

Education and integration by and for people at risk of social exclusion in the online university environment

Information on the case study:

Organisation: Universidad Internacional de La Rioja (UNIR)

Size: 3 700 employees

Location: Logroño, Spain

Sector: Education

Operational context

UNIR is an online university based in Logroño (Spain) that offers awards bachelor's and master's degrees. The student body is made up of people from more than 25 countries, with different cultures and socio-economic backgrounds.

The problem/opportunity

Problem: Some students present personal and social situations regarding social exclusion risks. The university's priority objective is to achieve the full integration of all students into university life, seeking the necessary means and resources to make UNIR a university for all. The inclusion of different learner profiles, with different needs and diversity (functional diversity, cultural diversity, gender, ...), implies the implementation of strategies, measures, and actions focused on adapting the context and environment to individuals. Challenges include a lack of training and information to respond to the needs of students with disabilities. In addition, difficulties in communicating with other university staff are one of the main challenges to inclusion.

Classroom diversity is beneficial for the students, both for its energising effect and for the transmission of values it embodies. It is precisely the lack of reference points that can give rise to difficulties in dealing with peers, insofar as ignorance can lead to rejection or, on the contrary, paternalistic behaviour. It is therefore important to improve and perfect knowledge and strategies to offer quality teaching to all students.

Opportunity: UNIR investigates the benefits and challenges posed by the inclusion of students with disabilities in universities. Their inclusion in the university classroom benefits them and teachers, according to a study carried out by UNIR's researchers and the University of Seville. This study compiles the experience of 119 teachers from 10 Spanish universities (Carballo, Molina, Cortes Vega, & Cabeza Ruiz, 2022). The professors agreed that the presence of students with disabilities in the classroom favours the development of values and skills, such as empathy and understanding of diversity in general (particularly disability). The development of these is the responsibility of professionals trained in the field of social sciences and specialised with postgraduate degrees.

What was done

1. Implementing specialised diversity Masters:

Action: Carrying out postgraduate courses specialising in intervention with groups of people at risk of social exclusion.

Examples:

- Master's degree in social Intervention, which provides the specific knowledge to effectively manage, design and evaluate social intervention programmes.
- Master's degree in special education, supported by ICT and neuropsychology, adopting a multidisciplinary approach that explores various disabilities, providing practical and theoretical tools directly applicable in educational settings.

2. Implementing specialised diversity courses:

Action: Implementation of specialised courses on functional diversity.

Examples:

- Course in Intellectual Disability in Children and Motor Development new psychomotor activities: oriented to use sport as a therapeutic tool, teaching the most innovative trends in the field of sport and health. It offers access to different resources and activities that can later be put into practice with children and allows them to acquire the necessary competences to foster the development of socio-emotional skills such as self-esteem, communication and assertiveness.
- Therapeutic Football Course: Together with the Atlético de Madrid Foundation and the Querer Foundation, this course is aimed at professionals who work with children with Intellectual Disability and difficulties in their Motor Development. With the participation of internationally renowned and active professionals, this course uses sport as a therapeutic tool, giving the opportunity to learn the most innovative trends in the field of sport and health.
- Course in Neuroeducation: practice with children possessing intellectual disabilities. An interdisciplinary methodology is applied, allowing children to acquire the necessary skills to promote the development of socio-emotional skills, such as self-esteem, communication and assertiveness. This course is provided by the Querer Foundation and the Atlético de Madrid Foundation, with the collaboration of the Community of Madrid.

3. Implementing special support services:

Action: Special Needs Attention Service (SANNEE) provides support to students with temporary or permanent functional educational needs, providing the most appropriate solutions for each case.

Examples:

- Access to Virtual Campus resources: materials are adapted according to the needs of the student.
- Curricular adaptations: the Academic Coordination Departments are informed on the special educational needs of students, so that the appropriate modifications can be made.
- Adaptations in exams: the necessary actions are taken in exams to guarantee equal opportunities for all UNIR students.
- Pedagogical advice: cases that require it are referred to the Academic Guidance Service to provide students with the most appropriate personalised attention.
- Other actions: considering different case and situations, specific departments provide appropriate responses to the requests of UNIR students with functional limitations.

Outcomes

1. Students are specialised in diversity topics and their professional applications

Outcome: Professional profiles for intervention with groups at risk of social exclusion in:

- Public administration, as a civil servant specialised in social policies and intervention programmes.
- Social services, as a manager and director of companies in charge of planning and supervision or responsible for specific care centres for various population groups.
- Third sector, as a director in organisations to plan and evaluate social projects.
- Research, as a technician in public and private organisations.
- Head of social projects in public and private organisations, responsible for the design and management of intervention projects.
- Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) area, in organisations, defining fields of interest and designing action plans.
- Consultancy in social welfare and social policies, diagnosing needs and supporting the implementation of social intervention programmes.

Evidence: The number of degree graduates is over 10 000.

2. Special needs students:

Outcome: Students attended in Special Needs Attention Service (SANNEE)

- **Evidence:** 4% of the total number of students at the university have stated that they have some kind of functional diversity and have been supported.

Conclusion

Higher education in the field of intervention with people at risk of social exclusion, as well as support people with functional diversity, made UNIR overcome the challenge of creating specialised professional profiles and integrating students. The university demonstrated its commitment to diversity and the satisfaction of students and teachers. These efforts created a good study and work environment, contributing to successful results of employment opportunities for students in general, as well as equality in access to education without any

discrimination. This demonstrates the importance of continuing to raise awareness and create an inclusive environment in the university environment.