of inclusion that take place in it (policies, cultures and practices) and (b) to identify the main factors that enhance and limit the configuration of the university as a space for student inclusion.

## METHOD

A mixed study was carried out in three stages: a first quantitative stage, where an initial approach to the field of study was made, and a second and third qualitative stage, delving into the participants' discourses on diversity and university inclusion. The scope of this study is not only to take advantage of the potential of mixed research (Stacciarini & Cook, 2015), but to give the qualitative perspective a primary character that is complemented by the secondary quantitative insights.

### Participants

Students from the three universities of the Galician University System (University of A Coruña, University of Santiago de Compostela, and University of Vigo) participated in the research. The quantitative study involved 296 students ( $n = 44$  males, 14.9%;  $n = 252$  females, 85.1%) aged between 18 and 60 years ( $M = 20.90$ ;  $SD = 4.27$ ); Degree in Early Childhood Education ( $n = 132$ , 44.4%), in Primary Education ( $n = 100$ , 33.7%), in Social Education ( $n = 35$ , 11.8%) and in Speech Therapy ( $n = 30$ , 10.1%). For the qualitative study, 174 university students participated, of whom 130 were studying the Degree in Primary Education and 44 in Early Childhood Education at the three universities mentioned above.

### Instruments and data collection

Data was collected during an academic year (Table 1) following the criteria from the Ethic Committee of the American Psychology Association (APA, 2017) regarding confidentiality, anonymity, respect for the opinions of the participants, voluntary participation, and the signing of informed consent.

**Table 1***Methodological development of the study*

Stage	Approach	Aim	Participant	Data collection
Stage I	Quantitative	(b) to identify enhancing and hindering factors for university inclusion.	296 students	Scale of Perceptions about University Inclusion (SPUI)
Stage II	Qualitative	(a) to collect students' perceptions about university inclusion.	168 students	On-line discussion groups (OLDG)
Stage III	Qualitative	(a) to deepen in students' interpretations.	6 students	Interviews and mind maps.

In the Stage I the instrument that was used to collect quantitative data was the Scale of Perceptions about University Inclusion (SPUI). It is a 34 items tool that assess the inclusion culture, policies and practices through a 5-point Likert scale (0: no/never, 1: hardly ever, 2: sometimes, 3: usually, and 4: Yes/always). It was designed *ad hoc* by the researchers. The study of its psychometric properties (Losada-Puente et al., 2021) revealed an initial factor structure in six factors (building communities, establishing inclusive values, developing a centre for all, organising supports, organising learning and mobilising resources) that explained 52.04% of the variance. Subsequently, a structure composed of these six first-order factors was confirmed, grouped around three second-order factors: culture, policy and inclusive practices ( $\chi^2/df = 1.494$ , CFI = .951, GFI = .871; RMR = .041, RMSEA = .041). The reliability of the instrument was excellent ( $\alpha = .946$ ;  $r_x = .868$ ). In the present study, the instrument had excellent internal consistency ( $\alpha = .951$ ), as did its dimensions ( $\alpha$  culture = .863;  $\alpha$  politics = .863;  $\alpha$  practice = .922).

Due to the health measures adopted in the institutions of the Galician University System, an interactive space was created (Stage II) through a forum for students to discuss inclusion in a targeted manner. In order to deepen the students' appraisals of university inclusion, the technique selected was *rapid online focus groups* (Blake et al., 2021) (also called reflective essays by Rahiem et al., 2021). For this purpose, different sequential moments of reflection were proposed: intrapersonal (individual evaluations) and interpersonal (group evaluations resulting from the interactions between participants) by means of written word (Table 2):

**Table 2**  
*Schedule of the reflection sessions in the Stage II*

Session	Development	Questions	Timing	Information provided
Awareness-Raising	1. Intrapersonal reflection: ice-breaking question regarding inclusion. 2. Interpersonal reflection: free group interaction from individual responses.	What inclusion means for you? Which words or ideas suggest to you?	1 week	159 individual posts 30 replies
Deepening 1: Inclusive Culture	1. Intrapersonal reflection: specific questions regarding inclusive policy, culture and practices at the university.	Are university classrooms welcoming, safe and collaborative spaces where ALL people have a room?	1 week	156 individual posts 12 replies
Deepening 2: Inclusive Policy	2. Interpersonal reflection: from the individual responses, an interactive discussion was carried out. Hosted by experts on the topic (university professors with research expertise in inclusion)	Does the university take measures to pay attention to student diversity (provision of services, resources and support, teacher training, adaptation of infrastructures...)?	1 week	152 individual posts 17 replies
Deepening 3: Inclusive Practices		Do university teaching staff have and make use of material and personal resources to respond to student demands/needs?	1 week	140 individual posts 17 replies

Finally (Stage III), we delved into students' personal perceptions on inclusion based on their university experience. Virtual semi-structured interviews were applied to a group of informants (6 women) who had also participated in Stage I. Moreover, participants also elaborated mind maps. The first technique was composed of eight questions related to the university-high school relationship, experiences in the institution, spaces, or training resources. For instance, they were asked: "How would you define the relationship between students and professors?",

“What do you think about competitiveness among university students?” or “Do you perceive your faculty as an inclusive environment? The mind maps, on the other hand, were free representations of their personal view of inclusion at university.

## Data collection

The qualitative craft analysis was developed under the Miles and Huberman Model (Miles et al., 2013) in two stages: firstly, deductive and, secondly, inductive. Initially, three main categories were established deductively (culture, policies, and practices of inclusion), and later the researchers carried out a second inductive and transversal analysis where three thematic categories were identified. These themes make up the results of this work: perceptions of the university institution and inclusion, environments and spaces, and coexistence in the university.

In parallel to the qualitative analysis process, the SPUI data were studied by means of IBM SPSS 27 Statistical Package. Descriptive (central tendency and dispersion) and inferential analyses were carried out using parametric statistics (Student's t-test). A confidence level of 95 ( $p < .05$ ) was considered. The initial descriptive analyses served as a starting point to situate the interest of the study around the three main themes addressed in the focus groups and were subsequently useful to quantitatively support the participants' discourse.

## RESULTS

### Preliminary results

From the initial analysis of the quantitative data (Table 3) it was found that, on average, students placed the level of inclusiveness at the university in the middle of the 0-4 scale ( $M = 2.68$ ;  $SD = 0.55$ ); that is, only *sometimes* the University favours inclusive culture ( $M = 2.71$ ;  $SD = 0.55$ ), policy ( $M = 2.50$ ;  $SD = 0.72$ ) and practices ( $M = 2.48$ ;  $SD = 0.71$ ), so there is still room for improvement. Most items were placed in the category *sometimes*, although with a positive tendency towards usually, with exceptions placed in the category *sometimes*, with a negative tendency towards *hardly ever*.

In terms of inclusive culture, the establishment of inclusive values ( $M = 2.72$ ;  $SD = 0.61$ ) was highlighted, where there is *usually* agreement between university and professors in understanding diversity; however, it is only *sometimes* perceived that professors place great expectations on all students. Likewise, in community building ( $M = 2.70$ ;  $SD = 0.63$ ) it was noted that faculty and students *usually* treat each other with respect, but coordination between professors only *sometimes*



occurs. Regarding the inclusive policy, there was a positive tendency towards considering that support is *usually* organised ( $M = 2.61$ ;  $SD = 0.81$ ); however, there was a tendency to consider that the University *hardly ever* is developed for all students ( $M = 2.3$ ;  $SD = 0.79$ ), especially regarding the support given to students when they join the University System or the organisation of learning groups so that students feel valued. Inclusion practices stood out positively in the organisation of learning ( $M = 2.48$ ;  $SD = 0.71$ ), above all in that *sometimes* and with a tendency to be *usually*, professors try to make students do things to the best of their ability. To a lesser extent, resources are mobilised ( $M = 2.37$ ;  $SD = 0.85$ ), with the resources that professors generate to support learning and participation being particularly noteworthy.

**Table 3**

*Descriptive statistics on the values of inclusion culture, policy and practices at the university*

Dimension/ subdimension/item	M	SD	Min	Max.
Inclusive culture	2.71	0.55	1.11	4
Building communities	2.70	0.63	1	4
In this faculty all students help each other.	2.49	0.87	0	4
Professors coordinate with each other.	2.27	0.82	0	4
Professors and students treat each other with respect.	3.01	0.80	0	4
The faculty is open to the social community.	2.93	0.91	0	4
In the faculty there is an atmosphere of quality and pleasant living.	2.79	0.79	1	4
Stablishing inclusive values	2.72	0.61	0.78	4
Professors favour one group of students over others.	2.60	0.89	0	4
Great expectations are placed on all students.	2.38	0.84	0	4
Professors try to remove all barriers to learning and participation in the faculty	2.54	0.94	0	4
The faculty strives to reduce discriminatory practices.	2.81	0.88	0	4
Professors and University share the philosophy of inclusion.	3.02	0.83	1	4
Professors believe that all students are equally important.	2.85	0.89	0	4

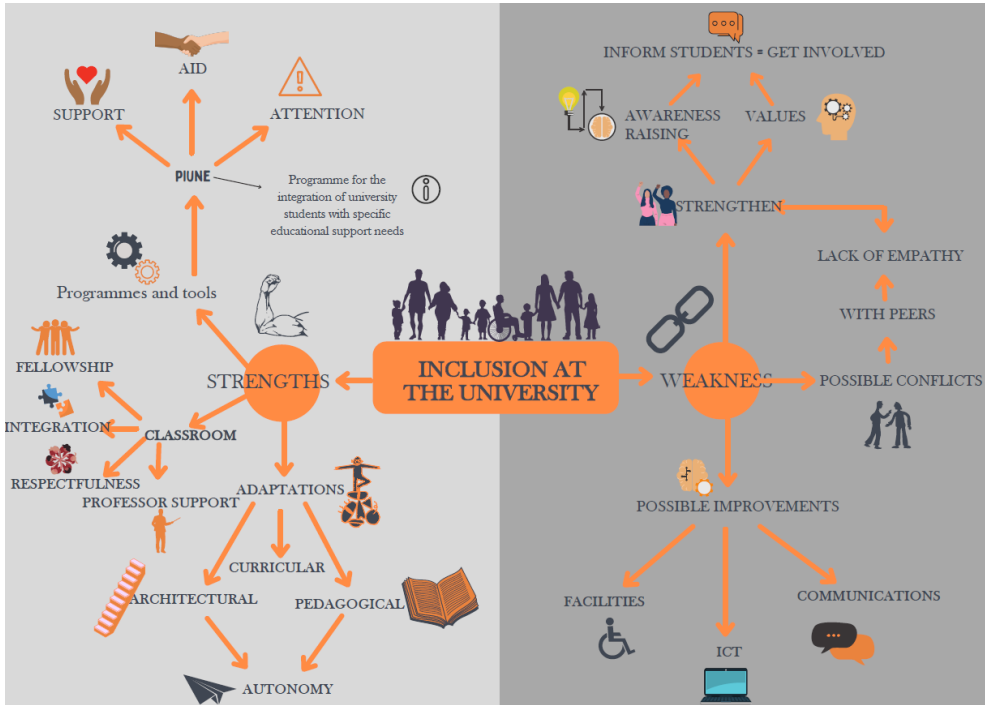
Dimension/ subdimension/item	M	SD	Min	Max.
Professors and students are treated as individuals and have a “role”	2.91	0.85	0	4
Professors show equal concern for all learning groups	2.63	0.88	0	4
At the faculty there are attempts to prevent bullying and harassment.	2.69	1.07	0	4
Inclusive policy	2.50	0.72	0	4
Developing a faculty for all	2.38	0.79	0	4
The faculty makes its building physically accessible for all.	2.52	1.13	0	4
When the students join the faculty for the first time, they are helped to adapt.	2.09	1.14	0	4
The faculty organizes learning groups so that all students feel valued.	2.25	1.02	0	4
Classes are responsive to the diversity of learners.	2.45	0.94	0	4
Classes are made accessible to all learners.	2.60	0.99	0	4
Organizing the diversity of supports	2.61	0.81	0	4
Special educational needs” policies are policies of inclusion.	2.73	0.91	0	4
Assessment practices and pedagogical support are used to reduce barriers to student learning and participation.	2.50	0.93	0	4
Psychological and emotional support is related to curriculum development and pedagogical support.	2.60	1.00	0	4
Practices of inclusion	2.48	0.71	0.39	4
Organizing learning	2.59	0.68	0.22	4
Professors encourage students to do their best.	2.82	0.87	0	4
Students are encouraged to come to classes.	2.57	1.02	0	4
All forms of support are coordinated.	2.27	0.89	0	4
Lessons promote the understanding of differences.	2.64	0.94	0	4
Students are actively involved in their learning.	2.52	0.88	0	4

Dimension/ subdimension/item	M	SD	Min	Max.
Students learn collaboratively.	2.74	0.89	0	4
Classroom discipline is based on mutual respect	2.76	0.92	0	4
Professors plan, Review and teach collaboratively.	2.49	0.91	0	4
Professors are concerned with supporting students learning and participation.	2.51	0.92	0	4
Mobilising resources	2.37	0.85	0	4
Community resources are known and used.	2.24	1.00	0	4
Diversity among students is used as a teaching-learning resource.	2.31	1.00	0	4
Professors generate resources to support learning and participation.	2.56	0.90	0	4
Total	2.68	0.55	1.12	3.86

### Students' perception on university inclusion

As a starting point, the following mind map reflects the main thematic categories found around inclusion. They will be further explored below, reinforcing the participants' discourse with quantitative information.

**Figure 1**  
Mind map on university inclusion



Note: source: Mind map, elaborated by participant 5.

Although both qualitative and quantitative questions were oriented towards the university, participants made constant allusions to their previous educational stage. The perceived differences between the two institutions (University - High School) and in their own responses to inclusion (Table 3) lead the participants to state that, before starting their university studies, they had an idealised outlook; however, their current perception of the university reflects the absence of notable differences with high schools [“they exist, but university is not so different from a high school, it is an extension of it” (S 159)].

They referred high schools as a “home-like” institutions, conferring them characteristics of a *familiar environment* such as the personalised attention, close relationships, or the family spotlight. On the contrary, they perceive the university as an overcrowded institution, depersonalized in the students’ attention and where it is difficult establishing links with professors. Inclusion and attention to diversity at the University have been considered insufficient, noting that this

institution seeks to “give little importance to inclusiveness in classrooms and faculties; (...) it will last as long as you take care of it and you will take care of it as long as you want it, so the fight for inclusion in the university is neither wanted very much nor will it last” (S1).

**Tabla 4**

*University-Higher Education duality*

Representation	Indicators and evidence
Higher school as a “home-like” institution	<p>Small educational communities, with low ratios, which facilitate familiarity and contact with all students, but “more closed to society and the surrounding context” (GRDL).</p> <p>Individualised attention and personalised knowledge of students.</p> <p>Close relationships within the community.</p> <p>Uniform and stable institutional organisation.</p> <p>Little teacher turnover: greater individualism among teachers, greater contact with students.</p> <p>Teaching staff dedicated exclusively to teaching.</p> <p>Use of traditional methodologies.</p> <p>Family spotlight.</p>
University as a “factory-like” institution	<p>Overcrowded educational community that makes contact difficult, but “<i>more in harmony with society</i>” (GRDL).</p> <p>Overcrowded classrooms: depersonalised attention and ignorance of needs/demands.</p> <p>Distant relationships and difficulty in establishing links; new relationships between peers as “<i>young but mature and respectful adults</i>” (GRDL).</p> <p>Changing and versatile institutional organisation: four-monthly changes.</p> <p>Professors as “<i>mere exhibitors of academic knowledge dedicated to teaching, but above all to research</i>” (GRDL).</p> <p>Many professors, more coordination, less direct contact with students.</p> <p>More mature” academic environment: meaningful learning through different methodologies (from traditional to active).</p> <p>Absence of families as educational agents.</p>

Participants pointed out that the main barriers to the university inclusion come from the professors-students ratio. The considerable number of students in a compulsory subject (approx. 90-100 people) makes it difficult to know individual needs/demands. It was criticised that professors do not know their students because “the time they spend with their students is very little and they always work in large groups, which makes it difficult to get to know the characteristics and diversity of the students” (S83). Others mention the way learning is organised in this space as an argument against this criticism and as justification for the *cold and distant teacher-student relationship* that causes,

(...) they do not have the individualised treatment that the students themselves would like or even the professors, which is quite normal, because although they make their best efforts, it is almost impossible for one of our professors, who only gives us one semester, sometimes not even that, to contact and get to know more than 100 students (S14).

Overcrowding in university classrooms hinders attention to diversity and personalisation as pedagogical principles, from the organisation of a subject to the teaching methodology. The very “form and structure” of the institution means that it is the students who have to adapt to a university that is “very difficult to change, so there is no other solution than to adapt ourselves” (S93). Moreover, overcrowding is seen as “incompatible” with individualised teaching attention, since the efforts made “happen in an improvised and decontextualised way” (S116). Even though students seem to understand and accept that this institutional structure does not favour personalised attention to students, they place this responsibility on the professor:

The university system is oriented towards more distant teaching, where students must be more autonomous in their learning. And I am reluctant to think that “there is no other way”, because as soon as it is known that the professor influences the students, it would be necessary to know these students (S65).

However, another perceived barrier appears here: the multitasking profile of the professors. The aspirations of the majority of professors, mainly towards research or scientific dissemination, were pointed out as “a factor that rivals the possibility of offering personalised attention” (S3). Furthermore, there is a negative appraisal of professor-student relationship at the university. Professors’ attitude is perceived as distant and uncommitted to inclusion, which makes it harder for students to share their situation or demands, since “if a professor is apathetic and distant, students perceive communication as a nuisance, so they avoid it, even if it is harmful” (S3).

The discourse on this distancing seems to be linked to the *more practical component of inclusion* (organizing learning and mobilizing resources). Precisely

the *practical dimension* received the lowest scores (Table 5). In the organisation of learning, discipline based on mutual respect (M = 2.76, SD = 0.92) stood out, in line with the demand for a “young but mature adult” peer relationship (S148), and followed by “collaborative learning” (M = 2.74, SD = 0.89), although this does not exempt the presence of difficulties “in contact with/among students” (S3, S57). They also valued positively the promotion of understanding diversity in the classroom (M = 2.64, SD = 0.94) and the active involvement of students in their learning (M = 2.52, SD = 0.88), which reinforces the search for “meaningful learning” (S101, S116). However, the way in which professor plan, review and teach collaboratively (M = 2.49, SD = 0.91), related to a “changing and flexible” institutional organisation (S105), was considered to be an area for improvement.

**Table 5**

*T-test for the contrast between for the contrast between culture, policy and practices of inclusion in the university*

Dimensions and subdimension	Dif M	SD	T	Df	95% CI		d
					Lower	Upper	
Culture-Policy	0.21	0.54	6.715**	297	0.148	0.271	0.54
C1/C2	-0.02	0.60	-.525	296	-0.086	0.05	
C1/Po1	0.31	0.76	7.156**	296	0.228	0.400	0.60
C1/Po2	0.09	0.74	2.037*	296	0.043	0.003	0.74
C2/Po1	0.33	0.65	8.866**	296	0.258	0.406	
C2/Po2	0.11	0.68	2.692*	296	0.039	0.029	0.65
Policy-Practices	0.23	0.48	0.548	296	-0.04	0.07	0.68
Po1/Po2	-0.23	0.70	-5.597**	296	-0.305	-0.146	0.70
Po1/ Pr1	-0.21	0.59	-6.062**	296	-0.067	0.093	0.59
Po1/Pr2	0.01	0.71	0.324	296	-0.067	0.093	
Po2/Pr1	0.02	0.61	0.480	296	-0.053	0.088	
Po2/Pr2	0.24	0.73	5.650**	296	-0.053	0.087	0.73
Practices-Culture	0.02	0.48	-8.090**	296	0.175	0.280	0.48
Pr1/Pr2	0.22	0.60	6.35**	296	0.153	0.291	0.60
Pr1/C1	-0.11	0.62	-2.931*	296	-0.176	-0.035	0.62

Dimensions and subdimension	Dif M	SD	T	Df	95% CI		d
					Lower	Upper	
Pr1/C2	-0.12	0.49	-4.300**	296	-0.180	-0.067	0.49
Pr2/C1	-0.33	0.74	-7.639**	296	-0.411	-0.243	0.74
Pr2/C2	-0.35	0.69	-8.676**	296	-0.424	-0.267	0.69

Note. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .001$ . Acronyms: C1- Building communities; C2- Establishing inclusive values; Po1- Developing a centre for all; Po2- Organising diversity of support; Pr1- Organising learning; Pr2- Mobilising resources.

Table 4 shows that the appraisal of the *inclusive culture* is significantly higher than the *inclusive policy* ( $p < .001$ ), especially in the establishment of inclusive values, as well as in the *practice of inclusion* ( $p < .001$ ). The university's capacity to build inclusive communities was rated higher than the organisation of learning in the classroom ( $p = .004$ ) and resource mobilisation ( $p < .001$ ), as was the establishment of inclusive values than the organisation of learning ( $p < .001$ ) and resource mobilisation ( $p < .001$ ). Consistent with these results, it is worth referring to the contribution of a participant who evidences the role attributed to the teacher and the university institution in the path towards educational and social inclusion:

I often get the impression that some professors have some interest in us, but it's not true; I notice that they ask questions or that they want us to intervene simply out of commitment, because they teach us that a good part of learning must be interactive and didactic, and that's why they do it (...). Obviously, there will always be professors who are not like that and who really care about what we can contribute (...) Interest and inclusiveness cannot be forced (S152).

### Students' perceptions about the university environments and spaces

Students recognise the existence of specific services to respond to their diversity (especially physical), but not other characteristics such as mental health or socio-economic problems. They also pointed out that, despite the reservation of places for people with functional diversity, the facilities have access barriers ["why can't blind, mute or deaf people come to the university? Therefore, they demand buildings and facilities adapted to different situations and/or people because, although the universities are concerned about physical adaptations (chairs for left-handed people, toilets for the disabled...), these are perceived as one-off actions in "old, inflexible facilities, which make it difficult to move around the centre" (S42, S70).



These results were also reflected quantitatively in the appraisal of resources to attend to diversity (*practices of inclusion*). As can be seen in tables 4 and 5, this was the lowest rated subdimension ( $M = 2.37$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ), significantly below the others ( $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.60-0.74$ ), especially in terms of knowledge and use of community resources ( $M = 2.24$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ), and in the use of diversity among students as a teaching-learning resource ( $M = 2.31$ ,  $SD = 0.99$ ). On the contrary, physical accessibility showed mean values with a positive tendency ( $M = 2.52$ ) but with discrepancies between subjects ( $SD = 1.13$ ).

Differences were found among the academic, the emotional and the social perception of the university facilities. Academically, learning spaces with a traditional architecture where “there are still platforms and distribution of tables in rows” (S2) stood out, alongside the use of traditional educational practices (e.g. not very participatory lectures). This would justify the high appraisal that professors and students are treated as having a role ( $M = 2.91$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ), as the role of these two agents is clearly differentiated in the academic space.

On an emotional level, the environment and spaces are described as “respectful and mature” (S11, S13, S58), free to express opinions without being or feeling judged, as they are inhabited by *young adults* (S47, S55), so it is “difficult to see someone not respecting another classmate or creating conflicts” (E4). The university is considered to make efforts to reduce discriminatory practices ( $M = 2.81$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ), to prevent bullying ( $M = 2.69$ ;  $SD = 1.07$ ) and to a lesser extent to organise learning groups so that students feel valued ( $M = 2.25$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ) and to coordinate support ( $M = 2.27$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ). The perceived efforts of professors to link curriculum development and pedagogical support with the psychological and emotional support of students ( $M = 2.60$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ) stood out.

Lastly, the social perception of the university was that of a space that is prone to socialising and expanding their social network, despite the fact that the overcrowding in the classrooms leads them to prioritise creating and maintaining their most closed circle of friends [“there are people in my class with whom I have never spoken, it overwhelms me, I almost always limit myself to being with the same group of friends” (S55)]. Regarding the *inclusive culture*, there is a need to improve the help to adapt to the faculty ( $M = 2.09$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ) and during the academic year ( $M = 2.49$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ).

## Students and formal coexistence at the University

Professors-students' relationships in Higher Education are *formal relationships* among adult people, where the recognition of the maturity and academic responsibility stood out, due to the “degree of maturity that we have” (S18). These relationships are also considered *fleeting relationships* “brief, prompt

and less close" (S35). Among peers' *collaboration and support, good job climate and commitment* stood out alongside *individualism* ["Undeniably the society is becoming increasingly individualistic, therefore selfishness begins to emerge affecting directly the system we are in, where grades are more important than general wellbeing" (S67)].

Students make the professors responsible for the promotion of the inclusive culture, policy and practices at the University since "they have a fundamental role since, depending on the classroom climate the interactions emerge on their own and in an effective way" (S43). They considered there was room for improvement in the way in which professors adapt classes for attending to students' diversity (M = 2.45, SD = 0.94), being accessible to all (M = 2.59, SD = 0.99) and promoting the understanding of diversity (M = 2.64 SD = 0.94). It was also reflected in contributions such as "the social, moral and psychological environment is perhaps not so welcoming in some universities where professors, not so much students, make negative statements from a position of authority, which generate stigmatisation and rejection (S6)"; even so, they value positively the respectful treatment between professors and students (M = 3.01, SD = 0.82) and the professors' attempts to make them do things to the best of their ability (M = 2.82, SD = 0.86), stating that "this way of working favours cooperation and our competitiveness, encouraging us to want to improve and to do things in the best possible way" (S10).

On average, it is perceived that all students are equally important (M = 2.85 SD = 0.89) and that there is some professors concern for supporting the learning and participation of all students (M = 2.51, SD = 0.92) and for resourcing them (M = 2.56, SD = 0.89). Even so, expectations do not seem to be the same for all (M = 2.38, SD = 0.84), considering that some students are favoured over others (M = 2.60, SD = 0.89), which can lead to competitiveness:

As far as collaboration is concerned, although it is true that in the activities carried out in groups in the classroom, cooperation is perceived, I believe that competitiveness is still present as a result of the presence of a system that grades students according to a number that defines their abilities and places them in a position of superiority or inferiority with respect to the rest of their classmates (S25).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The education system and the way in which it operates are decisive for making progress in reaching inclusion or, on the contrary, remaining anchored in exclusion (Fernández-Menor and Parrilla, 2021). Universities are making efforts to achieve inclusive Higher Education, seeking accessibility, participation and learning for all their students (Araneda-Guirriman et al., 2017; Moriña et al., 2019). The creation

of university participation and inclusion services or the detection and removal of physical barriers are a starting point, but may be insufficient; likewise, listening to students' needs must go beyond collecting information on the quality of professors through standardised systems (Calvo & Susinos, 2010) and delve deeper into the nuances of such assessments. This study aimed to provide an overview of the student's perception of inclusion at university, which has given both light and shade on the reality in Galician universities.

The change from high school to university education implies a break with significant people and institutions. There is a certain disappointment on seeing it as an infantilised environment in which two differentiating characteristics can be identified: overcrowded classrooms and the coldness of professor-student relationships.

Una explicación plausible es la escasa preparación docente en metodologías que permitan enseñar en un aula diversa y la sensación de desamparo al enfrentarse a la necesidad de dar respuesta a la diversidad (Perera et al., 2022). La educación inclusiva sitúa al estudiante como centro del proceso del *aprendizaje personalizado*, siendo esencial atender a sus conocimientos previos, necesidades, capacidades y percepciones (UNESCO, 2017) para diseñar espacios en los que este tenga un papel activo, evitando la pasividad y la dependencia (Calvo & Susinos, 2010).

Classroom overcrowding is a problem at international level (Araneda-Guirrman, 2017), which translates, in Spanish universities, into a lack of application of the principles of inclusive education, by maintaining assessments based on summative criteria as opposed to continuous assessment (Sandoval et al., 2020). One plausible explanation is the lack of professor preparation in methodologies that allow teaching in a diverse classroom and the feeling of helplessness when faced with the need to respond to diversity (Perera et al., 2022). Inclusive education places the student in the spotlight of the personalised learning process, and it is essential to address their prior knowledge, needs, abilities and perceptions (UNESCO, 2017) in order to design spaces in which they play an active role, avoiding passivity and dependence (Calvo & Susinos, 2010).

Professors' attention to emotional and social aspects is essential for students' all-round development. However, students are reluctant to share their concerns with their professors, perceiving them as cold and distant, while they do not seem to be aware of what the professors' concerns and obligations are. One of the great barriers in universities is the undervaluation of the unduly *excessive teaching burden* (Márquez & Melero-Aguilar, 2021), which leads them to direct their work towards the highly valued *research work* (Alcaín & Medina-García, 2017).

The development of an inclusive university requires efforts to develop cross-disciplinary training in inclusive education, so that work is carried out on the basis

of prevention, identifying barriers, generating beliefs and overcoming prejudices (Márquez & Melero-Aguilar, 2021; Salmi & D'Addio, 2021). Inclusive education is a term unknown to some professors, many of whom still adhere to the deficit model (Collins et al., 2019) and acknowledge the lack of knowledge of the current rules and regulations to address diversity (García-González et al., 2021; Rangel-Baca, 2021). However, research also indicates that professors who are inclusive use similar methodological strategies aimed at all students (Moriña & Orozco, 2022).

This research shows that universities must adapt to the students and not the other way around, a principle on which the models of inclusion and the paradigm of support that today preside over educational proposals and attention to diversity are based. Professors need training in inclusion and universities need a firm institutional commitment (Bartolomé et al., 2021; Perera et al., 2022) and the implementation of inclusive policies and practices.

An optimistic result in this research points to the importance that students attach to social relationships of respect and support in the university, which transcend the academic sphere. The university plays a crucial role in students' lives, becoming a real-life opportunity (Calvo & Susinos, 2010) which, given the aforementioned overcrowding, forces them to group together in small circles of support that may tend to create stronger ties. Discrepancies regarding the benefits and prejudices of the university environment have already been highlighted by previous literature, both in students (Collins et al., 2019; García-González et al., 2021; etc.) and in other key agents, such as families and/or professors (Magumise & Sefotho, 2020; Márquez & Melero-Aguilar, 2022; Paseka & Schwab, 2020).

In conclusion, educational inclusion generates diverse narratives and expectations that require joint action to listen and respond to the questions that may arise in order to understand and accept diversity (Opertti, 2019). What is clear is that it necessarily implies eliminating the homogenisation of the education system, where the integration background of special education is still palpable (Vigo-Arrazola et al., 2022), and understanding that inclusion refers to an education that revolves around diversity and where everyone has room. Therefore, it cannot be addressed exclusively through policies far removed from inclusive educational cultures and practices, because inclusion is a process that affects the whole student body, the institution and its members, and the processes of exclusion or inclusion do not arise naturally, due to certain intrinsic characteristics of individuals, but are constructed socially and relationally based on different opportunities (Unicef, 2017). Unfortunately, and despite the progress made, "it seems that the world is not on track to meet the 2030 education goals" (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2020, p. 32).

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