Practical Guidelines for Inclusive Higher Education: The Voices of Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

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Abstract: In Higher Education (HE), inclusion occurs when equity and respect for diversity guide institutional approaches, enabling conditions of support and self-determination. Building on that premise, this qualitative study translated the categories proposed by the HiLives project (2022) for inclusive HE into practical guidelines based on Student voices, connecting them to international quality principles such as the Think College Accreditation Standards (TCAC) (2021). A focus group was conducted with students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD) enrolled in a three-year Portuguese inclusive program, to explore their experiences in both academic and internship contexts. Using a deductive-inductive approach, thematic analysis was conducted with categories developed from the HiLives framework (2022) and aligned with Think College's international accreditation standards (2021). These categories ensured the results were both contextually relevant and comparable on a global scale. The results stressed the importance of accessible teaching, tailored support, and fostering a sense of belonging to the academic community. Internships highlighted the value of hands-on experience, dedicated supervision, and recognition as active team members, positioning them as a gateway to employment. Person-centered planning also emerged as a structuring principle, aligning individual goals with the educational pathway. From these findings, guidelines were developed, translating both European and international quality frameworks into clear and actionable recommendations. The main contribution of this study lies in the proposal of a framework stemming from students with IDD voices, providing an innovative reference for HE institutions seeking to establish or enhance inclusive programs.

Keywords: Inclusive higher education, Intellectual and developmental disabilities, Student voice, Person-centered-planning, Inclusive internships

Introduction

The right to Higher Education (HE) for people with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD) has been one of the major discussions in recent years. Globally, there is growing demand for inclusive universities that focus on HE not only through access to facilities and courses but also by being grounded in principles such as equity, diversity, belonging, and social participation for all. This conceptual advancement has increasingly provided a unique, meaningful, and authentic experience for students with IDD in HE, students who have historically faced contexts in which their voices and representation were often absent (UNESCO, 2017; European Commission, 2020).

Regardless of the progress in inclusive policies and practices, ensuring meaningful participation for students with IDD in HE. Barriers persist and often manifest in pedagogical, structural, and social dimensions, hindering full inclusion for many students (Grigal et al., 2019). Over the years, it has become evident that being a HE student is not solely about academic performance, but also about autonomy and social connection within a community that has historically excluded this population (O'Brien et al., 2019).

In this context of progress, the Think College Accreditation Standards emerged at the international level, particularly in the United States (Institute for Community Inclusion, 2019; Grigal et al., 2021). These standards define quality dimensions for inclusive programs and establish measurable criteria in areas such as program structure, academic access, career development, coordinated support, and campus participation as described in figüre 1. The Think College model is based on systemic and evidence-based frameworks committed to academic inclusion and sustainable institutional practices (Grigal et al., 2021).
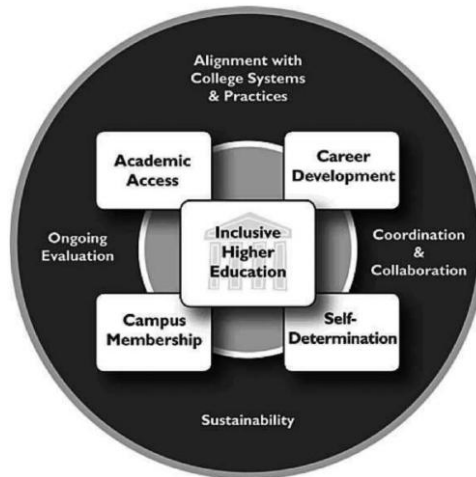

Figure 1. The think college standards for inclusive higher education (Grigal et al., 2021).

In the European context, projects such as "Higher Education for Inclusive Lives" (HiLives) (2022), coordinated by the University of Aveiro in Portugal, aimed to create opportunities for sharing knowledge and practices on including students with IDD in higher education and supporting their transition to independent living. This project proposed an Inclusive Higher Education Framework structured around five interrelated categories: Model, Policy, Support, Inclusive Pedagogy, and Personal and Social Development (Santos et al., 2022). This framework is guided by principles of Person-Centered Planning, Autonomy, and Quality of life (HiLives Consortium, 2022). This definition draws upon the theoretical legacy of Patricia O'Brien, who conceptualizes inclusion from a relational and participatory perspective rather than as a mere technical adaptation (O'Brien & Slee, 2012; O'Brien, 2004). Her model advocates emphasizes that inclusion only occurs when students' voices and choices are recognized as central to learning and institutional transformation.

Together, Think College and HiLives project present frameworks that complement each other. They intertwine structural and evaluative rigor with a humanistic and interpretive lens rooted in European educational traditions. However, despite their structural robustness, there remains a significant gap between theoretical models and their translation into practice-oriented guidelines. Current policies often fail to consider the lived experiences of students with IDD, whose perspectives are essential for designing supports that are both accessible and empowering (Hart et al., 2023; Martins, et al., 2022; O'Brien et al., 2019).

Given this configuration, the present study is guided by the following research question: How can the categories proposed by the HiLives framework, articulated with the international Think College standards, be translated, through students' voices, into practical guidelines for inclusive HE. Accordingly, the main objective is to

translate the HiLives framework categories (2022) and Think College standards (2021) into practical guidelines based on the lived experiences and perspectives of students with IDD. To achieve this objective, the following specific objectives were established:

1. To identify how students perceive their academic and internship experiences after three years in HE;
2. To analyze these experiences through the a priori categories (HiLives + Think College), complemented by emerging themes;
3. To highlight structuring principles of inclusion, such as pedagogical accessibility, individualized support, and person-centered planning;
4. To develop clear guidelines that translate European and international frameworks into evidence-based recommendations for HE institutions.

By integrating international standards, European frameworks, and the authentic voices of students, this study contributes to the global dialogue on inclusive HE as a space for transformation. An environment where equity and excellence are understood not as opposing goals but as mutually reinforcing dimensions of a truly inclusive university.

Method

Study Design and Contextual Framework

This qualitative and exploratory study focuses on the active participation of students with IDD in a HE program. The study adopts a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, emphasizing co-construction between participants and researchers along the whole process, focusing mainly on the students' voices and their own narratives in order to generate future guidelines.

The focus group (FG) aimed to transform individual narratives and collectively shared experiences into comprehensive and practical guidelines for inclusive HE. Findings were articulated with two internationally recognized frameworks: the HiLives Framework (2022), which outlines core dimensions of inclusion and quality in European Higher Education, and the Think College Accreditation Standards (2021) from the United States. Integration these frameworks ensured a cross-contextual theoretical dialogue between local realities and global inclusion standards, without assuming empirical equivalence (see figure 2 below).
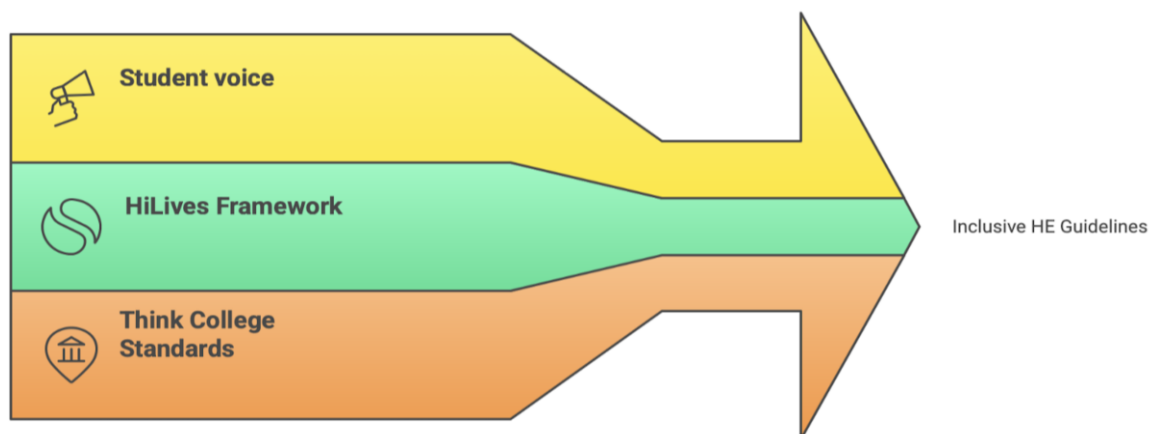

Figure 2. Inclusive high education guidelines.

Participants and Context

The study included five students from an Individual Programme of Multidisciplinary Studies (IPMS), a pioneering course in Portugal, focused on full inclusion in the university context. Participants included 2 male and 3 female students, aged 22 to 65, all with formal diagnoses of IDD. The students completed a three-year program: two years of academic activities followed by one year of supported internship.The course is designed to promote full participation of students with IDD in academic and social contexts.

Data Collection Techniques and Analysis

During the FG Dynamics, participants were provided with visual support including a timeline showing the activities carried out throughout the course and photographs and colorful post-its. This served as memory aids and neutral prompts of the most important activities (both formal and informal) they had experienced along the course. The mediation took place through questions designed to elicit autonomous responses from the students. The inclusion criteria of participation was focused on completion of the course and willingness to participate.

The FG dynamics was structured around five main dimensions proposed by the HiLives Framework (2022) such as *Model, Policies, Support, Inclusive Pedagogy,* and *Personal and Social Development.* These served as an initial structure for analysis while also enabling new themes to emerge directly from the data. The Think College Standards (2021) served as a complementary reference framework, helping to situate findings within a broader international context.

All transcripts were organized and coded using the MAXQDA 2024 software. The analytical process followed the principles of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), combining both deductive and inductive reasoning. The process unfolded in the following stages:

1. Repeated reading of transcripts to gain familiarity with the material.
2. Initial coding based on the HiLives categories while allowing new codes to emerge.
3. Refinement of themes and review of internal consistency.
4. Definition of final themes and interpretative synthesis.
5. Theoretical triangulation with the proposed frameworks.
6. Development of practical recommendations for inclusive higher education through interpretative synthesis.

Rather than targeting comparison or quantification, the process of triangulation sought to enhance interpretive depth and to highlight how students' lived experiences resonated with, or challenged, existing frameworks of inclusion.

Results and Discussion

The results, presented through the voices of the students, highlighted the importance of understanding how the participants themselves had experienced the whole process. Their reflections were highly relevant and offered new insights on inclusion in HE. The suggested guidelines align with national and international quality frameworks, focusing on individualized support, adaptation of infrastructure and methodologies, a more guided preparation for the labor market, and the promotion of a welcoming environment, all of which are described below:

Personalized Support and Advising: Mentorship, emotional support, and individual rhythm

Regarding Personalized Support and Counseling, the thematic analysis revealed a central focus on personalized guidance, emotional support and pedagogical flexibility. The role of mentors and tutors seemed to be crucial for students' experience in HE, as evidenced by statements such as:

"They help us to study, slowly, at our own pace." (P2)
"At the start I was a little afraid, but they motivated me and lifted my spirit." (P2)
"They support us whenever we need." (P1)

It is important to emphasize that the support provided by mentors and tutors went beyond solely academic dimensions; emotional support played a central role in promoting confidence and motivation in students.

Consequently, personalized support addressing both academic and emotional needs proved to be a determining factor in the context of the course. Family members, especially mothers, have also emerged as major sources of encouragement and support during the students' transition to university life. Moreover, the guidelines identified by students, aligned directly with the HiLives categories related to Support and Guidance and with the Think College Standard "Advice and Support Services", particularly by highlighting personal support as the necessary foundations for developing self-determination and confidence. The results also point to what Grigal et al. (2019) have advocated as individualized counseling systems with a persistence tool among students with DDI.

Accessible Learning and Teaching Flexibility: Clear Communication, and UDL Principles

In relation to this theme, students valued variation of learning modalities and accessible teaching methods. In this sense, they clearly expressed frustration with classes taught exclusively online and the lack of practical involvement regarding some of the activities joined by them. One participant mentioned: "Sometimes it's confusing online... I like the little book more", while another said: "It is important to go slowly at our own pace."

These findings reinforced the need for variation in pedagogical models and the priority to the ones that are more accessible and aligned with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (CAST, 2018). This way, flexibility in learning pace and evaluation methods emerged as key to equitable participation and support for the Accessible Teaching and Learning category within the HiLives framework. The findings of the study also aligned with Think College's "Academic Access" standard, which emphasizes multimodal teaching and flexibility in evaluation as essential quality indicators. Thus, inclusion becomes tangible when pedagogical flexibility is institutionalized and not individualized.

Belonging and Social Inclusion: Friendship, Family-Like Community, and Motivation

The feeling of belonging emerged as a deeply emotional dimension of inclusion in most of the accounts provided by the participants. The students described strong feelings of friendship, acceptance and connection with the university community. They also portrayed the university as "a family", highlighting social relations as a key aspect of their experience:

"We are not just a community. We are a family." (P3)
"It is very important to make new friends." (P?)

Within this realm, social activities such as picnics, group lunches and different kinds of celebrations were identified as opportunities to build trust, feelings related to happiness and new friendships.

"Being together with others made me happier and more open-minded." (P1)

The feeling of belonging promotes well-being and motivation, confirming the HiLives framework category focused on social connection, as well as its emphasis on social participation and group activities. The theme of belonging also ended up confirming that inclusion is lived emotionally before being perceived structurally (O'Brien & Slee, 2012). These results suggest that inclusive programs should intentionally cultivate social ecosystems of belonging, integrating peer mentoring, joint projects and community events that extend learning beyond the classroom.

Transformative Role of Internships: Learning by Doing, Confidence, and Structure

Students described the internships as turning points in their personal growth, self-confidence, and preparation for professional life. Through practical involvement, students redefined themselves as competent adults, validating HiLives and Think College's emphasis on career development and experiential learning

"I learned to be a better person and to deal with many situations." (P3)
"I was happier and more confident after my internship." (P1)

Despite the reported increase in confidence and personal development, some challenges emerged:

"Sometimes I just waited for someone to give me something to do." (P2)
"It would be nice to have internships close to my home." (P3)

This finding indicates that internships serve as experiential bridges to adulthood. However, they require adequate structure, supervision, and alignment with students' interests in order to be effective.

As Papay et al. (2020) note, effective internships for students with IDD combine autonomy with sustained guidance, conditions echoed by participants in the program. These results underscore that preparation for

employment begins within the learning environment, especially by providing students with necessary tools for this endeavor during their time at university, not after graduation.

Barriers and Facilitators

Along with the support received from their peers, mentors, tutors, and staff and leisure activities such as picnics, social gatherings among other activities, students also identified the implementation of Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope (PATH) as a valuable tool for planning goals for the present and future.

"PATH helped me find a job and organize my life." (P5)

Participants also mentioned barriers including unclear communication on room and department signage, confusing infrastructure. limited accessibility in some areas, and emotional anxiety during the adaptation process.

"The door numbering is confusing." (P5)
"Sometimes the classrooms are too hot or too cold." (P5)
"The elevator often breaks down." (P5)
"I was nervous and didn't know what to expect." (P2)

An important insight from this theme is that inclusion depends on both accessible environments and relational trust. In other words, physical comfort, clear communication, and psychological safety are interdependent pillars for a meaningful and rewarding experience. This reveals that inclusion depends as much on environmental elements as it does on psychological issues, reinforcing what Shogren et al. (2021) describes as prerequisites for agency: safety and relational trust. Therefore, universities must adopt accessibility policies in, physical and affective dimensions.

Emerging Themes: Emotional Impact and Valuing the Practical Doing

Two important themes emerged throughout the process: The emotional impact of inclusion experiences and a preference for practical, hands-on learning. Firstly, regarding emotional impacts, students underwent a transformation in confidence throughout their educational journey. Eventually, Initial feelings of fear and nervousness progressively gave way to pride and empowerment:

"So much confidence... but I did it." (P2)
"I feel stronger and more confident now." (P1)

Emotional transformation is a key indicator of the effectiveness of inclusion. When students feel seen, supported, and valued, inclusion moves from policy to lived experience. This emotional shift exemplifies what O'Brien (2004) describes as the "experiential core of inclusion," where empowerment occurs through meaningful participation in educational and social activities combined with recognition of each student's inherent worth, capabilities, and contributions to the academic community. The second relevant theme concerns the value placed on practical and experiential learning. Students expressed a clear preference for practical learning, perceiving active involvement as the true essence of learning and teaching:

"You have to give me work." (P3)
"I felt more like a real worker during the internship." (P2)
"I wanted to understand more, not just tidy things up." (P1)

These statements reinforce that active participation promotes agency, confidence, and competence. Such findings call for curricular rebalancing that integrates experiential, project-based, and community learning to align with HiLives' "Learning and Participation" category.

Practical Guidelines for Inclusive Higher Education Based on Student Voices

The guidelines and practical recommendations for HE institutions will be described below, based on the findings stemming from the voices of participants and in accordance with the HiLives framework (2022) and

Think College Standards (2021). It should be noted that the guiding principles of this process are the person-centered planning and the full inclusion of students with IDD. Figure 3 identifies the pillars of the Practical Guideline according to the themes that emerged from the students' perspective.
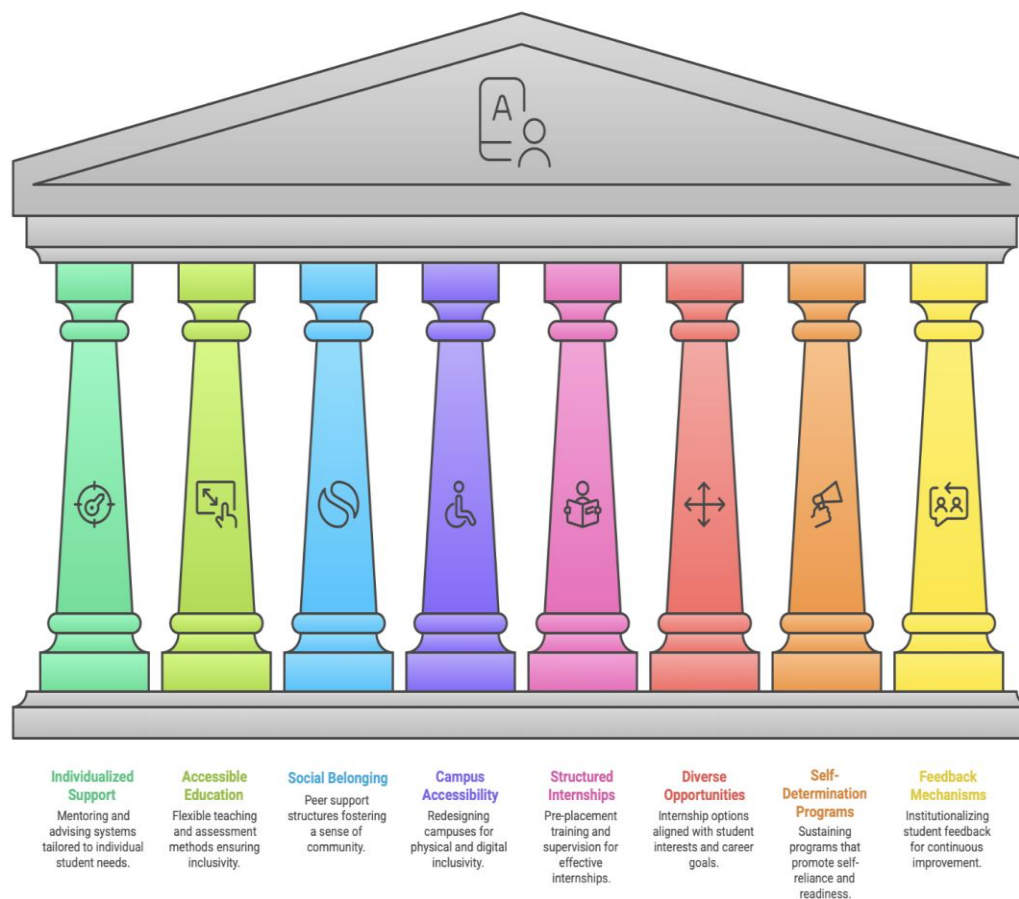

Figure 3. Pillars of the practical guideline

Table 1 provides a summary of the themes that emerged from the analysis, along with corresponding students description that capture their lived experiences and perspectives, as well as suggested guideline in alignment with HiLives framework and Think College standards.

Conclusion

These findings demonstrate that inclusion in Higher Education lies in having students with IDD as co-authors of the entire process, because they are the protagonists and the main beneficiaries of that right. Their voices announced that inclusion needs authentic opportunities of participation, pedagogical and emotional support and real relationships.

From their narrative, inclusion is organized as structural condition and lived experience focused on belonging, confidence and self-determination. Students mentioned mentorship, friendship and emotional support as the main help to overcoming initial fears and confusion during their transition into HE. The presence of trusted mentors who understood their individual needs, combined with peer relationships that fostered genuine connection, created a safety net that enabled students to take academic and social risks necessary for growth. Likewise, accessible teaching, adapted communication, and flexibility in learning pace were perceived as key factors for academic success and engagement. These factors create the conditions under which academic content becomes genuinely reachable and meaningful. Regarding internships, the students described this moment as tranformative and life-changing. These experiences provided them with opportunities to apply their academic learning in real-world professional settings, where they felt treated as adults and capable of having an independent life.

Table 1. Student-informed practical guidelines

Theme	Student-Informed Description	Practical Guideline (HiLives–Think College Alignment)
Personalized Support and Advising	Students emphasized the importance of mentors and tutors who respect their learning pace and provide both academic and emotional guidance.	Establish individualized mentoring and tutoring systems that combine academic and emotional
Accessible Learning and Teaching Flexibility	Students requested clearer explanations, fewer online-only classes, and diverse hands-on activities.	Apply Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and flexible assessment strategies that integrate practical and digital resources, promoting accessible learning for all.
Belonging and Social Inclusion	Feeling part of the university community was a recurring theme: 'We are not just a community. We are a family.'	Foster social belonging through inclusive group projects, peer mentoring, and extracurricular activities that promote friendship and community engagement.
Transformative Role of Internships	Internships were seen as gateways to employment and personal growth: 'I learned to be a better person, to deal with many situations.'	Design structured internships with clear task plans, dedicated supervision, and reflection meetings.
Barriers and Facilitators	Students identified both physical and organizational barriers (e.g., inaccessible classrooms, confusing signage) and emotional facilitators (motivation, empathy).	Improve campus accessibility (maps, signage, elevators) and ensure consistent mentoring that addresses both emotional well-being and academic progress.
Emotional Impact and Personal Growth	Inclusion was experienced as emotionally transformative: 'It was many emotions… but I became happier and more open-minded.'	Integrate emotional literacy and well-being programs into inclusive curricula, emphasizing self-determination and resilience as learning outcomes.
Valuing the Practical and the 'Doing'	Students showed preference for experiential, hands-on learning instead of theoretical lectures.	Balance theory and practice in all learning activities, privileging experiential and community-based learning
Transition and Person-Centered Planning (PATH)	The PATH tool was valued for linking study goals to life aspirations and employment.	Institutionalize Person-Centered Planning as a standard component of inclusive methodologies, bridging academic pathways and employment transitions.

The results also show that barriers to inclusion often stem from the physical and organizational environment, such as confusing signs, limited accessibility, and inconsistent communication. These challenges reveal that inclusion requires deliberate institutional design, not just goodwill or interpersonal support. Moreover, students recomended structured supervision, clear tasks definition and diverse placement options as essential components of effective academic and internship experiences. Structured supervision provides the ongoing guidance and feedback necessary for students to develop competence and confidence in their roles. Clear task definitions eliminate ambiguity, enabling students to understand expectations, perform their responsibilities effectively, and experience the satisfaction of meaningful contribution.

Students pointed out facilitators were deeply relational and their connections were rooted in empathy, motivation, and institutional commitment. These relational facilitators created a support ecosystem enabling students to navigate challenges, develop identities as capable learners, and achieve outcomes extending beyond academics to include personal growth, social inclusion, and preparation for adult life. By triangulating the HiLives (2022) and Think College (2021) frameworks, this study translated international and European quality standards into practical and context-sensitive guidelines. These guidelines underscore eight pillars:

1. Strengthen individualized mentoring and advising systems.
2. Ensure accessibility and flexibility in teaching and assessment.
3. Foster social belonging and peer support structures.
4. Redesign physical and digital accessibility on campuses.
5. Structure internships with pre-placement training and consistent supervision.
6. Diversify internship opportunities and ensure relevance to student interests.
7. Sustain tools like PATH that promote self-determination and employment readiness.
8. Institutionalize student feedback mechanisms for continuous quality improvement.

Overall, this study contributes with an innovative and empirically grounded framework for HE institutions seeking to strengthen inclusive programs. It demonstrates that inclusion becomes real when universities move beyond compliance and embrace co-construction with students, when their experiences and emotions are not merely data, but directions for action. In conclusion, the voices of students with IDD invite HE to reimagine excellence through equity: a university that listens, adapts, and evolves alongside its learners, ensuring that diversity is not an exception to quality, but its very foundation.

Recommendations

This study highlights the need for HE institutions to incorporate inclusion as a strategic and transformative principle in all dimensions of teaching, policy-making and practice. Universities would benefit from integrating Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and person-centered planning into curricula, guidance and assessment systems, ensuring that support structures promote autonomy, emotional well-being, and self-determination among students with IDD. Faculty development programs should prioritize inclusive pedagogy, accessibility and flexible learning approaches that value diversity among students. Similarly, institutions should be able to collaborate with families, communities and employers to build sustainable pathways for transition from higher education to life after university, that can be related to have a job or other activities into community places. Ultimately, transforming student voices into actionable policies and practices will enable higher education to incorporate a model of excellence based on equity, participation and belonging.

Scientific Ethics Declaration

* The authors declare that the scientific ethical and legal responsibility of this article published in EPESS journal belongs to the authors.

* The research followed established the ethical principles for qualitative studies involving participants with disabilities. All participants provided informed consent and continuous assent during the process to ensure their willingness to remain involved. Personal data were anonymized, pseudonyms were used in all transcripts, and every precaution was taken to safeguard participants' privacy, dignity, and autonomy.

Conflict of Interest

* The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest

Funding

Acknowledgements or Notes

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To cite this article: