

# Humanising the university to progress towards a more inclusive model. An approach from social pedagogy

## *Humanizar la universidad para transitar hacia un modelo más inclusivo. Una aproximación desde la pedagogía social*

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### Abstract:

Research in social pedagogy is situated within a methodological framework that must be consistent with the epistemological principles of the discipline. These include the premises from the classic approaches of critical pedagogies, as well as other more contemporary models that allow these postulates to be specified within the framework of current neoliberalism, such as post-feminist, inclusive, decolonial or common good pedagogies, among others. Taking these positions into account, we present a case study whose objective has been to analyse the elements that define the processes of inclusion of socioeconomically and culturally disadvantaged students in a university institution. The research is qualitative in nature and includes elements from ethnographic study designs. Forty-seven people from different groups in the university community took part in the study, using the in-depth interview as the central data production technique, as well as the field diary and a review of institutional documentation. Data analysis was carried out by coordinating a system of open, axial and selective coding. The final results obtained from the selective coding are defined in relation to seven themes: (1) otherness as the basis of discrimination and exclusion; (2) the positive and the threatening; (3) envisioning utopia and acting on reality; (4) university education as a liberating or banking praxis; (5) the university must be constituted as an inclusive space: from the adaptation of individuals to the transformation of the environment; (6) on groups and identities: labels, stigmatisation and visibilisation; (7) the representation of reality from the voices of the participants. The final considerations address two paradigms that define the institutional culture that underlies the definition of inclusive models: the claims of humanising the university or the university for excellence and the elite.

**Keywords:** social inequality, case study, inclusion, social justice, social pedagogy, educational policy, critical theory, university.

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## Resumen:

La investigación en pedagogía social se sitúa en un marco metodológico que debe ser coherente con los principios epistemológicos de la disciplina. Ello supone incluir las premisas de los planteamientos clásicos de las pedagogías críticas, así como otros modelos más contemporáneos que permiten concretar estos postulados en el marco del neoliberalismo actual, como las pedagogías posfeministas, inclusivas, decoloniales o del bien común, entre otras. Atendiendo a estos posicionamientos, se presenta un estudio de caso cuyo objetivo ha sido analizar los elementos que definen los procesos de inclusión del alumnado en situación de desventaja socioeconómica y cultural en una institución universitaria. La investigación es de naturaleza cualitativa e incluye elementos de los diseños etnográficos. En el estudio, han participado 47 personas de diferentes grupos de la comunidad universitaria. Como técnica central de producción de datos, se ha utilizado la entrevista en profundidad junto con el diario de campo y la revisión de documentación institucional. El análisis de datos se ha realizado coordinando un sistema de codificación abierta, axial y selectiva. Los resultados finales obtenidos a partir de la codificación selectiva se definen en relación con siete temas: (1) la otredad como base de la discriminación y la exclusión; (2) lo positivo y lo amenazante; (3) Proyectar en la utopía y actuar sobre la realidad; (4) la educación universitaria como praxis liberadora o bancaria; (5) la universidad se tiene que constituir como un espacio inclusivo: de la adaptación de las personas a la transformación del entorno; (6) sobre los grupos y las identidades: etiquetas, estigmatización y visibilización; (7) la representación de la realidad desde las voces de las personas participantes. Las consideraciones finales abordan dos paradigmas que definen la cultura institucional que subyace a la definición de los modelos inclusivos: las reivindicaciones de humanizar la universidad o la universidad para la excelencia y la élite.

**Palabras clave:** desigualdad social, estudio de casos, inclusión, justicia social, pedagogía social, política educacional, teoría crítica, universidad.

## 1. Introduction

The question of the identity of social pedagogy, as well as its foundations and dimensions, has been widely discussed among researchers in this field (Belando-Montoro et al., 2023). In this respect, one of the elements on which there seems to be a certain historical consensus is the importance of guaranteeing consistency between socio-educational praxis (including research) and the discipline's own epistemological principles.

Within the epistemological framework of social pedagogy, it is essential to transit through the principles of critical pedagogies, from the classic approaches of Freire (1974), which question the relations of privilege and power and the banking strategies of maintaining the status quo in favour of models with a dialogical, liberating and transformative orientation towards situations of oppression; to the more contemporary anti-fascist orientations that allow us to situate these approaches within the framework of current neo-liberalism, such as post-feminist, inclusive, decolonial or common good pedagogies, among others (Díaz, 2022).

With regard to the methodological frameworks that enable research processes to be tackled within the discipline itself, it is important to recognise research in the educational sciences as a form of study capable of transcending mere knowledge of what exists. Instead, it should be identified as something which enables the construction of socio-educational intervention processes' capacity to transform social, cultural and historical contexts (Belando-Montoro et al., 2023) and to establish new paths to connect academia and society (Sotelino-Losada et al., 2024). In this way, within the transformative orientation inherent to the discipline itself, it is essential that the researcher assume this task as "a political exercise in the production

of knowledge” (Brígida et al., 2021, p. 33) and accepts elements inherent to this process such as the importance of the unexpected or the non-existence of an objective reality of the world outside the observer within a post-qualitative research framework far removed from attempts to positivise, discipline and objectify qualitative research (Hernández-Hernández & Revelles, 2019).

Taking these epistemological and methodological frameworks into account, a case study is presented with the aim of analysing the elements that define the processes of inclusion of socio-economically and culturally disadvantaged students in a university setting.

This study is based on a concept of inclusion understood as a socio-educational model that takes as its starting point the concept of diversity as an inherently human characteristic and, therefore, as a value. Drawing on this model, socio-educational processes with a transformative orientation are enacted based on the human right to education and on the principles of equity and social justice, whose ultimate aim is to break the circle of reproduction of social inequality. In this sense, inclusive models must be based on critical pedagogy (García-Berrera, 2023) and consider historical traditions of discrimination, structural factors and identity markers in the production and perpetuation of inequalities (Artiles, 2025).

In relation to the idea of *diversity* that underlies these models, it is important to note that it is a somewhat problematic concept. Although the word is conceptualised as an inherent characteristic of the human condition, it demands recognition of the premise that there are certain non-hegemonic identity characteristics that translate into inequalities. It is therefore essential to assume a certain caution in the use of this term so as not to fall into the traps of discourses that deny structural inequality, which hold that all people are diverse and, therefore, nothing needs to be done, except perhaps rare and highly targeted interventions to address specific and concrete needs (Naranjo-Crespo, 2024).

Another critical point in the approach to inclusion processes, and one which justifies the methodological decisions presented below, has to do with the personal vision of reality (Freire, 1974), which implies that actions oriented towards apparently laudable ends are based on the vision of the world of the person who carries those actions out (who usually has a hegemonic identity), without considering the vision of the people towards whom the action is directed. The latter are the people who have the best possible view of the situation.

Finally, the study emphasises the dimension of culture, since, although institutional actions (both in their political and practical dimensions) are susceptible to change with greater or lesser ease, culture is linked to other structural elements such as ideology, hegemony and power, whose transformation towards the principles of equity and social justice is neither simple nor immediate.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Design

This study was conducted with a qualitative framework, involving a post-qualitative view. The study design had practically no adherence to the study processes of the neo-positivist and standardised perspectives of research (Hernández-Hernández & Revelles, 2019). Within this paradigm, the research process has included elements of ethnographic designs.

In keeping with the purpose of the research, as well as with the critical epistemological framework in which the study is located, a commitment has been made to conduct research on inclusion with a foundation on inclusive models. It is therefore essential that the design allows the research participants to have a voice, as these people are the ones who have the more complete view of the reality being studied. This lets a representation of the social unit being studied to be generated through the eyes of the participants.

Another of the aspects that justify this decision is the concern that the chosen design should allow for the construction of meanings along one of the dimensions that are considered

key to the study of inclusion processes in university institutions: culture. In this regard, Hammersley and Atkinson (2009) highlight the power of this method to capture meanings about daily human actions and to understand “the meaning that gives form and content to social processes” (p. 1).

## 2.2. Context and participants

The research was carried out in the Faculty of Education of a public university in Madrid, Spain between 2018 and 2024. We note that this study was conducted over the course of two rectoral terms. Participants were selected via a non-probabilistic purposive sampling, as described in (Hernández et al., 2019). Care was taken to ensure that a wide variety of voices from the community under study was represented, as well as to include participants who could provide expert views due to their links with the institutional structures for inclusion at this university or because they have faced situations of disadvantage in the university setting. Thus, 47 people from the university community volunteered and were accepted as participants (Table 1).

TABLE 1. Participants from the university community.

Group	Subgroup	Interview code
Institutional leaders (9)	Rectoral team leaders (2)	E_RTL_H_01
		E_RTL_M_02
	Administrative leaders (4)	E_AL_M_01
		E_AL_M_02
		E_AL_M_03
		E_AL_M_04
	Student leaders (3)	E_SL_M_01
		E_SL_M_02
		E_SL_M_03
Teaching and research staff - TRS (11)	Department of Research and Psychology in Education (3)	E_TRS_M_01
		E_TRS_M_02
		E_TRS_M_03
	Department of Language Teaching, Art and Physical Education (2)	E_TRS_M_04
		E_TRS_H_05
	Department of Educational Studies (2)	E_TRS_M_06
		E_TRS_M_07
	Department of Applied Sociology (2)	E_TRS_M_08
		E_TRS_H_09
	Department of Didactics of Experimental, Social and Mathematical Sciences (2)	E_TRS_M_10
		E_TRS_H_11

Technical management, administration and services staff - TMASS (4)	Management (1)	E_TMASS_H_01
	Administration departments faculty (1)	E_TMASS_M_02
	Administration assistant faculty (vice-dean's office and secretariat) (2)	E_TMASS_M_03
		E_TMASS_M_04
Students - Faculty of Education (14)	PhD (2)	E_STUD_H_01
		E_STUD_M_02
	Master (2)	E_STUD_M_03
		E_STUD_M_04
	Undergraduate and double degree (10)	E_STUD_M_05
		E_STUD_M_06
		E_STUD_H_07
		E_STUD_H_08
		E_STUD_M_09
		E_STUD_H_10
		E_STUD_M_11
		E_STUD_M_12
		E_STUD_H_13
		E_STUD_M_14
International mobility students from the Faculty of Education (4)	Master (2)	E_INTER_M_01
		E_INTER_M_02
	PhD (2)	E_INTER_H_03
		E_INTER_M_04
Associations with a presence in the Faculty of Education (3)	Association (1)	Association
	Student associations (2)	Student association 1
		Student association 2
Other (2)	University professor with links to the Spanish political sphere	University professor - national political
	Dean of the Faculty of Education from a foreign university (research stay at the faculty)	International university dean

### 2.3. Data production techniques

The interview is conceived of in this study as something beyond its traditional role as technique or instrument. Here it constitutes the cornerstone of the entire research process. As a starting point, the interview protocols for TRS, TMASS, students, social actors and institutional

leaders described in García-Cano et al. (2021a, 2021b, 2021d, 2021e, 2021f) have been used. These protocols have been adapted to the context of this particular study based on a review of the institution's documentation on diversity and inclusion (see data analysis techniques below) following the document analysis protocol of García-Cano et al. (2021c). Thus, we obtained a final interview protocol divided into three blocks according to three major classes and ten categories of analysis:

1. Conceptions: Recognition of differences and social justice; Equity of opportunities and equal opportunities; Individual and group actions; Adaptive actions and actions for institutional transformation; and Constraints on current conceptions.
2. Attitudes: Socio-educationally disadvantaged groups; and Educational access, retention, participation and attainment.
3. Alignment with the institutional conception: Alignment between personal and institutional discourse; Inclusion in the institution; and Responsibilities to or within the institution.

In addition, a field diary or *hypomnemata* was used, which made it possible to collect not only elements directly related to the data production process, but also everyday elements that warranted further elaboration due to their relationship with the point in time during the study.

The interviews were audio-recorded and all personal data obtained were processed in accordance with Spanish Organic Law 3/2018, of 5 December, on the Protection of Personal Data and the guarantee of digital rights. All participants signed an informed consent form prior to the interview.

## 2.4. Data analysis techniques

The analysis of the institutional documents as they relate to the interview protocols is based on an axial coding system. The definition of the categories and subcategories of the documentary analysis was based on a review of the international literature linked to university policy on the inclusion of socio-economically and culturally disadvantaged students in university settings:

1. Protected characteristics: ethnicity, language, socio-economic status, migrant background, religion or creed.
2. Motivation towards inclusion: university initiative, legal imperative.
3. Type of document: comprehensive plan, specific plan or protocol.
4. Level of action: university, faculty of education.

The analysis of the interviews was carried out by creating an open and axial coding system. The initial parameters of the axial coding system are related to the families and categories of the final interview protocol (see data production techniques). This axial coding system was appropriately redefined throughout the data production phase, starting from the open coding that was carried out in order to identify emerging categories and subcategories. The final system of themes and categories from which the interviews were analysed is as follows:

- Discourses and perspectives towards diversity and inclusion: concept of diversity, attitudes towards inclusion and institutional concept of diversity.
- Inclusion policies and practices: motivation towards inclusion, institutional organisational chart for inclusion, actions for inclusion, participation in actions for inclusion.
- Proposals for transformation: priorities for action and emerging issues, barriers and facilitators, institutional recognition, proposals.

Finally, a selective or third-level coding system was developed around seven themes to produce the results of the study. Those themes were:

1. Otherness as a basis for discrimination and exclusion.
2. The positive and the threatening.
3. Envisioning utopia and acting on reality.
4. University education as a liberating or banking praxis.
5. The University must be constituted as an inclusive space: from the adaptation of people to the transformation of the environment.
6. On groups and identities: labels, stigmatisation and visibilisation. Challenges ahead.
7. The representation of reality from the voices of the participants. Limitations.

### 3. Results and discussion

#### 3.1. Otherness as the basis of discrimination and exclusion

The first result drawn from the study is that otherness is the basis of discrimination and exclusion. Although this premise has been widely discussed in research within the framework of critical pedagogies, outside this epistemological framework there is a certain denial. The basic line of the denialist argument is that all people are diverse and, therefore, there is no discrimination towards non-normative identities, because the norm does not exist, only diversity (Sánchez, 2019). The coarsest form of this argument is that discrimination and exclusion towards non-normative identities is justified by arguing that people who hold these identities should renounce them and assimilate the hegemonic normative identity.

One element to highlight at this point is that, insofar as otherness is established on the basis of a dialectical relationship with the norm, if the norm depends on the context, so does otherness. In this sense, although the social sphere and the educational sphere are permeable (Artiles, 2025), based on the interviews, a case has been identified in another university context in which the identities that are configured as hegemonic in the social sphere were not hegemonic in the educational sphere. This is specifically in the public universities of Israel. In an interview with an institutional leader in the Faculty of Education of a public university in that country who was in Spain on a research stay, that administrator stated the following:

In Israel, for example, I tell you openly, if in a classroom the absolute majority are Arab students, the Jewish boys and girls, which is the only place in Israel where they are going to feel like a minority, and they are going to hear them talking to each other in Arabic and not in Hebrew, although they know Hebrew, but that is not their natural language, they are going to feel like what is going on here, what is going on with the university, etc. (International university dean)

Having identified this element in the interviews, a bibliographic search was carried out on studies in the Spanish context that had used a similar methodology and obtained similar results. A study by Gallego-Noche et al. (2021) on the perception of discrimination in eight Spanish universities, with a focus on the student body, was identified. Among the main conclusions, they point out that almost half of the students who feel discriminated against feel this way for more than one reason. Among the identities highlighted, one group stands out: being right-wing politically, Catholic and with a high income. As the authors point out, these are hegemonic values in Spanish society. In this sense, it is possible that, despite the broadly dominant position of these values in Spain, these identities are not hegemonic in Spanish public universities. This allows us to assess the possibility that normality or otherness may be signified in relation to a certain context that does not necessarily have to be consonant with the wider social circumstances.

### 3.2. The positive and the threatening

The second result, closely linked to the first, is that a distinction can be made within the identities that are on the other side of the norm. On the one hand, it is possible to differentiate between identities that are usually associated with positive signifiers (diversity as a value), and on the other hand there are identities that are not only considered a defect, but are even attributed threatening connotations in view of the possibility that the normative identities could lose their hegemony. Among the former, functional diversities have been identified, especially sensory and motor diversities. In the case of intellectual disabilities and learning difficulties, this is not the case. As pointed out by one of the associations interviewed: “[At the university] they talked about diversity, but of course, it is a very specific diversity of this group, right?”

Among the identities that are seen as threatening, cultural diversities stand out, especially those linked to migration and ethnicity (Gallego-Noche et al., 2021; Goenechea et al., 2020; Martínez et al., 2024). On these threatening identities, there is an extract from an interview with an institutional leader that stands out:

I think that in every country there really are groups that people and politics and budgets help because there is a goal, a socially appropriate goal, etc. But there are other cultural or religious groups that, even if they are offered help, there is not an attitude that really embraces them, brings them in... they are not really welcome [...]. Many times, when we say “We would like these groups to assimilate, to integrate, to include them...”, what we really want is to change them, for them to stop being so different and to be like us, like the majority, quote unquote [...]. There is a question of who we really want, who we want to open our doors to and who we want to accept and include, and who we would like to come, but in certain numbers, in certain proportions [...]. I think the threat is the feeling that the majorities who have always had the power and access to education and wealth, etc., feel threatened. They feel threatened, in my opinion, at the level of identity, not only economically, of what is going to happen when these groups begin to fill our social groups. (International university dean)

In the case of socio-economic diversity, the pandemic has changed the rules. The fact that the process of collecting information began prior to that event has made it possible to see how situations of disadvantage associated with social and economic aspects have become highly visible from that moment onwards. This is undoubtedly a very positive sign, since, as has been pointed out in some of the interviews, the Pandemic has shed light on situations that existed previously but were largely out of view, and made it easier to take action for these groups. Note this interview comment:

It seems that everyone has a computer, that everyone has access to WiFi and that's not true. There are many students who don't have that kind of help, sometimes not even a place to study at home. We are detecting types of problems that I think we had once thought about, [...] that are now coming to the surface much more. (E\_AL\_M\_04)

However, this fact also shows that when certain situations affect (or may affect) people with hegemonic identities (and not only the population of the third and fourth world) actions are taken immediately and without prior debate to question them, unlike actions aimed at groups with non-hegemonic identities, which are questioned to protect the gulf between the group identities of *us* and *them* (Curren, 2023). Beyond the university and educational sphere, this has also been observed at the social level, as can be seen when we compare the discourses on the reality of refugees arriving in Spain or the European Union. In this case, the reality of refuge experienced during this time has made it clear how people who have come from other parts of Europe represent that close *us*, while those who continue to come from Africa or Latin America represent the threatening *them*.

### 3.3. Envisioning utopia and acting on reality

The third result can be defined almost as a learning process constructed during the research that answers the question *how to move towards an inclusive university model?* The answer has two parts:



1. Envisioning utopia: what is an inclusive university?, what processes of institutional (and even educational and social) transformation would have to take place to move towards an inclusive university model?
2. Acting on reality: what can be done (from the current institutional or personal reality) to move towards an inclusive university model?

These two levels are articulated on the basis of a dialectical relationship in which utopia allows us to direct our gaze towards what we wish to achieve, and while accepting that this ideal is unattainable, there are no limits when defining utopia. Reality, on the contrary, does have defined characteristics that demarcate the limits of actions. Therefore, utopia is necessary to project the ideal model and outline the path that leads to it, and reality is essential to specify the actions that will allow progress along that path. These actions, moreover, should not only be thought of in terms of institutional policies, but from a broader perspective that includes any action that can be taken by any person or group in the community. An example of this is an everyday action such as that of a Social Education student who, with the aim of improving the classroom climate, decided to bring to class “an omelette and a glass of wine” to celebrate his birthday. Or, as another Social Education student interviewed pointed out, “inclusion can hardly be promoted if we are not friends, or if we don’t know each other, or if we don’t have any bonds. And if we can’t organise ourselves to demand this inclusion”.

### 3.4. University education as a liberating or banking praxis

The fourth result reflects the tensions involved in talking about inclusion in the university context. Álvarez-Castillo et al. (2021) highlight that at least two purposes can be identified in the university that do not have the same value: “those of the market, of a hegemonic nature, and those of diversity, of a subaltern type” (p. 8). In this sense, it is important to differentiate between genuine actions that are guided by a view that understands education as a liberating praxis, and those that, under a discourse of apparent good intentions, remain in a banking vision of education (Freire, 1974).

Fostering this type of discourse is one of the main barriers to advancing toward an inclusive university model. It prevents any possibility of change under the protection of a discourse in which, although what is expected is to maintain the *status quo*, the stated aim is to transmit that work is being done to change the state of affairs (Naranjo-Crespo, 2024). In this way, it is justified that there is no need to change anything else, but simply to continue working along already existing lines and to respond to specific situations as they arise, without acknowledging that inequalities and barriers associated with certain identity characteristics do exist:

The barriers I think are first of all. The barriers of thought, the invisibility of certain diversities, that it seems that it is not necessary, that it seems that why are we going to... if it is already obvious that, I don't know, that they can get married. Or it is obvious that there are churches that protect different cultures. Or it is obvious that there is a law on dependency. It seems like there are things that are obvious and it is not necessary to make certain things visible. (E\_TRS\_M\_07)

### 3.5. The university must be constituted as an inclusive space: From the adaptation of people to the transformation of the environment.

The fifth result implies a change of perspective when identifying situations that generate discrimination and exclusion, as well as taking action to reverse them. It is common that, when faced with this type of scenario, there is a tendency to more or less consciously attribute *blame* (Díez, 2022; O'Shea et al., 2016) to the people or groups experiencing these situations, or, in the best of cases, to their personal or social condition. However, institutions still need to question whether or not the institutional environment (from the physical elements to the culture) is supportive for all people (not just some or most) and allows them to proceed with their education in conditions of equity.

This institutional transformation can be accomplished in two ways. Consistent with the principles of the inclusive paradigm itself, the ideal path would be a process in which the whole community participates in a system of dialogical relationships. However, as highlighted in previous paragraphs, in order to move towards an inclusive university model, it is necessary to envision utopia and act on reality. And the reality is that today, although there are ways for the entire university community to participate in decision-making processes, actions with the capacity to impact the entire educational community are still carried out in a system of vertical relationships headed by university leadership. A notable element in this second framework of vertical relations is the presence of people with identities that have traditionally been excluded from leadership positions in the institution, although it is somewhat controversial because it confronts the recognised principle of meritocracy (Turner et al., 2017). These identities may include LGBTQIA+ people, migrants, people of colour, people with intellectual disabilities, women, etc. The presence of people with these identities would contribute, albeit from an equally vertical system, to this change of perspective, as these people are the ones who have an especially clear view of what it means to experience these situations of exclusion and discrimination: "If we talk about cultural diversities, if I talk about ethnicity..., then no. It will have to be people of colour, people who have suffered the oppressions of being treated differently on account of race, who will speak (E\_TRS\_M\_07).

### 3.6. On groups and identities: Labels, stigmatisation and visibilisation. Remaining challenges

The sixth result is related to the pending challenges in educational praxis. When talking about groups and identities, there is a gap that prevents us from clearly determining whether these types of labels make realities visible or stigmatise people:

Sometimes labels are necessary to make realities visible [...]. Labels serve to make their existence evident, they are made visible and other people can identify with them. There are people for whom labels are a great help in the construction of their identity and others for whom they are not necessary at all. It should not be forgotten that people are more important than the labels they put on themselves and that the personal desire to use them or not should be respected.

[Moreover], reference groups can be constituted by nothing more than the wishes of their members, but they may also be designated from outside, ignoring the self-identification of each person. (Delegación del Rector para la Diversidad e Inclusión de la UCM, 2021, pp. 40, 57)

For all these reasons, only two partial results are provided on the subject addressed, which can guide future actions in the framework of both educational practice and research:

1. There is a problem of under-representation of certain groups within the university institution, both in the student body and in the teaching and research staff, and especially in leadership positions:

It is true that the university community is becoming more and more diverse, there are fewer and fewer barriers to access, but it is still squarely a minority. And that means that the profiles of the teams that make decisions are biased from the outset. (E\_SL\_M\_02)

2. This problem of under-representation in turn generates a lack of literature and of complete and updated statistics that provide a comprehensive view of the problem.

### 3.7. The representation of reality from the voices of the participants. Limitations.

The seventh result relates to the limitations of the study and the idea of representation of reality. From the beginning of the study, we have been aware of the fact that the representation of reality mediated by the research process is not the same as the reality itself. It is therefore important to stress that the results presented here only reflect the voices of the people who took part, not of the entire university community. Furthermore, it should be borne in mind that

most of the people who agreed to participate had an interest in the issue of inclusion in the university environment, from different perspectives and with varying levels of knowledge. Those who were not interested in these issues either declined the invitation or simply did not answer.

In addition, part of the information collection process was affected by the covid-19 pandemic, so that both the contact to request participation and the interview process were often carried out online. This has especially limited contact with TMASS and international students, as it has only been possible to contact people with whom there was already a preexisting relationship or with contacts obtained through the snowballing technique. On the question of having to conduct part of the interviews online, although only the audio was recorded, the researcher deemed it important to conduct the interviews in audiovisual format in order to try to generate a space for dialogue that was as human as possible despite the boundary of the screen.

## 4. Final considerations

The study duration of over more than four years has run parallel to awareness-raising exercises (Freire, 1974) about the research topic that has been reflected in the field diary or *hypomnemata*. The field diary and the results obtained from the interviews have contributed to the understanding of the powerful impact of the ideology of normality in defining situations of inclusion and exclusion, in relation both to the experiences lived in first person as a woman and, especially, to others lived in third person as a pedagogue who during this period worked with adolescents and young unaccompanied migrants.

By transferring the understanding of these situations to university contexts, it has been concluded that, although not all situations of inequality remain in all their dimensions (presence, retention, participation or educational achievement), the fact that certain groups have reached the milestone of accessing university studies does not mean that inequalities associated with certain identities cease to exist (Belando-Montoro et al., 2022). Therefore, it is both difficult and dangerous to accept denialist discourses around the existence of these types of inequalities, discourses which often draw from the paradigm of meritocracy and equal opportunities (Díez, 2022). These discourses define diversity from the mere recognition of difference, denying the existence of barriers associated with certain identities under the premise that all people are diverse and, therefore, nothing needs to be done (Sánchez, 2019); perhaps actions aimed at resolving the specific and concrete needs of each person would be permissible, but in no case would actions with a transformative orientation to ensure equity and social justice be acceptable (Naranjo-Crespo, 2024). Furthermore, it has been observed how certain situations of exclusion and even violence against people with identity characteristics that are *on the other side of the norm* can be legitimised (Díez, 2022) and lead to a situation of total defencelessness for those who suffer them.

One of the central points of the study that has been most difficult to define has been to conclude what we mean when we say diversity. However, in January 2021, in an interview with an international student, a spontaneous response was obtained from the researcher in response to a question that allowed us to narrow down this concept:

In the end, I have understood that diversity is the norm, or at least that's the idea that has stayed with me. Yes, I couldn't say it any other way: in the end diversity is the norm. We are all different in some way. But it is true that there are differences that have a series of associated disadvantages, either because we are women, or because we come from more complicated family backgrounds. But well, in short, difference is the norm in the end, what happens is that sometimes that diversity is linked to situations of inequality, I think. (Author)

About a month later, the return of another question from a teacher brought to light one of the major challenges linked to this issue:

People are very concerned about political correctness and I don't know if that somehow leads to the fact that there are things that are not only not made visible, but that people don't even think about them [...]. So the most striking thing is that it is not something that remains to be done, it is something that is not even thought about [...] nothing can be done until it is thought that it is a situation that is happening. (Author)

Along with the meanings of the concept of diversity, this study revealed that the underlying question behind the definition and articulation of inclusion processes has to do with institutional culture (Boonzaier & Mkhize, 2018), which can be concretised from two approaches present both in the context of the study and at the macro-contextual level.

The first approach, in the words of a participant in the study, can be defined as “excellence and elite: authentic, unique and exquisite”:

There are professors who are against, to be clear, that this whole idea of opening up more, of including more, of making it more accessible. [His personal name] is wrong. The university was not created for that; they should go to another type of institution. The university is for academic excellence [...]. There are professors who are reluctant and antagonistic to this idea of, well, let's open up. The threat they feel is to the academic level: we are too flexible and we are losing the authentic, the unique and the exquisite. I often tell them to take into account that when they are talking it is because they are part of this elite, they are part of this elite that wants to reproduce itself. (International university dean)

In contrast to this approach, other voices interviewed brought up difficulties, support, challenges, proposals, etc., which basically had to do with a demand to humanise the university. These people highlighted such basic issues as going up to teachers simply because they knew their names or because they were not afraid of them (and this reminded them of their favourite teachers at school). Or feeling fortunate because “between missing work and missing classes, I'm managing to do everything the way I wanted: to have enough money to be able to afford the degree and to be able to dedicate enough time to be able to pass the subjects” thanks to the support of their bosses and some of the teachers. As for the ways in which they propose to humanise the university, giving participants the opportunity to come up with situations that fall somewhere between the more realistic and the more utopian, led to responses that ranged from “hippie faculty week” to “having parties” to “having an omelette and a glass of wine to celebrate my birthday”. More practical proposals were also made, such as creating welcome and reception spaces, establishing collaborative relationships between different stakeholders and making good practices visible; building multi-religious spaces; creating mentoring, tutoring and guidance figures; as well as other actions aimed at improving the sense of belonging to the university and opportunities for participation, such as giving more voice to the student body or improving the visibility of activities, services, procedures and associations.

These responses, together with other elements of analysis, led to the conclusion that both the elements that define the institution and those that have the capacity to transform it are part of the culture, because culture runs to and through the rest of the elements that make up the university community: leadership, curriculum, training, actions for equity (or lack thereof), etc. Furthermore, as culture is a transversal element that cuts across the entire university community, if there is a sincere desire to move towards an inclusive university model, the process of institutional transformation must be participatory and horizontal. Otherwise, actions with more or less impact will continue to be fostered, but they will be insufficient to transform the paradigm that underlies any type of action.

## Author's contributions

**María Naranjo-Crespo:** Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Resources; Validation; Visualization; Writing (original draft); Writing (review & editing).

## Artificial Intelligence (AI) Policy

The authors do not claim to have made use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the preparation of their articles.

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