
Can students with an intellectual disability join in? Training university teachers to pursue inclusive higher education

Inclusion and inclusive education in Flanders

The process towards inclusion in Flanders was one that was framed by major international legislative shifts (e.g. UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Salamanca Declaration and Article 24 of the UN Convention). Following the ratification of the UN Convention in 2006, a decree was introduced in 2014 for primary education (also known as the M-decree) and the **support model for higher education** was introduced in 2017. Nevertheless, a legislative initiative is not enough to make inclusion a reality in practice because the public perception of people with a disability continues to play a major role in the perception of inclusion or inclusive (higher) education. On top of this, this perception is always in motion.

In the past, people with disabilities were often looked at from a medical point of view which revolved around the diagnosis of a person and not taking into account other factors, often leading to segregation. Today however, people with disabilities are looked at from a social point of view, in which they have equal rights to take part in society, leading to inclusion (United Nations, 2006). This is also known as the handicap creation model which states that a disability only exists through the interaction of personal and environmental factors (Fougeyrollas, 1995), which gives a broader interpretation of the term disability than the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) framework would do (World Health Organisation, 2001).

As a result of these legislative shifts, a whole process took place in education which is still ongoing. In accordance with article 24 of the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, stating that education at all levels should be accessible to people with disabilities, the Codex for Higher Education was published in 2013. The Codex defined the group of students with disabilities as follows:

‘students with long-term physical, mental or sensory impairments that may interact with various thresholds to prevent them from participating fully, effectively and on an equal footing with other students in higher education’
(Art. II.276 §3).

In addition, the Codex also states that students with disabilities must be treated in the same way as all other students and they are entitled to receive adequate support when needed. This support can consist of ‘reasonable accommodations’ for which the Codex also provides detailed descriptions and conditions (Art. II.276., §3). Ensuring inclusive education for all students is the responsibility of higher education institutions themselves.

Inclusive education – but not for people with intellectual disabilities?

As a result of this evolution towards inclusive higher education, the number of students with disabilities is constantly increasing in Flemish higher education (Cnockaert et al., 2010; Emmers, Mattys, Petry & Baeyens, 2015; SIHO, 2017). However, despite Belgium's commitment to ratify internationally binding conventions pursuing the importance of inclusion and inclusive education, as well as the many efforts made by the various higher education institutions, it can be noted that **Flemish higher education may not be as inclusive as one would like it to be**. There are still high drop-out rates, students experiencing study delays, and it appears that not every lecturer or professor is yet open to the idea of inclusion in higher education (Emmers, Baeyens & Petry, 2019). Lecturers in higher education also do not always feel ready to support students with disabilities, particularly those with intellectual disabilities. They know little about the consequences of disability and do not always know what support students with a disability need in practice (Alquraini, 2012; Hart, 2006;).

While many groups of students with disabilities are already struggling in higher education, there is one group that is particularly struggling, namely students with an **intellectual disability**. A student with an intellectual disability is characterised by

‘significant learning, cognitive, and other conditions (e.g., mental retardation), whose disability impacts their ability to access course content without a strong system of educational supports and services. These are not students who would access the postsecondary education system in a typical manner; rather, they require significant planning and collaboration to provide them with access. In addition, these students often exit secondary education with an alternative diploma instead of a typical high school diploma’ (Hart, 2006, p 2).

In line with the fact that this group of students is struggling, and possibly even more important, is the observation that this group of students is hardly present in the Flemish higher education (Cnockaert et al., 2010, Emmers et al., 2015). The lack of access to higher education for these students is regrettable since previous studies of post-secondary programmes have shown positive effects for students with intellectual disability not only in terms of emotional well-being, social skills and personal development (Hughson, Moodie & Uditsky, 2006) but also in terms of employment opportunities (Migliore, Butterworth & Hart, 2009). In addition, the positive effects of these programmes are not only limited to students with intellectual disabilities themselves, but the other students also experience positive effects, including experience in mentoring and coaching fellow students (Kleinert, Jones, Sheppard-Jones, Harp & Harrison, 2012).

Yet, the observation that students with intellectual disabilities do not (or hardly) participate in the Flemish higher education is not entirely illogical. It is striking that precisely this group of students is not mentioned by the Flemish Education Council, nor are these children and young people prepared for entry into higher education. In fact, they are often in special education where there is a clear break with regular education and therefore lacking guidelines and a legal framework with regard to access to higher education and receiving adequate support.

Call for Action

This lack of guidelines and advocacy around this group of students and the lack of a preparation process is in

sharp contrast to our international commitment to making inclusive education a reality and action is therefore called for. We need to focus on the accessibility of students with intellectual disabilities in higher education. Together with a powerful international network an Erasmus + project was written with the title: **TUT4IND** - Training University Teachers for the inclusion of students with Intellectual Disabilities.

The TUT4IND Project

This project has **three main objectives** that will be achieved in phases over the next three years to increase access for people with intellectual disabilities to higher education:

- **The first aim of the project** is to provide higher education teachers with the necessary information, knowledge and skills regarding students with intellectual disabilities, in such a way that they can modify their teaching and learning materials to the specific needs of this group of students. A specific training programme will be developed and tested for this purpose. A virtual learning environment will also be used to share experiences across different institutes and countries.
- **The second aim** is to make higher education generally more accessible and inclusive to students with intellectual disabilities.
- Finally, **the last aim of this project is** to create more employment opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities and thus making the labour market more accessible in this way.

In order to realise this project, a consortium was set up, consisting of 5 partner countries - Italy, Spain, Portugal, Serbia and Belgium - and a total of 8 partner organisations. The participating higher education institutions are: the University of Calabria and the University of Urbino (Italy), the University of Burgos (Spain), the Polytechnic institute of Braganca (Portugal) and the University College Leuven- Limburg (Belgium). In addition, other partner organisations were selected because of their existing knowledge, experience and expertise related to the topic. These organisations are located in Serbia (Fondacija hiljadu zelja) and in Spain (Fundacion Aspanias Burgos, and the Centro Regional de Servicios Avanzados).

A good start is already half a victory - a clear baseline

The first step in this project was **identifying the formative needs** of university and university college teachers, related to the teaching and learning process for people with intellectual disabilities in higher education environments. For this purpose, a short questionnaire was developed by international experts on inclusive higher education and translated into the national language of each partner country. The questionnaire included a number of demographic questions (such as previous experience in teaching students with intellectual disabilities, number of years of teaching experience, the perceived usefulness of a training programme), as well as questions aimed at the possible training needs of teachers. These specific questions were presented by the use of statements in which participants had to indicate, by using a 5-point Likert scale, to what extent they felt a need (or not) to receive training about the specific topic in the question. This questionnaire was sent out using an online platform and was addressed to the teaching staff of all higher education institutions within each partner country. Furthermore, a reminder was sent out, three weeks after sending out the first email.

So? How did Flanders do? Are we ready for inclusive higher education?

We tried to reach a variety of higher education institutions and received responses from 6 out of 17 different higher

education institutions. A total of 128 responses was received, from whom 45 were men and 80 were woman, with a mean age of 43 years and a mean professional experience of 11 years.

Previous experience with people with intellectual disabilities

One of the first questions posed was about the respondents' possible previous experiences in associating with people with intellectual disabilities. Results showed that the majority of the respondents (60%) had previous experiences with people with intellectual disabilities, either related to the work environment, family-environment or other environments, implying that 40% of the respondents had no previous experience or contact with people with intellectual disabilities.

Experience in teaching people with intellectual disabilities

Next, we asked about the teachers' previous experience in teaching students with intellectual disabilities. First of all, 15% of the total respondents indicated that they had already taught students with intellectual disabilities in an educational context other than higher education while 78% of the respondents indicated that they had never taught students with an intellectual disability before. In addition, a small number, 7%, of the total respondents indicated that they had previously taught students with an intellectual disability in higher education. Taking into consideration the fact that in Flanders no explicit framework and guidelines exist for the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities in higher education, this is a rather high percentage and should to be interpreted with caution.

Respondents were then asked about their **previous training to teach students with intellectual disabilities**. Notably, 90% of the respondents indicated that they had not received any previous training for this. 40% of the participants shared the opinion that such training could be useful for their further professional development. The other 60% had no opinion or wasn't convinced that this was important for their professional development. This lack of adequate training and skills has been previously identified as a possible barrier in realising inclusive education (Leyser et al., 2011; Martins, Borges & Goncalves, 2018) although this can also offer opportunities. After all, when training courses respond to the current needs of teachers, they can also have a positive impact on the attitudes of teachers, which in this way can contribute to a more inclusive learning environment (Murray, Lombardi, Wren & Keys, 2009; 2011).

Including students with intellectual disabilities at university

Finally, some questions were asked about the **teachers' opinions** regarding the presence of students with intellectual disabilities at university. The majority of the respondents (60%) indicated that they believe that students with intellectual disabilities can participate in higher education, with the use of support. This is a good indicator that higher education teachers are open to it and yet it is only a small indication of an open inclusive learning environment, as already prescribed by Booth and colleagues in 2002. He makes it clear that creating an inclusive learning environment (including in higher education) is based solely on an inclusive culture in which teachers believe that everyone is welcome and in which inclusive values are also paramount (Booth et al., 2002). However, only half of these respondents indicated that they also consider it useful to develop a university course for students with intellectual disabilities.

Educational needs

The second part of the questionnaire was related to specific training content in order to gather the professionals' perceptions about what skills they consider important for teaching people with intellectual disability. The topics were divided into 3 different categories and the top 3 of the most important training topics are listed below.

1. Cross-training information

- Conditions and information about the learning process in people with intellectual disabilities.
- Knowledge about intellectual disabilities (development and characteristics).
- Tools and methods of motivation.

2. Inclusive methodologies and didactics

- Types of support (services, tools, methods).
- Tools and methods of augmentative and alternative communication.
- Tools and methods of support and enhancement.

3. Specific information

- Study strategies specifically for students with intellectual disabilities.
- Development of social skills.
- Vocational orientation.

What can we learn from these results?

First of all, attention must be given to the fact that we only received a total of 126 responses, which is not representative of the complete teaching staff of the higher education institutions in Flanders. Also, the fact that 7% report having taught students with an intellectual disability in higher education needs to be interpreted with caution since a clear definition of what is meant with 'intellectual disabilities' was absent in this questionnaire.

Although in Flanders, the participation of students with disabilities is increasing in higher education, **students with intellectual disabilities remain underrepresented**. This finding is supported by the fact that only 7% of the respondents indicated that they have previously taught students with an intellectual disability at university and the fact that 90% indicated that they haven't received the necessary training to do so, which has been previously shown to be a possible obstacle to inclusion (Leyser et al., 2011; Martins et al., 2018)

Thus, to create a more inclusive environment for this group of students, it is necessary to provide university teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills, based on a needs-assessment as indicated in table 1.

However, when creating this staff development programme, it will be important to think about the ways in which the information will be provided, including practical workshops and activities that include students with intellectual disabilities. This is important for two reasons:

1. Studies have shown that participating in workshops leads to better results and attitudes compared to reading books and other sources of information (Murray, Lombardi & Wren, 2011).
2. Multiple contacts with students with intellectual disabilities can also contribute to more positive attitudes towards these students, also known as the contact hypothesis (MacMillan, 2014).

We also highly recommend and encourage teachers and higher education institutions to exchange their experiences or good practices with students with intellectual disabilities during and after the course.

In addition to providing university teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills, we also hope to **influence their attitudes** towards students with an intellectual disability. After all, 60 % of the total respondents were convinced that, with adequate support, people with intellectual disabilities could participate in higher education, but only 40% of the total respondents also considered it useful to develop a university course, accessible for students with intellectual disabilities, in order to make it possible for them to attend university. What is the use of potential, if one does not think realising it is worthwhile?

By providing teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge about students with intellectual disabilities and also trying to influence their attitudes towards these students, we can slowly build an inclusive learning environment as defined by Booth et al (2002) consisting an inclusive culture with positive attitudes towards students with intellectual disabilities; inclusive practices that are being highlighted and exchanged; an inclusive policy with specific guidelines and a framework for this group of students.

To conclude, the next steps in the TUT4IND project will consist of developing a pilot course for teachers, based on the results from the European questionnaire. The highest ranked training topics will be further developed into separate course elements with associated tasks and assignments. All partners will be encouraged to recruit volunteers who are willing to participate in the online learning course. At a later stage, a virtual learning environment will be created in order to make sure teachers from other institutions and countries will be able to share their experiences with each other.



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