

Inclusive Strategies and Public Policies for the Integration of University Students with Disabilities and the Promotion of their Mental Well-Being in Academic Environments

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Abstracts

This study addresses inclusive strategies and the impact of public policies on the integration of university students with disabilities, with special emphasis on their mental well-being in academic settings. Through a quantitative approach, data from a sample of students with disabilities in public and private universities were analyzed. The results reveal that the proper implementation of inclusive policies significantly improves both academic integration and the emotional well-being of students. Key areas were identified for improving psychological care and academic accommodations, highlighting the importance of a holistic approach to addressing diversity in higher education.

Keywords: Inclusive education, disability, mental well-being, public policies, academic integration, higher education.

Introduction

In recent decades, higher education has undergone a process of transformation towards greater inclusion and equity, in part due to growing social awareness and the implementation of public policies aimed at guaranteeing access for students with disabilities (García-Cedeño et al., 2021). However, the inclusion of these students in universities is not limited only to physical access to the facilities, but also involves their full integration into all aspects of university life, both in academic and psychosocial terms (Rodríguez-Martín et al., 2022). The mental well-being of students with disabilities is a critical dimension within this process, since facing structural and

attitudinal barriers in the academic environment can seriously affect their emotional health and academic performance (Vega-Hernández & López-González, 2020).

At the global level, public policies have been implemented that seek to guarantee equity in higher education for students with disabilities. In many countries, these policies are based on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2021), which establishes the obligation of states to guarantee access to inclusive education. However, despite regulatory advances, there is a mismatch between established policies and their practical implementation in university environments (Romero-Martínez & Fernández-Ruiz, 2023). This mismatch creates a number of challenges, as many institutions do not have the necessary resources or adequately trained staff to address the particular needs of students with disabilities, which often impacts their emotional and mental well-being (González-Sánchez & Martínez-Pérez, 2021).

Mental well-being, in the context of higher education, has become increasingly relevant in recent years, especially for students with disabilities, who are at greater risk of mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, and stress due to the academic and social barriers they face (López-Aguado et al., 2022). The lack of adequate academic accommodations, the absence of psychosocial support, and stigmatization in the university environment are factors that negatively affect the well-being of these students (Santos-Moreno & Gil-Ruiz, 2020).

In this context, it is essential to analyze the effectiveness of inclusive strategies implemented by higher education institutions and how they contribute to the mental well-being of students with disabilities. In addition, it is necessary to evaluate the impact of public policies in improving the conditions of these students in terms of access to emotional support services and curricular adaptations (Pérez-Benítez et al., 2023). This study aims to examine the relationship between public inclusion policies, implemented academic strategies, and the mental well-being of university students with disabilities, providing a quantitative analysis of the factors that influence their integration and mental health in academic settings.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study focuses on two main approaches: the educational inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education and the mental well-being of these students, both mediated by public policies and institutional inclusion strategies. Each of these aspects has a significant influence on the quality of life and academic success of college students with disabilities.

1. Educational Inclusion and Disability in Higher Education

Educational inclusion is defined as the process by which educational institutions adapt to ensure that all students, regardless of their personal conditions or characteristics, have equal access to quality education (Booth & Ainscow, 2021). In the context of higher education, inclusion not only implies physical access to facilities, but also the elimination of academic, social, and attitudinal barriers that prevent the full participation of students with disabilities (Álvarez et al., 2023).

Universities have adopted various inclusive strategies to facilitate the participation of these students. These strategies include curricular adaptations, the provision of assistive technologies,

and the implementation of counseling and psychosocial support services (Pérez et al., 2021). However, despite the progress, significant challenges remain in the effective implementation of these measures. Attitudinal barriers, lack of awareness among teaching and administrative staff, and inadequate infrastructures are factors that hinder full inclusion (González & Muñoz, 2022).

Table 1: Barriers to the Educational Inclusion of Students with Disabilities

Barriers	Description	Fountain
Attitudinal barriers	Prejudices or stereotypes about the ability of students with disabilities	González & Muñoz (2022)
Lack of curricular adaptations	Absence of adaptations in methodology and evaluation	Pérez et al. (2021)
Inadequate infrastructure	Lack of physical accessibility in classrooms, libraries, and other university spaces	Álvarez et al. (2023)
Lack of teacher training	Poor training of teaching staff on issues of inclusion and attention to disability	López & García (2020)

2. Public Inclusion Policies

In recent years, several countries have implemented public policies to promote the inclusion of people with disabilities in higher education, in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2021). These policies have been instrumental in ensuring that universities develop inclusive programs, generate accessible infrastructure, and provide support services, such as psychological counseling and curricular adaptations (García-Ramírez & Fernández, 2020).

However, the effectiveness of public policies depends to a large extent on their implementation in educational institutions. A study by Ruiz and Castro (2022) revealed that although most universities have formal inclusive policies in place, in practice these policies are often not implemented effectively, due to a lack of financial and human resources. In addition, policies vary considerably between public and private institutions, with the former in many cases having the least capacity to implement adequate support programs (Vargas & Molina, 2021).

Table 2: Public Policies for Inclusion in Higher Education

Politics	Description	Effectiveness (scale 1-5)	Fountain
Educational Inclusion Law	Ensures equal access to universities for students with disabilities	4.0	García-Ramírez & Fernández (2020)
Funding policies for support services	Allocate resources for the implementation of curriculum adaptations and assistive technologies	3.5	Ruiz & Castro (2022)
Awareness and training programmes	Continuous training for teachers and administrative staff on issues of inclusion and attention to disability	3.2	Vargas & Molina (2021)

3. Mental Well-Being of Students with Disabilities

Mental well-being in university students with disabilities is a crucial aspect of their academic success and social integration. Ryff's (1989) theory of psychological well-being, which includes dimensions such as self-acceptance, autonomy, and mastery of the environment, has been widely applied in studies on mental health in educational contexts (Ryff & Singer, 2020). Recent research has shown that students with disabilities are at higher risk of mental health problems,

such as depression, anxiety, and stress, due to the barriers they face in the university environment (Pérez-Rodríguez et al., 2022).

Universities that implement inclusive policies and provide emotional and psychological support tend to improve the mental well-being of students with disabilities. A recent study by Vargas et al. (2023) showed that students who receive psychosocial support at their universities experience lower levels of stress and anxiety. However, in many institutions, psychological support services are limited or non-existent, which aggravates the situation of these students (Gómez & López, 2021).

Table 3: Factors Affecting the Mental Well-Being of Students with Disabilities

Factors	Description	Impact on mental well-being	Fountain
Psychosocial support	Availability of counseling and emotional support services	High	Vargas et al. (2023)
Curricular adaptations	Adjustments in methodology and assessment to suit student needs	Moderate	Pérez-Rodríguez et al. (2022)
Attitudinal barriers	Stigmatization and prejudice by peers and teachers	High	Gómez & López (2021)
Accessible infrastructures	Adaptation of university facilities to facilitate mobility	Low	Ruiz & Castro (2022)

4. Convergence between Inclusion and Mental Well-Being

The mental well-being of students with disabilities is closely related to the effectiveness of inclusive strategies implemented by educational institutions. Recent studies indicate that when universities adopt comprehensive inclusive policies and provide adequate support, students with disabilities have higher levels of satisfaction and psychological well-being (Santos & Pérez, 2020). Research also shows that a lack of adequate support can lead to feelings of isolation, poor academic performance, and in some cases, dropping out of school (García-López et al., 2022).

Therefore, educational inclusion and mental well-being cannot be considered in isolation. Both factors are interconnected and require comprehensive attention from universities and governments through public policies and institutional strategies that promote equity and access to quality education for all students, regardless of their personal conditions.

Methodology

This study used a quantitative, non-experimental and descriptive-correlational design approach to analyze the relationship between inclusive strategies implemented in universities, public inclusion policies, and the mental well-being of university students with disabilities. The quantitative approach is best suited for this type of research, as it allows for the collection and analysis of numerical data that can be generalized to a broader population (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In addition, the descriptive-correlational methodology is ideal for exploring the relationships between variables without manipulating them, allowing the observation of phenomena in their natural context (Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza, 2018).

Population and sample

The target population was made up of university students with disabilities enrolled in public and private universities in Spain during the 2023-2024 academic year. According to data from the Ministry of Universities (2022), it is estimated that there are approximately 12,500 students with disabilities enrolled in higher education institutions in Spain. To calculate the sample size, a non-probabilistic convenience sampling was used, selecting 350 students from different universities who agreed to participate in the study. This type of sampling is common in studies with hard-to-reach populations, such as people with disabilities (Etikan, 2017).

The sample was composed of 55% of students from public universities and 45% from private universities, with a balanced representation of different types of disabilities: 40% with physical disabilities, 30% with sensory disabilities, and 30% with psychosocial or mental disabilities. The age range of the participants ranged from 18 to 35 years, with 60% being women and 40% men.

Instruments

For data collection, a structured survey was designed composed of three main sections:

1. Sociodemographic data: Questions were included on age, gender, type of disability, and university of origin (public or private).
2. Inclusive Strategies Evaluation Scale: To measure the inclusive strategies implemented in universities, an adaptation of the educational inclusion scale by Ruiz & Alvarado (2021) was used. This scale contains 15 items with a Likert score of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), assessing aspects such as curricular adaptations, physical accessibility, and psychosocial support.
3. Mental Well-Being Scale: To measure the mental well-being of students, the psychological well-being scale of Ryff (1989) was used, validated in the university context by Pérez et al. (2020). This scale includes 18 items that assess six dimensions of mental well-being: self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, autonomy, mastery of the environment, purpose in life, and personal growth, with a Likert score of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Both scales were subjected to a reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The inclusive strategies scale had a coefficient of $\alpha = 0.85$, and the mental well-being scale had a $\alpha = 0.89$, indicating good internal consistency in both cases (George & Mallery, 2019).

Procedure

Data collection was carried out between January and May 2024. The surveys were administered online, using electronic forms sent to students through the universities' disability care services. Participants' confidentiality was guaranteed and prior informed consent was obtained. The average duration to complete the survey was 15-20 minutes.

Once the data was collected, they were analyzed using SPSS software (version 26). Descriptive analyses were performed to obtain frequencies, percentages, and measures of central tendency (means and standard deviations) of sociodemographic variables, inclusive strategies, and mental well-being. Subsequently, Pearson correlation analyses were carried out to explore the relationship between inclusive strategies and mental well-being, and Student's t-tests were applied to compare the differences between students from public and private universities.

Statistical analysis

An initial descriptive analysis was performed to identify the characteristics of the sample and the distribution of responses on the scales of inclusive strategies and mental well-being. The results showed that the overall average of the inclusive strategies was 3.9 (SD = 0.65), indicating that, on average, students perceive a moderately high level of inclusion in their universities. In terms of mental well-being, the overall average was 3.7 (SD = 0.72), suggesting that students with disabilities have acceptable mental well-being, but with areas that require improvement.

In addition, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to explore the relationship between inclusive strategies and mental well-being. The results revealed a positive and significant correlation between both variables ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that the greater the perception of inclusive strategies, the better the mental well-being of students with disabilities.

To examine the differences in inclusive strategies and mental well-being between students at public and private universities, a Student's t-test was performed. The results indicated that students from private universities reported significantly better inclusive strategies ($M = 4.1$, $SD = 0.59$) compared to students from public universities ($M = 3.7$, $SD = 0.69$), $t(348) = 3.87$, $p < 0.001$. In terms of mental well-being, students from private universities also had higher scores ($M = 3.9$, $SD = 0.65$) than their counterparts from public universities ($M = 3.6$, $SD = 0.73$), $t(348) = 3.21$, $p < 0.01$.

Table 4: Descriptive statistics of the main variables

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Minimal	Maximum
Inclusive Strategies	3.9	0.65	1.8	5.0
Mental Wellness	3.7	0.72	2.1	5.0

Table 5: Correlation between Inclusive Strategies and Mental Well-Being

Variable 1	Variable 2	r for Pearson	P-Value
Inclusive Strategies	Mental Wellness	0.68	< 0.001

Table 6: Comparison between Public and Private Universities

Variable	Public University (M, DE)	Private University (M, DE)	T-Value	P-Value
Inclusive Strategies	3.7 (0.69)	4.1 (0.59)	3.87	< 0.001
Mental Wellness	3.6 (0.73)	3.9 (0.65)	3.21	< 0.01

These results suggest that private universities are better equipped to implement inclusive strategies that promote the mental well-being of students with disabilities, compared to public universities. However, further analysis is required to identify the underlying causes of these differences and propose improvements in both types of institutions.

Results

The results of this study provide valuable insights into the relationship between inclusive strategies implemented by universities and the mental well-being of university students with disabilities. The findings obtained from the descriptive, correlational and comparison analyses between public and private universities are detailed below.

1. Descriptive Analysis of Inclusive Strategies and Mental Well-Being

The descriptive analysis revealed that, in general, students perceive a moderately high level of inclusion in their universities, with a mean of 3.9 (SD = 0.65) on the scale of inclusive strategies. This result indicates that, although universities are implementing measures to improve accessibility and support for students with disabilities, there are still areas for improvement (Vargas & Molina, 2021). Students reported that the aspects best evaluated in terms of inclusion were curricular adaptations (M = 4.2, SD = 0.54) and accessibility to technological resources (M = 4.0, SD = 0.60), while attitudinal barriers and lack of awareness of teaching staff received lower scores (M = 3.4, SD = 0.70).

Regarding mental well-being, the overall average was 3.7 (SD = 0.72), suggesting that students with disabilities have acceptable psychological well-being, but with areas that need attention. Students reported higher levels of well-being in dimensions such as purpose in life (M = 3.9, SD = 0.68) and positive relationships with others (M = 3.8, SD = 0.70), while self-acceptance (M = 3.4, SD = 0.78) and mastery of the environment (M = 3.3, SD = 0.74) were the dimensions with the lowest scores.

Table 7: Descriptive Statistics of Inclusive Strategies and Mental Well-Being

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Minimal	Maximum
Inclusive Strategies	3.9	0.65	1.8	5.0
Mental Wellness	3.7	0.72	2.1	5.0
Curricular Adaptations	4.2	0.54	2.0	5.0
Technological Accessibility	4.0	0.60	2.5	5.0
Attitudinal Barriers	3.4	0.70	1.0	5.0
Purpose in Life	3.9	0.68	2.0	5.0
Positive Relationships	3.8	0.70	2.0	5.0
Self-acceptance	3.4	0.78	1.5	5.0
Mastery of the Environment	3.3	0.74	1.0	5.0

2. Correlation between Inclusive Strategies and Mental Well-Being

A Pearson correlation analysis was performed to assess the relationship between inclusive strategies implemented in universities and the mental well-being of students with disabilities. The results showed a significant positive correlation between both variables ($r = 0.68, p < 0.001$). This suggests that as students perceive greater levels of inclusion and accommodations at their universities, their mental well-being also improves considerably. This finding is consistent with previous studies indicating that inclusive strategies, such as curricular adaptations and psychosocial support, have a positive impact on the mental health of students with disabilities (García-Cedeño et al., 2021).

In particular, curricular adaptations showed the strongest correlation with mental well-being ($r = 0.72, p < 0.001$), indicating that the adjustments made in the teaching-learning process play a crucial role in improving the psychological well-being of these students (Rodríguez-Martín et al., 2022). In addition, technological accessibility also showed a significant correlation with well-being ($r = 0.65, p < 0.001$), highlighting the importance of access to technological resources as a support measure.

Table 8: Correlations between Inclusive Strategies and Mental Well-Being

Variable 1	Variable 2	r for Pearson	P-Value
Inclusive Strategies	Mental Wellness	0.68	< 0.001

Curricular Adaptations	Mental Wellness	0.72	< 0.001
Technological Accessibility	Mental Wellness	0.65	< 0.001
Attitudinal Barriers	Mental Wellness	-0.45	< 0.01

3. Comparison between Public and Private Universities

To compare the differences in the implementation of inclusive strategies and mental well-being between students from public and private universities, a Student's t-test was performed. The results showed significant differences between both groups in terms of the perception of inclusive strategies ($t(348) = 3.87, p < 0.001$). Students from private universities reported a higher level of inclusive strategies ($M = 4.1, SD = 0.59$) compared to students from public universities ($M = 3.7, SD = 0.69$). This suggests that private universities tend to be better equipped or have more resources to implement effective inclusive measures (Ruiz & Castro, 2022).

In terms of mental well-being, students from private universities also reported significantly higher scores ($M = 3.9, SD = 0.65$) than those from public universities ($M = 3.6, SD = 0.73$), $t(348) = 3.21, p < 0.01$. This finding supports the hypothesis that private universities, by offering better resources and support, contribute more positively to the emotional well-being of students with disabilities (Vega-Hernández & López-González, 2020).

Table 9: Comparison of Inclusive Strategies and Mental Well-being between Public and Private Universities

Variable	Public University (M, DE)	Private University (M, DE)	T-Value	P-Value
Inclusive Strategies	3.7 (0.69)	4.1 (0.59)	3.87	< 0.001
Mental Wellness	3.6 (0.73)	3.9 (0.65)	3.21	< 0.01

4. Analysis of Subgroups by Type of Disability

To deepen the analysis, a comparison was also made between the different types of disability (physical, sensory and psychosocial). The results indicated that students with psychosocial or mental disabilities reported significantly lower levels of mental well-being ($M = 3.4, SD = 0.75$) compared to students with physical ($M = 3.8, SD = 0.70$) or sensory ($M = 3.9, SD = 0.68$), $t(348) = 2.98, p < 0.01$. This finding suggests that students with psychosocial disabilities face additional challenges that affect their mental health, which is consistent with studies that point to the vulnerability of this group (Pérez-Rodríguez et al., 2022).

Table 10: Comparison of Mental Well-Being by Type of Disability

Type of Disability	Mental Wellbeing (M, DE)
Physical disability	3.8 (0.70)
Sensory Impairment	3.9 (0.68)
Psychosocial Disability	3.4 (0.75)

Interpretation of the Results

The results indicate that the implementation of inclusive strategies, particularly curricular adaptations and technological accessibility, has a positive impact on the mental well-being of university students with disabilities. Private universities, by offering more resources and support, seem to be better positioned to ensure the well-being of these students. However, it is crucial to

continue developing inclusive policies in public universities, where there are still significant gaps in the perception of inclusion and well-being.

In addition, students with psychosocial or mental disabilities require special attention, as they exhibit lower levels of mental well-being compared to other types of disabilities. These results coincide with previous research that highlights the need for more accessible and specific mental health services for this group (Ortiz, 2021).

Conclusions

This study has allowed us to deepen the understanding of the relationship between inclusive strategies implemented in universities and the mental well-being of university students with disabilities, showing how these strategies, together with the support of effective public policies, significantly influence the academic and emotional quality of life of these students. From the findings, several key conclusions can be highlighted:

1. Inclusive strategies and mental well-being

The positive and significant correlation between inclusive strategies and mental well-being indicates that an adequate implementation of support measures, such as curricular adaptations, technological accessibility, and psychosocial services, contributes decisively to the psychological well-being of students with disabilities. Universities that apply a comprehensive approach to inclusion, which not only addresses physical and academic needs, but also emotional needs, manage to generate a more favorable environment for the integral development of these students. This finding coincides with previous research that highlights the importance of inclusive policies to improve students' academic and emotional outcomes (García-Cedeño et al., 2021; Vargas & Molina, 2021).

2. Differences between public and private universities

The study reveals significant differences in the perception of inclusive strategies and mental well-being between students from public and private universities. Students from private universities reported higher levels of inclusion and mental well-being compared to their peers from public universities. This suggests that private universities, in general, have more financial and human resources to implement support programs and services. However, it is crucial to note that this finding does not imply that all private universities offer optimal conditions, but that, on average, they seem to be better equipped to meet the needs of students with disabilities (Ruiz & Castro, 2022).

This result also highlights the urgent need to increase resources and strengthen inclusion policies in public universities. Governments and educational institutions must work together to ensure that students at public universities have access to the same opportunities and services as those at private universities, which is essential to reduce educational inequalities (Vega-Hernández & López-González, 2020).

3. Differential impact according to the type of disability

Analysis of the results by type of disability reveals that students with psychosocial or mental disabilities have significantly lower levels of mental well-being compared to those with physical

or sensory disabilities. This highlights the particular vulnerability of this group and their need for more targeted support. Despite general inclusive strategies, students with psychosocial disabilities require additional interventions, such as accessible mental health services, emotional well-being programs, and specialized counseling (Pérez-Rodríguez et al., 2022).

This finding underscores the importance of developing public policies and institutional strategies that differentially address the diverse needs of students with disabilities. While some accommodations may be effective for students with physical disabilities, students with psychosocial disabilities require more targeted support to ensure their mental well-being and academic success (Ortiz, 2021).

4. Attitudinal barriers and their negative influence

A crucial factor that continues to negatively affect students' mental well-being is the persistence of attitudinal barriers within the university environment. Although physical and curricular barriers are being addressed to a greater extent, prejudices, stereotypes and lack of awareness among teaching and administrative staff continue to be a significant obstacle to full inclusion. These barriers generate isolation and feelings of exclusion in students, affecting their emotional well-being and academic performance (González & Muñoz, 2022).

The elimination of these barriers requires a concerted effort on the part of universities, which must develop training and awareness programs on disability aimed at the entire university community. This is especially relevant, since effective inclusion depends not only on technical or physical adaptations, but also on a cultural change that promotes respect, understanding, and empathy towards diversity (Santos & Pérez, 2020).

5. Recommendations for future actions

In light of the results obtained, several recommendations can be proposed to improve the inclusion and mental well-being of university students with disabilities:

- Increase investment in inclusive resources: It is critical that public universities, in particular, receive more financial and human resources to implement inclusive and psychosocial support programs. Governments must prioritize funding programs that ensure equal access and opportunities for all students.
- Develop targeted mental health programs: Colleges should implement specific mental health services for students with psychosocial disabilities, including individualized psychological care, stress management workshops, and support groups.
- Train teaching and administrative staff: Continuous training in inclusion and disability is key to eliminating attitudinal barriers. Universities should offer mandatory inclusion awareness programs, which promote a change in institutional culture towards greater understanding and respect for diversity.
- Improve the monitoring of inclusive policies: Public policies must be evaluated regularly to ensure their correct implementation in all universities. In addition, control and monitoring mechanisms must be developed to ensure that these policies are not only on paper, but are effectively implemented in academic settings.

In conclusion, although significant progress has been made in the inclusion of university students with disabilities, important challenges remain that require urgent attention. Effective inclusion cannot be limited to the removal of physical barriers, but must be addressed holistically, considering both the academic and emotional well-being of students. Only through the implementation of well-designed inclusive strategies, robust public policies, and a change in attitudes within educational institutions can a truly inclusive and equitable environment be ensured for all students, regardless of their disability.

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