

Narratives of graduates with disabilities on key factors that promote university success

Narrativas de graduados con discapacidad sobre factores claves que promueven el éxito universitario

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to explore, from the perspectives of graduates with disabilities, the concept of university success and the factors that determine it. A narrative methodology was used and two semi-structured interviews were conducted among 30 Spanish and Italian graduates from 18 public universities. The data obtained were analysed through a system of categories and codes, using the qualitative software MAXQDA. The results show that success was defined as a subjective concept, closely linked to each individual's university experience. It is characterised by its multifaceted nature, due to the influence of both internal and external factors. Among the former, self-concept, self-determination, self-efficacy and resilience were highlighted. These were skills that enabled graduates with disabilities to persist and overcome obstacles throughout their university pathway. In terms of external factors, the importance of the support received from the close environment, such as family and partners, as well as from the university context, including classmates, faculty members, disability offices and service staff, was mentioned. The role of psychologists as a source of external support was also highlighted. In light of these findings, the conclusions emphasise that understanding the university success of graduates with disabilities is essential for educational institutions to promote it and, in turn, contribute to reducing dropout rates and improving inclusion policies. Given that each student experiences a different university journey, with different needs, circumstances and ways of understanding success, it is necessary for educational policies to be flexible and able to adapt to this diversity.

Keywords: success, university, disability, graduates, qualitative methodology

RESUMEN

Este artículo tiene como objetivo explorar, desde las perspectivas de graduados con discapacidad, el concepto de éxito universitario y los factores que lo determinan. Para ello, se utilizó una metodología narrativa y se llevaron a cabo dos entrevistas semiestructuradas. Para ello, se utilizó una metodología narrativa y se llevaron a cabo dos entrevistas semiestructuradas a 30 graduados españoles e italianos de 18 universidades públicas. Los datos obtenidos se analizaron mediante un sistema de categorías y códigos, utilizando el software cualitativo MAXQDA. Los resultados muestran que el éxito universitario se definió como un concepto subjetivo, estrechamente vinculado a la experiencia universitaria de cada individuo. Este se caracteriza por su naturaleza multifacética, debido a que influyen factores tanto internos como externos. Entre los primeros se destacaron el autoconcepto, la autodeterminación, la autoeficacia y la resiliencia. Estos fueron habilidades que permitieron a los graduados con discapacidad persistir y superar obstáculos a lo largo de la trayectoria universitaria. En cuanto a los factores externos, se subrayó la importancia del apoyo recibido del entorno cercano, como familia y parejas, así como del contexto universitario, incluyendo compañeros de curso, profesorado, oficinas de apoyo y personal de servicio. También se destacó el papel de los psicólogos como fuente de apoyo externo. A la luz de estos hallazgos, las conclusiones enfatizan que comprender el éxito universitario de los graduados con

discapacidad es esencial para que las instituciones educativas lo promuevan y, a su vez, contribuyan a reducir las tasas de abandono y a mejorar las políticas de inclusión. Dado que cada estudiante vive una trayectoria universitaria distinta, con necesidades, circunstancias y formas de entender el éxito propias, se hace necesario que las políticas educativas sean flexibles y capaces de adaptarse a esta diversidad.

Palabras clave: éxito, universidad, discapacidad, graduados, metodología cualitativa

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, higher education has become increasingly important in individual development and society. In Spain and Italy, an increasing number of people are choosing to continue their education after secondary school, pursuing university degrees (CRUE, 2024; MUR, 2022). Reports from Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries highlight that approximately half of students in compulsory education subsequently continue into higher education. However, one third of university students interrupt their studies without obtaining a degree (OECD, 2022). This situation underlines the need to prevent dropout rates in higher education institutions, especially with people with disabilities, and to promote university success (Pais et al., 2024).

The World Health Organisation defines disability as the result of the interaction between physical, psychological, intellectual and sensory limitations, along with internal and external factors such as physical barriers, negative attitudes and limited social support (WHO, 2002). Given the diverse needs and the lack of adequate academic responses to the diversity of students, it is noteworthy that in the two contexts explored in this study, Spain and Italy, people with disabilities have lower pass rates (Bellacicco & Parisi, 2021) and significantly higher dropout rates (ONPEGE, 2021). It is crucial that universities not only facilitate access but also promote the progress and success of their students (Moriña & Biagiotti, 2021).

Recent studies, such as that of Guez et al. (2024), underline the importance of fostering inclusion and developing a culture and an academic and social environment accessible to all. However, although Spain and Italy have made progress in this regard, not all students succeed at university (Bellacicco & Parisi, 2021; Santos et al., 2019). This is because, while regulatory frameworks have promoted egalitarian education, their implementation alone is not enough to ensure a fully inclusive university experience. Inclusion is a social process that involves the entire educational community (Ainscow & Viola, 2023).

This study aims to give a voice to a group that has often been silenced, focusing on the experiences of successful graduates with disabilities. The goal is to involve them in the construction of new definitions of success. As Bostock (2014) points

out, it is necessary to break away from traditional conceptions that tend to exclude and marginalise certain populations. However, the redefinition of university success should not be imposed by researchers; instead, it should reflect the perspectives of people with disabilities (Moriña & Van der Mel, 2025). Recognising their epistemic agency will lead to a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of university success.

Definition of the concept

Research on success defines it as a multifaceted, subjective, complex and dynamic concept, as its perception varies according to students lived university experience (Moriña & Biagiotti, 2021; Nail, 2024; Russak & Hellwing, 2019). For example, graduates with disabilities in Russak and Hellwing's (2019) study indicate that, for some, success is defined as being able to pursue something they are passionate about and competent in, or as a process of self-acceptance. On the other hand, Nail (2024) points out that a prerequisite for success is the ability to adapt to new challenges and the university environment and to develop strategies to overcome obstacles. However, for others, it is more linked to measurable outcomes, such as getting good grades or obtaining a degree (Pais et al., 2024). The simple fact of being a student or having decided to start a university degree can be seen as a success (Fernández-Menor et al., 2024). From a different perspective, the study by Solis-Grant et al. (2023) highlights that success is not only understood as completing university studies. It also encompasses the opportunity to engage in social experiences that arise along the academic pathway. As Moriña and Van der Mel (2025) point out, graduates value establishing friendships with their peers, building a support network, and developing a sense of belonging to the university community.

The support received from faculty members, and other university staff plays a crucial role in staying and completing studies. However, for this acceptance and support to be truly effective, university institutions need to understand their students' preferences, abilities, and academic goals upon entry, as emphasised by Santos et al. (2019). These considerations are particularly important during one of the most vulnerable phases of the academic journey: the first year of university. In this regard, the model proposed by Tinto and Pusser (2006) offers a theoretical framework that explains how inclusive environments, combined with institutional support for disability and social inclusion, can positively influence student learning and success, especially during the first year.

Finally, research on success in higher education also examines which internal and external factors influence university success (Moriña & Biagiotti, 2021; Römhild & Holleder, 2023). However, because the perception of success is so subjective, it is

challenging to determine definitively which factors are most relevant (Fleming et al., 2017).

Internal factors

Internal factors are defined as elements associated with the personal dimension of the student and are skills that they bring with them to university and which tend to consolidate as they progress in their pathway (Goegan & Daniels, 2020). These include self-determination, self-advocacy, self-discipline, self-esteem and self-knowledge (Moriña & Biagiotti, 2021). Moreover, students' satisfaction with their university pathway is closely related to the development of these skills (Fleming et al., 2017). As a result, recent research underscores the importance of universities fostering these competences, as strengthening them can reduce the risk of academic dropout (Nail, 2024). This study aims to explore those internal factors that have empowered students with disabilities to persist and thrive at university.

In this regard, other studies such as that of Bellacicco and Parisi (2021) have explored the qualities that enabled graduates to remain steadfast in the face of challenges, set clear objectives, be proactive, make decisions, have confidence in their abilities and be resilient. The international literature indicates that graduates perceive a significant change compared to their previous educational stage, necessitating the development of autonomous functioning within the university setting. This transition involves learning to advocate for oneself and developing effective strategies for requesting services that respond to their specific needs arising from their disability (Malinovskiy et al., 2023). This perception is also reflected in the study by Moriña and Martins (2024), which demonstrates that it is precisely at university that students are most required to take greater responsibility for managing their time and tasks while also seeking support.

In summary, the university experience is framed as an opportunity for growth that extends beyond academics, facilitating the holistic development of the individual (Nail, 2024).

External factors

External factors play a crucial role in the support networks that students with disabilities develop within their immediate environment. These networks encompass family, partners, friends, peers, faculty members, disability offices, and professionals outside the university (Hazan-Liran & Walter, 2024; McKinney & Swartz, 2022). This perspective finds support with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model, which illustrates how human development is influenced by the

interaction between individuals and their surroundings. This article demonstrates that student success depends not only on their capabilities but also on their ability to engage with their environment and develop a supportive and understanding social network that enhances their inclusion and well-being (Römhild & Holleder, 2023).

Students with disabilities recognise that support from family and partners is essential in that they offer four types of support: academic, financial, moral and social (McKinney & Swartz, 2022). This disability support mustn't limit the person's autonomy as they must learn to make their own decisions and develop their independence (Boughton et al., 2023). Although family support meets most needs, students also seek support from their peers, as they want to experience social participation and inclusion inside and outside the university (Vaccaro et al., 2015). Peers play a significant role in this regard and are noted for their help in setting academic goals and accessing study material. Friends, on the other hand, offer them moral support, encouraging them and being willing to listen and advise them (Vaccaro et al., 2015).

In other cases, students with disabilities have reported that faculty, disability offices and service staff have provided them with support, accommodations, understanding and have acted to help them succeed (Hazan-Liran & Walter, 2024). However, as Moriña and Martins (2024) warn, having these services available is not enough if students do not have the knowledge and capacity to request them promptly. Furthermore, the support of psychologists is crucial, as it provides students with strategies to become aware of their disability and overcome challenges in the academic environment (Kain et al., 2019).

Considering the aforementioned points, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What does it mean for graduates with disabilities to be successful at university?
2. What are the internal factors that favour university success for graduates with disabilities?
3. What are the external factors that favour university success for graduates with disabilities?

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN ITALY AND SPAIN

Italy and Spain have followed a similar development in terms of educational inclusion at university level (see Italy: Law 104/1992, Law 17/1999 and Law 170/2010; Spain: Organic Law 6/2001 on Universities, Royal Legislative Decree 1/2013).

Despite these regulatory frameworks, enrolment rates of students with disabilities remain relatively low in both countries. In 2021, Italy registered a total of 45,592 students with disabilities in its universities (ANVUR, 2022), while in Spain the figure amounted to 22,156 (INE, 2014). In 2019, 3,585 students with disabilities graduated in Italy (ANVUR, 2022) and 2,346 in Spain (INE, 2014). These figures reflect that, while access has improved, challenges remain in terms of retention and university success.

In terms of university structure, both countries have similar configurations, as all universities have disability offices. In Italy, beyond having a specific office, legislation requires that the office is supervised by a faculty member appointed by the Rector. This person coordinates, supervises and supports all initiatives related to the inclusion (CNUDD, 2024).

METHOD

A qualitative methodology, grounded in a phenomenological approach, has facilitated an in-depth analysis of the university experiences of graduates with disabilities (Van Manen, 2016). As noted by Moriña (2021), a key characteristic of this approach is its emphasis on amplifying the voices of participants. This has enabled a dialogical process between the researcher and the participants, allowing for the reconstruction of the meaning they attribute to their academic experiences.

Participants

The study involved 30 graduates with disability (15 Italian and 15 Spanish), who completed their studies in 18 public universities. The selection of participants was carried out using purposive criteria-based sampling, following the methodology outlined by Patton (1999) and Johnson and Christensen (2017). Participants had to meet the following characteristics: be graduates with a disability from universities in Italy and Spain, have completed their studies in the 2016-2017 academic year at the latest, have a recognised disability before starting university, and come from any subject area.

Participants were recruited in three ways. Firstly, contact was made with the staff of the disability offices at several universities, to whom the aim of the research was explained and who were asked to collaborate in contacting people who met the study's inclusion criteria. Secondly, an Instagram profile was created to promote the project, and Italian and Spanish disability associations were contacted. Finally, new participants were found through the snowball methodology (Cohen et al., 2000).

Of the participants, 18 were women (54%) and 12 men (46%), aged between 23 and 54, with an average age of 28. In terms of fields of knowledge, nine participants studied Social and Legal Sciences, eight Arts and Humanities, eight Health Sciences and five Engineering and Architecture. The most common type of disability among the participants was physical ($n = 17$), followed by visual disability ($n = 6$), hearing disability ($n = 5$), mental disability ($n = 1$) and multiple disabilities (hearing and visual, $n = 1$). Almost half of the participants continued their education beyond undergraduate level (37%), and it took an average of five years to obtain their first university degree, while just over half of the sample was employed at the time of the present study (57%).

Data collection strategies

Semi-structured individual interviews were used for data collection. To ensure that the interviews were relevant to the purpose of the study, an ad hoc process of constructing the instrument was carried out in several phases. Initially, two teams were set up to work independently, and then joint meetings were convened to review and refine the questions. To work on the script, the team drew on previous literature on university success and disability, mainly Moriña and Biagiotti (2021) and Russak and Hellwing (2019). During these sessions, it was discussed whether the questions covered all relevant aspects to be investigated. As a result of these meetings, some questions were discarded and reformulated, and the total number was reduced. In a second step, there was validation through expert judgement with faculty members with expertise in inclusive education, others with disabilities and professionals from the disability offices. The aim was to ensure the relevance, clarity, interest and appropriateness of the questions to the purpose of the research. The two question scripts were ultimately piloted with graduates who were not participants in the study. This step aimed to estimate response times and ensure that the questions were clear and straightforward to answer. Some of the guiding questions for the interviews included: What does it mean to be successful at university? Why is that important? Who supported you in staying and completing your studies? What factors were crucial to your ability to persist and finish your studies? Additionally, what were the key elements that contributed to your success in this regard?

Each interview lasted an average of 90 minutes and consisted of one-on-one interviews, and most of them (88%) were online via platforms such as Blackboard and Google Meet, while only four were face-to-face (12%). Each interview was recorded, transcribed and returned to the study participants, allowing them to revise, add or delete information.

Procedure of the study

In the first contact with the study participants, they were informed of the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation and the commitment required to start the interviews. In addition, they were given an informed consent form indicating the objectives and procedures of the study and, by signing it, they expressed their agreement and authorised the collection of the data. The team undertook to remove and maintain the confidentiality of the information if someone decided not to continue participating. Anonymity was guaranteed by assigning a number preceded by PS for Spain and PI for Italy instead of their name.

The study considered and respected the principles of ethics and process practice (Moriña, 2021) as well as those of the State Research Agency (AEI). The study was also approved by the Ethics Committee of the University-Region where the project is led (protocol number: 156/2021).

Data analysis

Data analysis began with the design of a coding system that was modified and complemented by structural and narrative analysis of the data so that the narratives of the research protagonists could be organised and understood in depth. This system facilitated the analysis of the large amount of information collected, ensuring that no essential data was lost (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019). In addition, it provided security, coherence, order, clarity and effectiveness, ensuring an accurate response aligned with the stated objectives (Patton, 1999).

The analysis was carried out in two phases: in the first phase, coding consisted of a system of categories and codes, combining an inductive and deductive approach. The former was applied in creating categories from the analysis of recurrent themes in the interviews, while the latter was used in comparing these themes with the existing international literature on the topic of study. The system of categories and codes was developed by applying rigorous and systematic data collection procedures and by cross-checking and validating sources during fieldwork. After this initial process of categorisation, a second analysis was conducted by the whole research team. This allowed questionable information to be discussed as objectively as possible, to give quality and credibility to the study. In addition, the consistency between the analyses carried out by the researchers was calculated to establish the validity and reliability of the analysis of patterns and themes (Patton, 1999). At the end of this phase, this coding system was imported into the MAXQDA qualitative software.

Table 1 presents the system of categories and codes used, indicating the number of Spanish (PS) and Italian (PI) participants who mentioned each code.

Table 1
System of categories and codes

Categories	Codes	Participants
1. Definition of success	1.1 Obtain a degree	PE: 11 PI:4
	1.2 Achieving goals	PE: 5 PI:6
	1.3 Overcoming barriers	PE:5 PI:4
	1.4 Learning	PE:5 PI: 3
	1.5 Getting good grades	PE: 1 PI: 6
	1.6 Make friends	PE: 3 PI: 4
2. Internal factors	2.1 Self-awareness	PE: 15 PI:15
	2.2 Resilience	PE: 15 PI: 11
	2.3 Self-determination	PE:9 PI: 10
	2.4 Self-efficacy	PE: 9 PI: 10
3. External factors	3.1 Classmates	PE: 11 PI: 12
	3.2 Family	PE: 12 PI: 9
	3.3 Disability office	PE: 11 PI: 9
	3.4 Faculty members	PE: 8 PI: 11
	3.5 Friends	PE: 6 PI: 7
	3.6 Service Staff	PE: 2 PI: 3
	3.7 Partner	PE: 1 PI: 4
	3.8 Psychologist	PE: 4 PI: 6

RESULTS

What does it mean for graduates with disabilities to succeed at university?

The concept of success for graduates with disability is a subjective and dynamic concept that varies according to individual experiences (Figure 1). Half of the participants ($n = 15$), mostly Spanish, indicated that success for them meant having finished their university degree. As one of them stated: “Finishing is a success, because not everyone decides and manages to study at university” (PS8). It was also evident that graduates needed to achieve goals ($n = 11$) to feel successful. Indeed, one participant described it as “something you set internally, i.e. knowing how to meet your goals in the time and in the way you need to” (PS10). The graduates realised that, despite their own pace, they could achieve their goals just like their non-disabled peers, “being successful means achieving my goals and graduating

like everyone else, despite encountering more difficulties” (PI18). This excerpt underlines how the trajectories of students with and without disabilities may differ because the former face greater obstacles. Hence, other graduates ($n = 9$) defined success as the ability to overcome various barriers. One of them evidenced that success “is more than an achievement, I would say it probably depends on how you deal with the path and the millions of difficulties that arise along the way” (PS13).

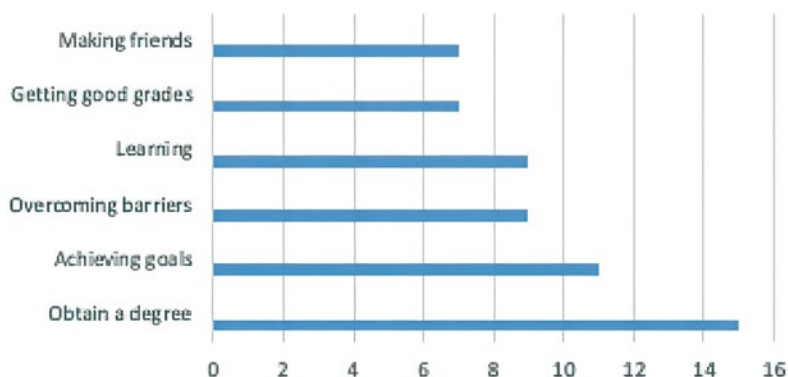
Another connotation of success was revealed in the learning process, as participants viewed learning itself as a form of success ($n = 9$).

The education system and the curriculum are not organised to give us the possibility to learn, because they don’t give us the tools we need. So, I think that finishing your studies and seeing that you have learned is considered a success (PS15).

Finally, two other aspects they associated with success were getting good grades ($n = 7$) and “networking with peers” (PI16) ($n = 7$). The first aspect was particularly emphasised by Italian graduates, who stressed the importance of getting good grades as this allowed them to “show the faculty member that I have studied, that I can achieve and that I can be satisfied with my work” (PI20). The second aspect noted helped graduates to feel part of the university community.

Figure 1

Definition of university success



What are the internal factors that favour university success for graduates with disabilities?

The internal factors favouring success are intrinsically linked to four key aspects (Figure 2). Self-awareness emerged as the first critical factor ($n = 30$). The findings indicate that students with disabilities who possess a positive self-perception, and a strong sense of self-awareness are better equipped to understand their

abilities and needs. None of the participants described themselves negatively; rather, they characterised themselves with adjectives such as cheerful, sociable, patient, persevering, determined and with a strong desire to learn. This positive self-perception reinforced their self-esteem, helping them to maintain motivation and confidence even in times of difficulty. One participant stated: “Having a positive self-perception and accepting your disability makes life easier, although it is true that at university you have to struggle all the time” (PS8).

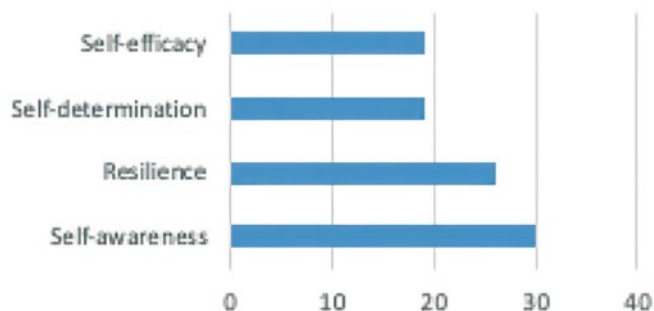
Another factor highlighted was resilience, mentioned by a large majority of participants ($n = 26$), which was defined as the ability to overcome obstacles and learn from experiences. One participant described it as: “Something fundamental to achieving success at university. It’s not just about overcoming obstacles but adapting and growing with each one” (PI18). Another witness commented on how disability had been what allowed her to develop greater resilience: “In all these years, I have realised that in the face of any kind of problem, after what I have been through, I will be able to solve it and keep on fighting” (PS3). Resilience had emerged as a vital mechanism to persist and overcome the difficulties encountered during university life.

Self-determination was identified as the third key factor ($n = 19$) and was associated with graduates’ ability to set clear goals, plan their academic path and be persistent in achieving their objectives. One participant underlined the importance of knowing how to plan autonomously, “I have always organised myself in my studies: I have found my method depending on the type of exam and subject” (PI25). Thanks to self-determination, other participants never thought of dropping out of university “not even in the face of difficulties because I had to achieve my goal, not only professionally but above all personally” (PI23).

Finally, self-efficacy ($n = 19$) was defined as the proactivity of graduates to ask for disability, adopt coping strategies and trust in their abilities to achieve their goals.

The faculty member wouldn’t adapt the exam for me, so I decided to talk to the vice-dean, but she didn’t understand my needs either, so I went to talk to the dean. I remember it was hard because I had to face exams I couldn’t take and people who didn’t understand me (PS15).

However, participants not only had to find solutions to these challenges, but also had to trust in themselves and their abilities because they could not count on the support of their environment: “when I started my studies I was told that I could not do English as a hearing impaired person, but luckily I trusted in myself and, as I expected, I succeeded” (PS6).

Figure 2*Internal factors influencing the university success of graduates with disabilities*

What are the external factors that favour university success for graduates with disabilities?

Most of the graduates ($n = 23$) stressed the importance of the disability received from their classmates. Classmates shared notes, helped with revision for exams, offered moral support and assistance with travel. Graduates described them as empathetic, available, helpful, understanding and approachable.

I was lucky that my classmates came together to help me, without them, I wouldn't have been able to finish university. They listened to me, asked me if I needed anything or just how my day had gone. Also, they were always available to help and encourage me, you could see that they empathised with me (PI18).

Without them the graduates would not have been able to consist of class activities or specific actions, "they helped me with tasks that, because of my physical disability, were more difficult for me, such as setting up a circuit, taking out the computer, picking up my backpack or changing classrooms" (PS2). Peers also provided an opportunity for inclusion in university life, as they were often invited to stay after class to socialise: "I stayed after class to share and discuss ideas about what had been discussed that day; it was a very interesting moment that allowed me to socialise and live the university experience like my classmates" (PI19).

While fellow students were key to success, many graduates ($n = 21$) also mentioned family members as a source of five types of support: academic, moral, financial, physical and mobility. Regarding the first, they described it as the help they received in transcribing class recordings, improving the writing of the final degree project, explaining content, recording themselves reading the notes or even accompanying them to the service for students with disabilities "to hand in the papers for the medical report and to inform them of my situation and know

what kind of services to apply for" (PS6). On the other hand, moral support was defined as encouraging "not to give up and not to give up in the face of all the difficult situations I have encountered" (PS2). Financial support was described as highlighting how lucky they had been to have a family willing to pay their tuition fees and other academic expenses. Some students mentioned that they could not live without their help because they needed it for basic things like getting dressed, putting on their shoes and going to university every day: "My mother would go 115km just to take me" (PI22).

Another key factor was the curricular adaptations and tools offered by the disability office ($n = 20$). In addition to mentioning specific adjustments (e.g. extra time for exams, having books in PDF, front row seat, travel within the university), graduates formed emotional bonds with the office staff or with people who worked with them, such as student supporters: "She is my friend, we spend a lot of time together and we help each other. Academically she made it very easy for me, she helped me with my studies and took my notes" (PS15). It turned out that the offices also acted as mediators between students and faculty members in that they interceded in situations where some faculty were reluctant to adapt exams or to implement measures such as requesting bright classrooms, recording lectures or handing out study material in advance. However, not all faculty members were an obstacle in the university pathway. Many of them were considered another key factor in university success ($n = 19$). Graduates fondly remembered those lecturers who took an interest in their welfare, offered constant support and provided follow-up from the beginning to the end of the course.

The faculty member was very involved and made sure that I not only understood the subject but that I was motivated to learn more. She was always present throughout the course, asking me how I was doing and if I needed anything (PI30).

Another graduate recounted how a faculty member, aware of his visual impairment, took the time to explain the content to him before class: "He received me in his office and gave me a brief presentation, explaining what he would later teach in the classroom so that I could participate" (PI27). These faculty members shared common characteristics: they were friendly, approachable, helpful and, above all, disability aware.

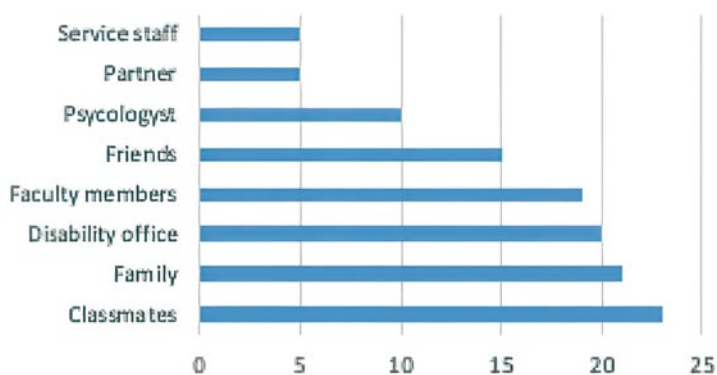
The external support the graduates received also came from their friends outside the university ($n = 15$). This was because they appreciated being able to share their uncertainties and thoughts with peers. They were a "safe place" (PS1) who "have always been there and encouraged me in the most difficult times by giving me advice" (PS4). Although some graduates preferred seeking support from friends, others opted for professional help from a psychologist ($n = 10$). The support of a professional helped them to "manage problems, to be more autonomous and to accept my disability" (PI30).

Finally, two other factors that enabled graduates to complete their degree were their partners ($n = 5$) and service staff ($n = 5$). On the one hand, especially the Italian graduates reported that their partners were supportive because they believed in their abilities, “she knew what I was worth and taught me that I should not be ashamed of my condition and that disability was not going to make me a worse engineer than my non-disabled peers” (PI27). On the other hand, the service staff were valued for facilitating access to lifts, helping to locate faculty members’ offices and even putting away backpacks if they were too heavy.

Figure 3 presents a summary of the findings discussed in this section.

Figure 3

External factors influencing the university success of graduates with disabilities



DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study analyses how Italian and Spanish graduates conceptualise success and the factors that determine it. It should be noted that even though this research involved two countries, no significant differences were revealed.

In the first research question, success is defined as a subjective and multifaceted concept. Russak and Hellwing (2019) consider that it should be defined in terms of what a person can achieve at a given point in time, rather than compared to pre-determined standards. This approach is in line with the findings of Bellacicco and Parisi (2021), who indicate that success is not necessarily limited to measurable outcomes such as getting good grades or obtaining a university degree. Even for some graduates in this study, the simple fact of learning or having decided to start a university degree could be seen as a success. This is why, as Fernández-Menor et al. (2024) point out, it should be a priority for educational institutions to ensure that all students have access to higher education. However, recent studies highlight the

importance of guaranteeing not only access but also retention, promoting inclusion and the development of a culture and an environment accessible to all (Guez et al., 2024). The findings of this study indicate that graduates wished to have a similar experience to their peers. However, this desire, as Santos et al. (2019) point out, was still limited by multiple barriers.

Given this scenario and the high dropout rates (ONPEGE, 2021), it would be valuable for future research to explore how dropout students with disabilities perceive success. Current scientific literature tends to focus only on those who graduate. Furthermore, it is recommended to use mixed methodological approaches to capture individual experiences and common patterns, and to adopt a polyphonic approach to investigate the perceived influence of different external agents on university success. Broadening this definition would make success a more inclusive and comprehensive concept (Russak & Hellwing, 2019).

In line with the multiple definitions of success given by graduates with disabilities, several factors leading to success were mentioned in the last two research questions. The findings of this study support the findings of research such as that of Russak and Hellwing (2019), which points to the existence of internal and external factors that favour university success. Regarding the former, the graduates' narratives mention that they serve to cope with university life and challenges (Malinovskiy et al., 2023). In addition, they promote growth that goes beyond the academic sphere, allowing for the integral formation of the individual. Fundamental life skills are developed, such as the ability to adapt, to persevere, to be independent and to know how to set goals (Russak & Hellwing, 2019).

However, this study, unlike others, shows that external support is also needed to achieve university success. Among these factors, the role of higher institutions as enablers of university success stands out. In this respect, the findings of this research provide valuable guidance for universities wishing to move towards greater inclusion (McKinney & Swarts, 2022; Nail, 2024).

An essential aspect that higher education institutions could focus on is the design of flexible and student-friendly educational policies, as this study shows that having a successful university experience depends on multiple factors. Several studies have analysed how these factors influence the academic trajectory. For example, authors such as Schreuer et al. (2024) emphasise the role of faculty members, while Römhild and Holleder (2023) highlight the role of disability offices. The present research, like the findings of Vaccaro et al. (2015), shows that friendships also play a key role in university. In the same vein, Solis-Grant et al. (2023) conclude that peer support facilitates learning and provides an opportunity for an inclusive university experience. It should not be forgotten that attending university is not only an academic matter, but it can also be a great opportunity for participation and social inclusion (Moriña & Martins, 2024). Therefore, university institutions should

also promote actions linked to associations, sport and cultural activities, which, as has been studied, are key to feeling part of the university community (Bailey et al., 2019).

Other studies, such as McKinney and Swartz (2022), mention the importance of receiving academic, moral and financial support from the family. However, Boughton et al. (2023) suggest that parents should remain in a peripheral role, providing disability but allowing enough autonomy for students to make their own decisions. In contrast, the findings of this study revealed that graduates have played an active role in their pathway, attending the disability office and requesting academic adjustments to meet their needs. Research such as that of Goegan and Daniels (2020) confirms that these adjustments are critical to facilitating university success. Instead of focusing solely on specific measures, it would be more effective for faculty members and education policy to adopt the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach. This offers multiple means of expression, representation and engagement, thus benefiting all students (Fleming et al., 2017).

In addition, universities could consider consisting of more disability awareness days so that students find it a safe place worth being and staying (Römhild & Holleder, 2023). Tinto and Pusser (2006) argue that effectively addressing the needs of these students can strengthen their self-esteem and motivate them to continue their education. This study concludes that, without support for inclusion (sensitised and trained faculty, peer support network, accessible study materials, etc.), students will continue to experience an obstacle course that discourages them from continuing their education (Schreuer et al., 2024). Moving towards true inclusion is not a simple challenge that is quickly achieved. Progress requires listening to the histories of those who have achieved university success and understanding the key factors in their experience (Moriña & Van der Mel, 2025; Pais et al., 2024).

Therefore, the testimonies presented in this research are of great value as they reflect the assessments of students with disabilities who have graduated. They can serve as a reference and inspiration for future students, motivating them to undertake university studies and demonstrating that disability is not an insurmountable obstacle in higher education. Moreover, some study participants have managed to enter the labour market and develop professionally, which shows how university studies are an opportunity for people with disabilities to get a job and improve their quality of life (Malinovskiy et al., 2023). Therefore, it can be concluded that allocating resources to higher education could be an effective strategy to respond to student diversity, ensure university success and promote the development of the whole person (Guez et al., 2024).

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