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Unibe Chair on Inclusion of People with Disabilities: Contributions to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (2030) and to the Social Impact of Higher Education Initiatives in the Dominican Republic

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Abstract

Global advocacy for the rights of people with disabilities has led to significant progress in inclusive higher education, supported by initiatives like the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). Many countries have implemented policies to promote access and participation, aided by technological advancements such as assistive devices (Biel Portero, 2011; Fajardo, 2017). Despite these gains, challenges persist, with disparities in education outcomes between disabled and non-dis-

abled students, as seen in the Dominican Republic (Oficina Nacional de Estadística, 2021). Continued efforts are needed to ensure full inclusion in higher education.

Keywords

Dominican Republic; special education; social inclusion; innovation; initiatives

Introduction. The Importance of Inclusion of People with Disabilities

Since the second half of the 20th century, there has been a growing movement of activism and advocacy for the rights of people with disabilities. This led to the adoption of international conventions, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006, which emphasized the importance of inclusion and equal opportunities in all areas of life, including education.¹ Many countries have implemented laws and policies that promote the inclusion of people with disabilities in higher education. These measures include the removal of physical barriers, access to support resources and accommodations, and ensuring equal opportunities in access and participation.² Inclusive education has gained further recognition and support in recent decades. There has been a shift from a segregated approach, where people with disabilities were excluded from regular education to an approach that seeks the full and meaningful participation of all students, including those with disabilities, in common educational environments.³

Technological advances have further boosted opportunities for inclusion of people with disabilities in higher education through assistive devices, technological adaptations, and support tools such as screen readers, voice recognition software, and augmentative and alternative communication systems. These have greatly facilitated access and participation of people with disabilities in educational settings.⁴ The implementation of pilot programs, research projects, and successful experiences in different educational institutions have demonstrated the benefits

¹ I. Biel Portero, *Los derechos humanos de las personas con discapacidad*, Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos 2011.

² S.M. Fajardo, *La educación superior inclusiva en algunos países de Latinoamérica: avances, obstáculos y retos*, “Revista Latinoamericana de Educación Inclusiva” 2017, 11(1), pp. 171–197.

³ M.T. Polo Sánchez, C. Fernández-Jiménez, M. Fernández Cabezas, *The Attitudes of Different Partners Involved in Higher Education Towards Students with Disabilities*, “International Journal of Disability, Development and Education”, 65(4), pp. 442–458.

⁴ N.Y. Mendoza Giler, Rosero D.J. Parra, *Las TICS como apoyo para la inclusión de las personas con discapacidad visual y auditiva en las Universidades*, Bachelor’s Thesis, 2017. Ley núm. 139–01, que crea el Sistema Nacional de Educación Superior, Ciencia y Tecnología, y la Secretaría de Estado de Educación Superior, Ciencia y Tecnología, 10097, 2001.

of including people with disabilities in higher education. These experiences have helped raise awareness, share knowledge, and promote changes in educational policies and practices.⁵

It is important to note that, while there have been significant advancements in the inclusion of people with disabilities in higher education, challenges and gaps persist that need to be addressed to ensure effective and meaningful inclusion for all students. Only 16% of people with disabilities living in the Dominican Republic have attained a higher education qualification, compared to 22% of the population without disabilities. Furthermore, little or nothing is known about the quality of their education through inclusive education practices.⁶

For people with disabilities to have equitable access and meaningful participation, including an environment conducive to academic success, certain conditions must be guaranteed to eliminate barriers:

- Access and admission: Higher education institutions must ensure that people with disabilities have equal opportunities to access and be admitted to their academic programs.
- Accessible physical and technological environment: It is essential for physical facilities to be accessible to all people, in a manner that is comfortable and safe, thus promoting student independence while navigating the campus. Additionally, it is necessary to provide supportive and assistive technologies that allow students with disabilities to access information and fully participate in academic activities.
- Curricular adaptations and inclusive methodologies: Academic programs should be adapted to meet the individual characteristics of students with disabilities. This includes making adjustments to teaching methods, assessments, and curriculum design to ensure that all students can participate and learn effectively.
- Support services: It is important to have specialized support and counseling services for students with disabilities in higher education.
- Awareness and training: Awareness and training of faculty, administrators, and students is essential for creating an inclusive environment in higher education. It is necessary to promote understanding of diverse needs and foster inclusive attitudes and practices throughout the educational community.
- Participation and empowerment: Higher education institutions should promote active participation and empowerment of students with disabilities.

⁵ K. Cisterna, I. Cortés, S. Urrea Águila, K. Villarroel Ambiado, A. Ocampo González, A. Infante Fernández, V. Contreras Fernández, P. Tomé Díaz, *Experiencias y desafíos sobre educación superior inclusiva*, Chile 2016.

⁶ Oficina Nacional de Estadística, *Encuesta de Hogares de Propósitos Múltiples*, 2021, <http://redatam.one.gob.do/bindom/RpWebEngine.exe/Portal?BASE=ENH2021&lang=esp> [accessed: 31.08.2024].

This involves providing opportunities for decision-making, participation in extracurricular activities, and having a voice in institutional planning and decision-making through shared governance mechanisms.

In the Dominican Republic, some universities have undertaken initiatives to support the academic inclusion process of students with disabilities, despite the lack of clear guidelines or minimum requirements for academic inclusion of people with disabilities at the national level, beyond the obligations arising from the Convention and Organic Law No. 5–13 on Equality of Rights of Persons with Disabilities. A local network of universities that work towards inclusion has been created and taken initial steps to widen the scope of inclusion in higher education.

Inclusive Education, a Paradigm Shift

Current models of disability attention focus on the barrier-free model and are based on the human rights approach. Unibe's Chair has made substantial strides in improving quality education for students with disabilities who attend Unibe facilities by making its facilities more accessible and by creating a support unit that provides accommodations to our student body. The university has ensured that inclusion is embedded in its strategic planning and educational model. This important action translates into a gradual transformation of services and initiatives in the university. It resulted in the creation of an Inclusion and Diversity Committee and the creation of institutional policies that promote inclusion.

In addition, since 2002, Unibe provides affordable quality mental health and therapeutic care to community members and the overall public with disabilities in its community service clinic, serving more than 100 people each month or every year. Unibe has made strides in creating networks across education stakeholders to influence inclusive education policies, actively participating in most national efforts in inclusive education. Over the past years, the university has seen an increase in the number of institutional agreements signed with organizations made up of and working on behalf of people with disabilities. Furthermore, Unibe was granted USAID's Read program grant, which is a USD 20,000,000 literacy grant that includes an inclusive education component. The project reached 400 public schools across the Dominican Republic and benefitted more than 300,000 public school students. Unibe has also expanded its academic programs to incorporate more programming that deals exclusively with inclusive education. Unibe continues to create extracurricular and open to the public programming that provides education and tools to professionals and community members. The research department continues to prioritize disability studies and has conducted studies within and outside of the Read program in areas related to autism and cerebral palsy and inclusive education in general.

Our initiative aims to contribute to the promotion of the rights and full inclusion of people with disabilities in academic, social, and employment contexts. We achieve this through awareness-building, collaboration, research, training, progressive implementation of accessibility criteria, accommodations provision, and service creation. To date, our efforts have directly benefited the entire university community (approximately 4,500 individuals) and indirectly impacted external beneficiaries through open public awareness programs and opportunities.

One of our high-impact projects benefits more than 300,000 primary-level students across 400 public schools nationwide.

As a higher education institution, our impact extends to future professionals and their work in society who are currently being educated at our center. This contributes to several United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), through the creation of an inclusion and Diversity Committee. Initiatives include:

SDG 4 Quality Education: Promoting inclusive and quality education for all

The university has developed a series of initiatives aimed at promoting and providing access to quality higher education for all. These initiatives include:

Professional Training: Masters in Inclusive Education, master's in applied Behavior Analysis, Concentration in Attention to Diversity, electives in Sign Language and

Universal Accessibility that can be taken by students from all programs.

Continuing Education Courses: In inclusive education.

- Diploma on leadership and political participation for young people with disabilities (financed by USAID).
- Diploma on inclusion in the workplace, in collaboration with the University of Murcia.
- Diploma on Sign Language.
- Diploma on Applied Behavior Analysis focused on autism.
- Certificate program in Animal-Assisted Therapy for people with disabilities.
- Certificate course for Animal-Assisted Therapy Technicians (with a focus on disabilities).
- Course on Speech and Stuttering Disorders.
- Annual Inclusion Week with conferences and activities related to inclusion.

Research on Inclusion (Silver Award)

Unibe, through the USAID Project Read Project, has created an inclusive reading practice methodology. The project developed resources designed for resource-restricted public-school students to ensure that all children, regardless of their reading ability, have appropriate materials for reading practice. This initiative has resulted in

a vast production of children's literature as well as publications, and presentations at national and international conferences presenting both the methodology and results.

The Gender, Inclusion, and Safe School component of the USAID-Project Read has produced reports indicating how the intervention has changed teachers' perceptions of people with disabilities, thus promoting respect for dignity and right to education of children with disabilities. Studies have also been conducted on caregiver burnout for people with disabilities.

Teacher Training in Inclusion: Semi-annual meetings with teachers who have students with disabilities to provide them with strategies and tools aimed at achieving class objectives.

Support Services for Educational Inclusion: A department that offers services to the educational community with disabilities to achieve curricular adaptations and ensure their academic success throughout their academic career.

Accessibility: Ensuring web and technological accessibility of Unibe platforms and accessibility of the campus, library, and resources.

Inclusive Admission: Inclusive education policy that refers to support services if necessary.

Inclusion Scholarships for People with Disabilities: 3 annual scholarships for any degree offered at the university.

SDG 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth: Fostering economic growth and ensuring decent employment opportunities

- Diplomas in Labor Inclusion
- Signing of the labor inclusion pact with the Ministry of Labor
- Job fairs for people with disabilities
- Inclusive recruitment

SDG 10 Reduced Inequalities: Working towards reducing inequalities

The university promotes the reduction of inequalities through the creation of specific Institutional Policies on Inclusion and Diversity. It promotes discussion spaces between government agencies, civil society organizations, academia, international organizations, and the business sector such as annual inclusion events, conventions, panels, and conferences. Some of these initiatives have been awarded the RD Inclusion recognition, that is given by the national Council of Disabilities (CONADIS) and the United Nations Development Program (PNUD).

Continuing Education

- Course on political participation of people with disabilities
- Self-administered course on Diversity and Inclusion that is required for all members of the community

- “Programa Universitario de Estudiantes con Discapacidad (PUEDO)”: PUEDO is an inclusion program for students with cognitive disabilities. It allows students who don’t meet national requirements for university education admission to engage in learning experiences in the university that develop their interests and vocations.
- RD Incluye Gold Award (2019) Gender, Inclusion, and Violence Prevention Component: Usaid Leer’s Project Gender, Inclusion, and Violence Prevention component aimed to create awareness among school administrators, counsellors and teachers about inclusion and accessibility issues. It involves training activities and project development to propose practical solutions for our country’s public school system.

SDG 11 Sustainable Cities and Communities: Creating inclusive and sustainable communities

- Progressive adaptation of infrastructure to ensure campus accessibility.
- RD Incluye 2020 (Silver Award): The Accessibility Project, launched by the Maria Batlle Foundation and Unibe, raises awareness among university students about inclusion and accessibility. It proposes real solutions for infrastructure challenges related to inclusion in museums and other urban spaces.

SDG 17 Partnerships for the Goals: Implementing the SDGs through collaborative partnerships

Unibe has a long history of collaborative work with government institutions, international organizations, civil society entities, the business sector, and academia that work towards promoting the rights of people with disabilities. Some of our allied institutions include: UNDP, UNESCO, CONADIS, Ministry of Labor, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Higher Education, USAID, World Vision, Best Buddies International, Yo También Puedo, The Ibero-American Network of People with Physical Motor Disabilities, Pro-bien Foundation, ADATSRD, Maria Batlle Foundation, SIMUDIS, Dominican Autism Foundation, United Hands for Autism, University of Santiago de Chile, University Maria Grzegorzewska University, University of Florence, and the Interuniversity Inclusion Network of the DR.

Our commitment to these goals reflects our dedication to a more equitable and inclusive society. Below is a summary of the achievements and initiatives related to disability inclusion at the Universidad Iberoamericana (Unibe).

RD Incluye 2017 – Gold Award:

- Unibe’s academic offerings cover knowledge acquisition about disability and inclusion.
- The university contributes to the production of knowledge related to disability.
- Unibe provides inclusive services for students with disabilities.

RD Incluye 2018 – Silver Award for “Programa Universitario de Estudiantes con Discapacidad (PUEDO)”:

- PUEDO is an inclusion program for students with cognitive disabilities.
- It allows students who don't meet national requirements for university education to engage in experiences that develop their interests and vocations.
- The program was designed collaboratively with Unibe's UNESCO Chair on Labor and Academic Inclusion and other relevant departments.

RD Incluye 2019 – Three Gold Awards and Four Silver Awards:

Gold Award for Good Inclusive Practices in Unibe Clinics:

- Services include psychological support for individuals with autism and their families.
- Psychometric evaluation for intellectual or emotional disabilities.
- Group intervention programs for children with autism.
- Life skills program for young people with intellectual disabilities.
- Accessibility improvements in parking and restrooms.

Silver Award for Physical Accessibility of Facilities:

- Unibe made architectural adjustments, including accessible bathrooms, ramps, and accessible registration and cashier windows.

Silver Award for Inclusive Practices in Continuing Education and Extracurricular Activities:

- Diplomado on leadership and political participation for young people with disabilities (financed by USAID).
- Unibe hosted a continuing education certificate on Labor Inclusion in collaboration with the University of Murcia.
- Diplomado on Sign Language.
- Diplomado on Applied Behavior Analysis focused on autism.
- Certification in Animal-Assisted Therapy for people with disabilities.
- Certification course for Animal-Assisted Therapy Technicians (with a focus on disabilities).
- Course on Speech and Stuttering Disorders.
- Annual Inclusion Week with conferences and activities related to inclusion.

Gold Award for Inclusive Academic Offerings at the Undergraduate and Postgraduate Levels: Inclusion as a Transversal Axis:

- Unibe sensitizes psychology and education students to offer clinical and pedagogical services to people with disabilities.
- Courses explicitly address inclusion, while others incorporate inclusive perspectives in their content.

Research on Inclusion (Silver Award):

- Unibe, through the Read program has created an inclusive reading practice methodology. They provide resources to public school students to

ensure that all children, regardless of their reading ability, have appropriate material for practice. This initiative is the result of various research efforts, publications, and presentations at national and international conferences.

- The Gender, Inclusion, and Safe School component of the USAID-Leer Project has produced reports indicating how it has changed teachers' perceptions of people with disabilities, promoting respect for their inherent dignity.
- Studies have also been conducted on caregiver burnout for people with disabilities.

Gender, Inclusion, and Violence Prevention Component (GISS Leer Project – Gold Award):

- Unibe's Gender, Inclusion, and Violence Prevention component aims to create awareness among young university students about inclusion and accessibility issues. It involves training activities and project development to propose practical solutions for our country's infrastructure.

Inclusion Week (Silver Award):

- The Inclusion Week is part of Unibe's efforts to extend inclusion work to various platforms within the university. It provides knowledge in areas related to disability, supporting the Schools of Psychology and Early Education.

RD Incluye 2020 (Silver Award):

The Accessibility Project, launched by the Maria Batlle Foundation, raises awareness among university students about inclusion and accessibility. It proposes real solutions for infrastructure challenges related to inclusion.

RD Incluye 2021 (Gold and Silver Awards):

- Web Content and Electronic Media Accessibility (Silver Award): Unibe ensures equal opportunities for access to academic programs, educational activities, and administrative services through electronic products and services. This includes web accessibility, academic documents, instructional materials, and more.
- U-Academy Accessibility (Gold Award): Unibe's commitment to inclusion extends to its U-Academy platform.
- Universal Accessibility Practice Scope: Unibe's regulations impact all products published under the domain www.unibe.edu.do and the U-Academy platform, ensuring accessibility across various areas.

RD Incluye 2022 (Agent of Inclusion Award):

- Unibe received the "Agent of Inclusion" award for important and sustained inclusion initiatives.

These efforts demonstrate Unibe's commitment to disability inclusion and its positive impact on education and society

Challenges and Gaps

Although there has been significant progress in the advancement of services and recognition of the rights of people with disabilities in the past decade, important challenges persist:

1. **Social Stigma:** Medical and charity models of addressing people with disabilities is still persistent. The rights based and social elimination of barriers model of assistance is still poor.
2. **Public Policy:** The country lacks sufficient public policy with an inclusive outlook. Existing specific policies are insufficient and lack enforcement.
3. **Poverty:** many people with disabilities live in poverty due to lack of access to services and education
4. **Limited access to education:** Current education basic and secondary level laws are compulsory to inclusive education, but challenges related to accessibility and specific services and accommodations make the educational system poorly suited to create effective inclusion. In the Dominican Republic most people with disabilities only complete primary level education.
5. **Work inclusion:** locally there are laws mandating employment quotas for people with disabilities, enforcement is inconsistent.
6. **Local Information and Statistics:** The Dominican Republic lacks a sustainable data entry system that enables characterization of the local population. The new disability assessment system is only working in the metropolitan area, leaving most rural population without access
7. **Accessibility:** private and public transportation, buildings and virtual scenarios still lack universal accessibility principles making it difficult for people with disabilities to access and their independent use and create further barriers to services, education and employment
8. **Healthcare:** Coverage for services and technical support systems is very limited, affecting people with disabilities health and quality of life.

Guaranteeing Equitable Access and Participation

It is important to address specific conditions necessary for effective educational inclusion and further the scope of impact of inclusion in higher education. Below is a list of recommendations to be considered by institutions:

- **Inclusion as a cross-cutting theme in decision making and curriculum development:** higher education institutions are key to training professionals who can provide services, attend to, communicate, design, and implement policies that include all people, including those with disabilities, who often

face numerous barriers to exercising their rights in educational, health, labor, recreational, social, and other areas. Having educators, decision-makers, officials, health professionals, administrators, engineers, and architects who think inclusively will allow us to build opportunities where there may now be a barrier.

- **Access and Admissions:** Equal opportunities for people with disabilities to access and be admitted to academic programs include disability services in the recruitment and admissions process. This also includes allocating admissions quotas for students with disabilities and developing a scholarship program tailored to rewarding the talents of students with disabilities.
- **Accessible Physical and Technological Environment:** It is important that institutions provide facilities and assistive technologies ensuring full participation.
- **Curricular Adaptations and Inclusive Methodologies:** Creating specific services for the whole community within the university that create adjustments to teaching methods and assessment, recruitment and job facilities for faculty and staff, as well as creating specific programs that are tailored to include people with cognitive disabilities that cannot access superior education due to traditional requirements for admission.
- **Support Services:** Specialized support, counseling and services for student's faculty and staff
- **Awareness and Training:** Faculty, administrative staff and student training as well as recurrent meetings, and extracurricular activities.

Conclusion: Advancing Inclusion and Rights of People with Disabilities

Advancing inclusion and protecting the rights of people with disabilities is not only a question of human rights but also a strategic necessity for sustainable development. By recognizing the unique needs of this population and implementing targeted policies, we can create a more inclusive and resilient society.

Globally, approximately 15% of the population consists of people with disabilities. In the Dominican Republic, this figure is estimated to be 15.6%. Acknowledging this demographic reality is essential for effective policy formulation that contributes to creating prosperous, resilient societies with better opportunities for participation. To adequately include people with disabilities in higher education, it is essential to implement both public policies and internal policies within academic institutions. These policies must guarantee that this population can fully enjoy their rights. Allocating financial resources, raising awareness, and fostering

participation are key steps in this process. Initiatives should be designed to consider diversity comprehensively and from an intersectional approach. By addressing the specific needs of everyone, we can ensure their active participation in all aspects of life.

Higher education institutions play a pivotal role in shaping future professionals. Therefore, they should integrate inclusion as a transversal axis across all programs. A multidisciplinary approach ensures that the rights of people with disabilities are promoted consistently and ensures a sustainable and more equitable future society for all.

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