

# Processes Of Educational Inclusion In Times Of Crisis

Martha Vergara Fregoso<sup>1</sup>, Audin Aloiso Gamboa Suárez<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Profesora-Investigadora en el Departamento de Estudios Internacionales del Centro Universitario de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades de la Universidad de Guadalajara.

<sup>2</sup>Facultad de Educación, Artes y Humanidades, Universidad Francisco de Paula Santander Cúcuta, Colombia, [audingamboa@ufps.edu.co](mailto:audingamboa@ufps.edu.co), Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9755-6408>

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## Abstract

The pandemic marked society and, therefore, educational institutions, since preventive measures revealed large gaps and differences, and led to rethink the role of the school today, to rethink its constitution and redirect its actions towards a renewed entity, with new positions, new approaches and commitments, in order to respond to current needs and, even more so, to serve students with disabilities. This paper represents a research advance in which an analysis is made of the perspective, policies and strategies that the University of Guadalajara implements to guarantee inclusive education, and some of the effects generated in higher education students as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic; in particular, emphasis is placed on the effects that the situation has had on students with disabilities. For this research, some interviews were conducted with blind students from the same institution, in order to learn about their experiences during the health emergency.

**Keywords:** Higher education; Educational inclusion; Students and disability; COVID-19 pandemic.

## Introduction

This paper analyses the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education, specifically on students with disabilities due to blindness (Casallas-Flórez et al., 2020). To this end, the background and foundations of inclusive education are presented, as well as the process, strategies and actions that the University of Guadalajara (UDG) has carried out to identify itself as an inclusive university, as well as some reflections on the educational situation of universities during the pandemic; finally, the biographical-educational narrative of one of the students with disabilities and the barriers she faced during the pandemic are presented.

## Method

This study is inscribed in the perspective of biographical narratives, which were rescued through a space of dialogue, reflection and encounter, where confluences and divergences make it possible to weave the diverse life routes of each participant and situate ourselves in the notion of biographical space; as Leonor Arfuch, et al (2005), put it, by attributing the objectification of experience to the narration of one's own life. Therefore, biographical methods can be privileged forms of access to knowledge of the social.

In the interviews, three axes were considered: 1. To tell their own story (they relate their experience as students with disabilities at the UDG during the pandemic); 2. To problematise their experience (they relate the problems they faced); 3. Three undergraduate students were interviewed: two from International

## Development

Schools are facing new challenges and decisions in the face of the coronavirus (Gómez, 2020a; Gamboa et al., 2020; Gamboa, 2019; Gamboa, 2016). Both students and teachers have had to change the ways in which they acquire knowledge, and have entered the world of information and communication technologies, which has revealed significant inequalities around who has access to a device with an internet signal, or who can choose to continue studying or work to make ends meet. But there is one sector that faces other barriers to learning, even before the pandemic: students with disabilities (Avendaño et al., 2021; Gamboa et al., 2021; Gómez, 2020b; Osorio, 2020; Urbina et al., 2020).

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2020), people with disabilities may be limited in their educational processes because there are not enough virtual programmes and applications to facilitate and make classes useful, in addition to the difficulty of acquiring such technological implements. The activities carried out by teachers in the classroom now become the task of parents, tutors or the students themselves, who must adapt the proposed activities to the resources available to them, and this implies a significant increase in the time dedicated to education, a situation that is not possible in all homes, so that the tasks could be carried out incompletely. In addition to the above, certain disabilities require therapies and physical and social learning methods, a situation that is slowed down by the recommendations for voluntary isolation (ECLAC-UNESCO, 2020).

## Background

Since the Declaration of Human Rights (ONU) in 1948, it has been stated that one of the basic pillars is to be able to enjoy a quality education, which is why this ideal is the basis for developing strategies for inclusive education. In 1960, the Convention against Discrimination in Education was adopted, the first international instrument that comprehensively covers the right to education, which has been ratified by 106 states to date. Six years later, in 1966, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ONU) was signed, reiterating the obligation of the member states to guarantee the fulfilment of rights, including the right to education.

Later in 1989, in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (ONU), the importance of compliance with the rule of law for children's equal opportunities is once again reiterated. It is in this Convention that the Convention defines persons with disabilities as "those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments and who, in interaction with various barriers, may be hindered in their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others" (Article 1). A year later, the World Declaration on Education For All (UNESCO) urges countries to make greater efforts to address student needs.

It was not until 2006 that the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN) issued the first legal instrument that refers to the concept of inclusive and quality education. Inclusive education is considered a right that obliges the authorities to provide sufficient conditions for the implementation of a strategy to achieve its full development.

In 2015, at the World Education Forum (UNESCO), the declarations of each of the regions of the planet were approved, specifying their commitment to inclusive education, and in the same year, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was proposed within the framework of the fourth goal, which refers to quality education and defines ensuring inclusive, equitable and quality education and promoting lifelong learning

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<sup>1</sup> This paper only includes the experience of one of the students of the Bachelor's Degree in International Relations at the Centro Universitario de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades of the University of Guadalajara.

opportunities for all. Inclusive education is seen as a right in which authorities are obliged to provide sufficient conditions to ensure equal opportunities and equal treatment for all people to learn and thus reduce vulnerabilities.

With a view to making this right effective without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunities, the aim is to ensure an inclusive education system at all levels, as well as to ensure an inclusive education system and lifelong learning (United Nations, 2006); In this case, we refer to the inclusive university, defined as one that opens its doors to diversity, be it ethnicity, age, nationality, culture, religion, disability, learning styles, socioeconomic status, among others, and thus be able to provide the same level of opportunities to its students, assessing the differences, but through strategies to provide this accessibility. In this case, authors such as Ainscow, Booth and Dyson, state that the development of inclusive education in higher education institutions requires actions in a series of dimensions, culture, policies and practices (Ainscow, Booth y Dyson, 2006).

Regarding the creation of inclusive cultures, it is necessary to establish values and attitudes where respect for diversity prevails and thus improve the relationship between subjects, this will be the basis for the approach of inclusive policies, which implies a transformation of educational institutions at both organisational and curricular level, All this must be contemplated in strategic plans, and finally be evident in the development of good inclusive practices, which must be transferred into actions where the above is put into practice, for which it is important to consider the context, time and space; This is in order to achieve equal opportunities (Avendaño-Castro, 2020; Hernández et al., 2018).

## The case of the University of Guadalajara

**The Institutional Inclusion Policy of the UDG was created under the opinion number IV/2018/1795, period of the 2018-2019 session, on Wednesday 19 December 2018, within the Education and Regulations Commission; this document identifies the house of studies as an inclusive, equitable and equality-driven institution (University of Guadalajara, 2018).**

This policy includes the Institutional Inclusion Programme that supports different vulnerable groups, including people with disabilities, and is managed by the General Coordination of Cultural Outreach and Dissemination, which is responsible for coordinating, advising and supporting institutional policies in the areas of outreach, social action, inclusion, attention to indigenous communities, social service and gender perspective, as well as cultural dissemination and artistic promotion of the University of Guadalajara, under the General Statute of the University of Guadalajara.

Within this Institutional Development Plan there are programmes for deaf students in high schools 7 and 3, the hiring of interpreters for hearing impaired students in high school and undergraduate courses, and the creation of three multicultural high schools for the Wixárika population in three localities of Mezquitic, Jalisco. Among the actions carried out for this purpose are the following:

In correspondence to the above, it is proposed to strengthen scientific research and academic production in the field of inclusion, thus promoting cultural and intercultural richness, by promoting universal accessibility, as indicated by the UN Human Rights Council to Mexico, in order to comply with international treaties ratified by the State, among these objectives is that Mexico with the UDG seeks to improve the conditions of interpreters of Mexican Sign Language (LSM), and promote undergraduate and postgraduate curricula aimed at training in interpretation and teaching in LSM.

Among the many programmes and initiatives that the UDG has developed to strengthen inclusion, in 2015,

the Inclusive University Programme (PUI) was created, thanks to which economic stimulus programmes were provided, one for indigenous students and the other for students with disabilities. This same programme is a provider of workshops and diploma courses on inclusion, human rights, sexual diversity, LSM, as well as the manager of extraordinary resources for the creation of spaces, inclusive technologies and the creation of ramps and tactile paths in some university centres.

## Disability among UDG students

The University of Guadalajara considers educational inclusion in its objective number 17 of the Institutional Development Plan 2014-2030. The strategies of this objective are aimed at ensuring that education at all levels of the University Network is inclusive for those sectors of the population with the highest level of vulnerability.

In 2015, the Inclusive University Programme (PUI) was created, which operates under the idea of educational inclusion, which is a "principle that is linked to the dignity and equality of people as inalienable rights and the great goal of committing education to the task of helping to overcome discrimination and contribute to reducing socio-cultural inequality" (University of Guadalajara, n/a). This programme seeks the improvement and adaptation of all the educational programmes of the University Network to make them accessible to each of the students of the University Network. At the beginning of 2019, the UdeG served three thousand 67 students with some kind of disability (González, 2019), a considerable increase from 2015 when the enrolment of students with disabilities was only 581 according to Álvarez (2016).

Among the strategies that the University of Guadalajara has implemented with the Inclusive University Programme are:

- a. The opening of the Specialised Service Centre for the Visually Impaired: "Reading for All", which offers digitisation services, the conversion of printed and electronic books into accessible formats, Braille conversion and reading aloud to ensure access to information and reading for the visually and hearing impaired population.
- b. The creation of the Inclusion Unit, responsible for the implementation of the Inclusive University Programme, which not only promotes equality for people with disabilities, but also for those in other situations of vulnerability, such as students from indigenous peoples; single mothers and heads of family; people with autism and Asperger syndrome; older adults and members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Transgender, Transvestite, Intersex and Queer (LGBTTTIQ) community.
- c. Development of awareness-raising courses on sexual diversity for teachers, administrative staff and students, to raise awareness and train teachers, especially those from the degree in Public Communication of the University Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities (CUCSH), from the Departments of Mental Health, Neurosciences, Applied Psychology, Basic Psychology and from the degree in Nursing of the University Centre for Health Sciences (CUCSH), as well as from Preparatory School 19 of the Health Sciences University System (CUCS), Neurosciences, Applied Psychology, Basic Psychology and the Bachelor's Degree in Nursing at the University Centre for Health Sciences (CUCS), as well as Preparatory School 19 of the Higher Secondary Education System (SEMS), which are the departments with the largest number of students with hearing impairment (CVSS, 2017).
- d. The drafting of the proposed Protocol of Action in Cases of Discrimination.
- e. The process of psycho-pedagogical accompaniment of students with disabilities, to ensure their academic continuity.
- f. The creation of the propaedeutic course for baccalaureate applicants with hearing impairment, whose purpose is to place them on an equal footing with the rest of their classmates.
- g. Support for adjustments in the admission exam for applicants with some type of disability, such as support readers for the visually impaired, Mexican Sign Language interpreters and support for students with Asperger's or autism.
- h. The opening of High Schools 7 and 7, which have a programme for hearing impaired students, as well as offering Mexican Sign Language courses for the educational community.

### Situation of universities due to the COVID-19 pandemic

Worldwide, all education systems, including higher education, face major challenges in maintaining so-called "educational normality" and protecting the fundamental right to education. It is worth noting that 45% of households in Latin America have limited access to energy services, interconnection to internet networks and data, and availability of computer equipment; the situation is more acute in rural areas, especially among indigenous populations. This reality opened up new social gaps over the last three years, which limited higher education and were a triggering factor for university dropouts (UNESCO, 2021).

Some of the impacts on Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have been: declining student enrolment; a slowdown in research and outreach activities; and job insecurity for faculty and non-teaching staff due to declining incomes. Regarding the behaviour of university enrolment in times of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is noted that in the United States there is a decline of -13% between 2019 and 2020, and this decline is projected to grow until 2026 (Blacke, 2022). Other impacts on the education community were emotional, caused by isolation and the pressures exerted by the change in learning processes, as well as by job losses or financial problems. Precisely, the economic difficulties of the universities limited their scope of action to some extent, and compromised the quality of education.

## Experience at the University of Guadalajara: educational inclusion in the framework of COVID-19

In view of the suspension of face-to-face classes in March 2020, the University of Guadalajara shared in its digital media different tools for teachers and students to operate distance education. However, there is little public information related to the strategy to ensure educational inclusion during the virtual mode of classes.

The website of the Inclusion Unit Programme (PUI) contains only two information links: one with the results of the support programme for students with disabilities, and the other for registration for the entrance exam adjustments. On the other hand, the PUI Facebook portal has shared resources from institutions outside the UDG with recommendations for the prevention of COVID-19 for people with disabilities, as well as workshops and seminars alluding to the days commemorating various types of disability, such as the webinar: "COVID-19: Disability in times of pandemic", in which participants shared their personal experience, although no particular strategies for e-learning were addressed.

Other tools found on PUI's social networks are infographics in the Wixárika language<sup>2</sup> with official information issued by the UDG, and recommendations for the isolation period. This is evidence that, although the PUI is important and is part of the University's mission, care for persons with disabilities took a back seat during the pandemic.

## Results

Being a student with blindness in the midst of a pandemic. A student's experience.

Dulce is a blind student in her fourth semester of the Bachelor's Degree in International Relations at the University Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities, and has been studying at the UDG Network since high school. The last time she had specialised education was during primary school; that is, although she has had support from her teachers, after primary school, all the other levels have been "pioneers" in providing attention to blind people and, according to the student, it has been a matter of mutual learning, as the teachers who accompany her at the same time learn to work with students with disabilities.

Time is the biggest barrier Dulce has had during her university education because, she says, "what takes you an hour to read, for me it takes three: getting the readings, converting them and reading them". Since high school he has not been able to get the material in Braille, so the materials provided by professors, he has to convert them to Word format, as this is the only format that his reading software accepts for transfer to audio, which is the way he can approach the readings. Converting a text is not a simple task; previously she would go to the typing area of the State Public Library, where they have quick text conversion programmes; however the content of the readings is often modified and does not match the original texts, so if Dulce needs a text much closer to the original she must request it from the University's Inclusion Unit; the problem is that it can take up to a month to transcribe a complete book. Unfortunately, with the restrictions imposed by the pandemic, the above-mentioned units are out of service, so access to the necessary materials is now the responsibility of the student.

With the online modality, teachers use presentations to present the topics of their classes, which involves listening to the voice of their classmates and teachers mixed with the audio of the presentations, which complicates comprehension, as the sounds become confusing. In addition, Dulce suffers from a medical condition that causes her constant use of hearing aids to increase the pressure in her eyes, resulting in severe headaches, so the time spent listening to lectures must be moderated.

Despite the circumstances, Dulce is positive:

Currently with the online ones it is complex and it doesn't make it easier because now they are giving me access to all the books, their presentations [...] the classes are recorded and I can listen to them [...] there are more tools, there are more to look for, although I don't think it favours the time I used to spend on the road because I take advantage of it to convert documents and all these things (E.1/3).

The negative in this case is that the student states that "not all platforms are accessible to me [...] teachers use apps like Drive and Dropbox, and the screen readers on the mobile and computer don't match" (E.1/3).

When asked about the strategies that teachers have applied to achieve inclusion at the university, the student comments that in reality she is the one who has sought ways to integrate, and that to date there are only two teachers who have used tools to help her make the most of her class:

"My limits are when the teachers project things and they forget that I am there, they assume that I am watching it and if I am asking what the presentation says [...] it is always ugly, if they are in a hurry to present, because some meetings like in Zoom last 50 minutes, imagine me with my doubts, they don't answer me as I think they should" (E1/5).

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<sup>2</sup> The Wixárikas or Wixáricas, known in Spanish as Huicholes, are a majority ethnic group living in the northern part of the state of Jalisco, Mexico.

## Conclusions

The UDG has contributed strongly to the prevention of COVID-19 in the state of Jalisco, adapting its facilities as rapid testing laboratories and voluntary isolation centres, and making important investments for the loan of oximeters and distribution of food to its students. However, there is a clear lack of public information on assistance and virtual tools for students with disabilities, which is a major challenge to comply with UNESCO's recommendations in the face of the pandemic.

The International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has stated that education, being a universal human right, should not forget those who suffer from some kind of disability and that, to be truly inclusive, it should be incorporated into all levels of education and not be seen as a separate educational entity (Meza, 2015). This is why bodies such as the Inclusion Unit must have a presence throughout the University Network, not only in those campuses where a greater number of people with disabilities have been detected, since the exclusion of students with disabilities from certain campuses means going against the principle of universal education.

The UDG has the appropriate mechanisms in place and the path has already been paved by students who, with their knowledge and the support of committed teachers, have laid the foundations for true educational inclusion; this means that, with sufficient will, it will be possible for the PUI to become a reality throughout the University Network in the near future.

The IES were significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, not only in terms of income, but also in terms of difficulties in providing continuity and normality to their substantive functions, such as teaching, research and social outreach, which suffered a high impact due to the lack of relationships, forcing them to rethink and design new strategies and services. In addition, the emergence of new social gaps and the aggravation of some pre-existing ones became evident. On the other hand, the university educational model supported by digital technology made it possible to recognise the benefits and limitations of virtual environments and to develop actions accordingly.

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