

Strengthening Inclusive Education in a Colombian Institution of Higher Education

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Abstract

This research aimed to explore the actions for strengthening of attention to diversity in a higher education institution. The study was designed on the descriptive type of methodology for prospective multivariate analysis. The instrument used was the *Índice de Inclusión para la Educación Superior* [Index for Inclusion in Higher Education]. The research was conducted in five stages: At stage 1, representatives of the different bodies in the institution were selected and trained. At stage 2, an awareness and training process was carried out with the entire community. At stage 3, a probability sampling was performed and the instrument was applied. At stage 4, through a Multiple Correspondence Analysis and a Multiple Factor Analysis, the indexes by factors of accreditation, institution, and population group were constructed. Finally, the actions for the strengthening of inclusive education were prioritized. It was found that Inclusive Education demands efforts for its development, especially in organization, management, and administration, in academic support resources and physical infrastructure, and in financial resources. Additionally, it was found that professors are the most critical group in this regard. Based on the results, priority actions are proposed to be integrated into the institutional development plan.

Keywords: Higher education, inclusive education, an index for inclusion.

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Introduction

Even though it is a universal agreement that inclusive education allows equal opportunities for all students, transformation processes and challenges are different in every country (Gubbels, Coppens, & de Wolf, 2018; Savolainen, Engelbrecht, Nel, & Malinen, 2012; Stepaniuk, 2019). For several years, and in accordance with the guidelines of international organizations such as UNESCO, in Colombia, legislative advancements have been developed in order to make inclusive education the model to reach the goal of *Educación para Todos* [Education for All] (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2016; Sayed & Ahmed, 2015; UNESCO., 2005; United Nations Educational, 1996; Štrajn, 2015). However, there are several challenges to guarantee the right to education, such as overcoming the high levels of inequity and the low level of quality in the system (Organización para la Cooperación y el Desarrollo Económicos, 2016).

Specifically, in higher education, the process of inclusive education started in 2007 when the National Ministry of Education (MEN for its acronym in Spanish) and the Research Center for Development of the Universidad Nacional de Colombia carried out a study to identify the state of the student population at this level. This research identified five groups which because of the system failures were at disadvantage to access, continue, and graduate from higher education. These are people with disabilities and exceptional abilities or talents, ethnic groups (black communities, Afro-Colombians, *Raizales* and *Palenqueros*, indigenous communities, and Romani people), population victim of the armed conflict, demobilized population in process of reintegration, and a population living on borders (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2013).

Between 2007 and 2011, the change started taking over from the concepts of integration and special educational needs to the concept of Diverse Educational Needs (NED for its acronym in Spanish). This concept highlights the significance of performing affirmative actions in education not only for the students with disabilities but also for the population groups identified, in line with the diversity principles of inclusive education (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2013).

In 2012, the term NED was abolished and the term “barriers for learning and involvement” evolved to highlight that the system-specific barriers (political, financial, linguistic, physical, geographical, cultural, among others) are the ones restricting students in higher education from access, continuance or graduation. There is an understanding of the

priority given to certain groups not as a population-based approach but as a need for the inclusive education process in the Colombian context (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2013).

In 2013, the MEN published *Lineamientos Política de Educación Superior Inclusiva* [Guidelines for Inclusive Higher Education Policy], a document providing meaningful elements for the formulation of public policy strategies and actions relevant in the context of higher education with quality. In 2016 the *Índice de Inclusión para Educación Superior* [Index for Inclusion in Higher Education, [ÍNES for its acronym in Spanish]. This is a tool validated in the country whose goal is “to promote education of quality by supporting inclusive education strategies in HEIs [Higher Education Institutions] as a central part of the institutional policy” (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2016, p.28).

The ÍNES is the result of a research process that began in 2012 and was supported by international experts (such as Mel Ainscow, Artemi Sakellariadis, and Clementina Acedo), some higher education institutions, and other organizations related (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2016). This tool included the elements developed in the original Index for Inclusion (a globally recognized instrument used in different countries to help educational institutions to develop self-assessment and improvement processes for inclusive education; it has shown a positive influence in these transformations) and adapted those to the Colombian higher education context (Ainscow, 2015; Arizabaleta & Ochoa, 2016; Booth & Ainscow, 2002; Booth, Ainscow & Black-Hawkins, 2000; Duran et al., 2005; National Ministry of Education, 2016; Sánchez & Ainscow, 2018).

In this context –and taking into account that the Escuela Colombiana de Rehabilitación [ECR for its acronym in Spanish] is a higher education institution pioneer in Colombia in the training of health, rehabilitation, and inclusion professionals, and that within its actions stands out being a founding member of the *Red de Instituciones de Educación Superior para la Discapacidad* [Network of Higher Education Institutions for Disability] and promoting through it inclusive higher education for people with disabilities in the country–, ÍNES was taken up to identify the strengths and opportunities for improvement of the diversity in the institution and create actions that strengthen learning, quality, and involvement of the entire educational community (Escuela Colombiana de Rehabilitación, 2012, 2016).

Methodology

Design

To define actions for the strengthening of attention to diversity in the ECR, Descriptive design was chosen. It followed the proposal of Veiga, Fuente, and Zimmermann (2008), who mentioned that the purpose of these studies was to specify the most significant characteristics in a population and to provide data on which to base reasonable statements. In turn, the research was prospective given that this allowed to anticipate future situations and conditions and to develop a planning process more in line with the changing circumstances (Escobar & Sepúlveda, 2009). The task was proposed based on the present facts concerning attention to diversity in the ECR and on what people (individuals and collectives) can do to achieve the desired future.

Instruments

The ÍNES was used, which is divided into two parts: the first one corresponds to the identification questions, and the second one consists of 25 indicators covering central topics in inclusive education (with their corresponding guiding questions) related to the 12 factors of institutional accreditation of the *Consejo Nacional de Acreditación* [National Accreditation Council] (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2016). These 25 indicators are divided into three groups, according to its measuring scale: 7 existence indicators with the following answer categories: “It exists and it is implemented”, “It exists and it is not implemented”, “It does not exist”, and “Does not know”; 13 “frequency” indicators with the following answer categories: “Always”, “Sometimes”, “Never”, and “Does not know”; and 5 “recognition” indicators with the following categories: “Yes”, “No”, and “Does not know” (see Table 1).

Table 1

ÍNES indicators, types of indicator and associated accreditation factors. Own elaboration based on the Index for Inclusion in Higher Education (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2016).

Indicator	Type of indicator	Factor
1.1. Barriers for Learning and Involvement	Existence	1. Institutional Mission and Project
1.2. Identification and Characterization of Students from Inclusive Education	Frequency	
2.1. Student Engagement	Existence	2. Students

2.2. Admission, Continuance, and Incentive and Credit Systems for Students	Existence	
3.1. Professor Participation	Existence	3. Professors
3.2. Inclusive Professors	Frequency	
4.1. Curricular Interdisciplinarity and Flexibility	Frequency	4. Academic Processes
4.2. Flexible assessment	Existence	
5.1. Integration of the Institution in National and International Academic Contexts	Recognition	5. National and International Visibility
5.2. External relations of professors and students	Recognition	
6.1. Research, Innovation, and Artistic and Cultural Creation in Inclusive Education	Recognition	6. Research, Artistic and Cultural Creation
6.2. Articulation of Inclusive Education with the Processes of Research, Innovation, and Artistic and Cultural Creation	Frequency	
7.1. Outreach, Social Projection, and Regional Context	Recognition	7. Relevance and Social Impact
7.2. Follow up and Support for Employment	Existence	
8.1. Self-Assessment and Self-Regulation Processes Focused on Inclusive Education	Frequency	8. Self-Assessment and Self-Regulation Processes
8.2. Improvement Strategies	Frequency	
8.3. Inclusive Information System	Existence	
9.1. University Welfare Programs	Frequency	9. University Welfare
9.2. Student Continuance	Frequency	
10.1. Flexible Administrative and Management Processes	Frequency	10. Organization, Management, and Administration
10.2. Organizational Structure	Recognition	
11.1. Resources, Equipment, and Practice Spaces	Frequency	11. Academic Support Resources and Physical Infrastructure
11.2. Facilities and Infrastructure	Frequency	
12.1. Sustainable Inclusive Education Programs	Frequency	12. Financial Resources
12.2. Financial Support for Students	Frequency	

Procedure

Based on the methodological route proposed in ÍNES, 2016, the development of the following stages was carried out:

1. **Promotion and planning:** Representatives of the different bodies of the institution were summoned and a coordinating team was formed (representatives of students, professors, directors, and administrative staff) to guarantee an comprehensive view in the planning process. The Index for Inclusion in Higher Education (ÍNES) was socialized, in terms of its context, definition, objectives, and scope, methodological route, implementation, analysis and interpretation of results, and an implementation chronogram was elaborated.

2. **Awareness and training process:** Various campaigns were carried out to inform the community in the university about the concept of inclusive education, its characteristics, and principles, and to encourage the commitment of administrative staff, professors, and students in the completion of ÍNES questionnaires.
3. **Exploration:** The members of the institutional community were divided into three groups (administrative staff, professors, and students). The number of participants was calculated utilizing a probability sampling assuming a trust level of 95% and a sampling error of 5% according to the data of the ECR registration and control unit. Participants filled in the ÍNES voluntarily, virtually, and individually. For the application, it was guaranteed that the material would be accessible for the different groups. The institutional computers room and the consultation of the principal researcher or a member of the coordinating team of the research were available.
4. **Perception Analysis:** The information was compiled and consolidated into a matrix with the perception answers for each of the coded indicators. The answers per indicator represented a qualitative variable (ordinal in the case of "existence" and "frequency" indicators, and nominal in the case of "recognition" indicators). The R project computer package was used to perform the multiple correspondence analysis procedure, which allows the visualization of the essence of perceptions and to reduce the dimensionality of the data matrix (Greenacre, 2008), in order to eliminate redundancy, to manifest the existing relationships between the variables, and to built the indices by accreditation factor that summarized the information. Subsequently, utilizing multiple factor analysis, the established indices were synthesized and the index of the subgroups of interest and the institution were constructed. According to ÍNES, results depend on the sample, as they are not contrasted against a criterion or reference value, and a score of 0 to 5 was assigned (where 0 represents a low perception and 5 a high one).
5. **Identification of Priority Actions:** From the results obtained, the traffic light system was applied to each indicator (25 correspondings to the 12 factors), in accordance to the positive response percentage, the answers "It exists and it is implemented", "Always", and "Yes", according to the indicator. In green were identified the indicators where more than 80% of respondents provided a positive answer; in yellow, those where the positive answer was between 60% and 80%; and in red, indicators where the positive answer was less than 60% of respondents. Based on the application of the traffic light system and

on the interpretation of results in the light of institutional documents, a meeting with directives was held and the actions to be integrated in the institutional development plan were prioritized for the strengthening of inclusive education.

Ethical Considerations

All the procedures in this research were performed in accordance with the ethical and legal norms required for research with human beings in Colombia. Resolution No. 8430, 1993 of the Health Ministry.

Results

595 participants filled in the ÍNES questionnaire, which corresponds to 84.4% of the institutional community. The population group with the greatest participation in the research was students i.e. 479 (83.9% of all students), followed by 73 Professors (89% of all professors). The group with the lowest participation was Administrative Staff i.e. 43 (82.7% of all administrative staff). This is in line with the distribution of the population in ECR.

The general index for the institution was 3.55, which means that the perception of the institutional community is slightly superior to that of the national general system (3.51). By analyzing it individually, it can be seen that the administrative staff of ECR has the best perception regarding the inclusive education process, 3.59, followed by students with 3.55, whereas the lowest perception is that of professors, 3.48 (see Table 2).

When analyzing the results by accreditation factor, it can be seen that the institutional community has a low perception (under 3) of the factors 10 (Organization, Management, and Administration), 11 (Academic Support Resources and Physical Infrastructure), and 12 (Financial Resources). This means that most of the respondents believe the institution does not have an organizational structure that allows to develop specific actions for inclusive education or the financial strength to guarantee the sustainability of the strategies, or the resources, equipment, and practice spaces accessible and relevant to fulfill the characteristics of this approach. A high perception (over 4) was noted for factor 2 (Students), in which they are inquired about the scholarships, loans, incentives systems, the strategies and programs available to favor admission, continuance, and graduation with quality for students. As for

the rest of the factors, a medium perception (3–4) was observed (see Table 2).

Table 2
Index Per Accreditation Factor And Per Interest Group Own Elaboration.

Factor	Factor Index	Interest Groups	Factor Index according to Interest Group
1. Institutional Mission and Project	3.86	Students	3.86
		Administrative Staff	3.86
		Professors	3.56
2. Students	5	Students	5.0
		Administrative Staff	5.0
		Professors	5.0
3. Professors	3.93	Students	3.93
		Administrative Staff	5.0
		Professors	3.93
4. Academic Processes	3.86	Students	3.86
		Administrative Staff	3.86
		Professors	3.56
5. National and International Visibility	3.43	Students	3.43
		Administrative Staff	3.43
		Professors	3.36
6. Research, Artistic and Cultural Creation	4.03	Students	4.03
		Administrative Staff	5.0
		Professors	3.68
7. Relevance and Social Impact	3.68	Students	3.68
		Administrative Staff	3.63
		Professors	3.56
8. Self-Assessment and Self-Regulation Processes	3.39	Students	3.58
		Administrative Staff	3.14
		Professors	3.39
9. University Welfare	3.93	Students	3.7
		Administrative Staff	5.0
		Professors	3.7
10. Organization, Management, and Administration	2.18	Students	2.18
		Administrative Staff	2.65
		Professors	2.18
11. Academic Support Resources and Physical Infrastructure	2.1	Students	2.1
		Administrative Staff	2.1
		Professors	2.1
12. Financial Resources	1.97	Students	1.97
		Administrative Staff	3.47
		Professors	1.97

According to the traffic light system applied to the indicators perception and the revision of the institutional documents, 11 actions in red or of low perception were identified and must be addressed by ECR in the short term to strengthen inclusive education (see Table 3). The actions were included in the improvement proposal reviewed with the institution directives to integrate them to the Institutional Development Plan 2016–2021.

Table 3

Priority Actions to be integrated in The Institutional Development Plan 2016–2021 by Associated Strategic Line and Quality Factor

Strategic line 1 (Quality Assurance)
Design and implement self-assessment and self-regulation processes that allow to identify the institutional compliance of the inclusive education focus as a transversal axis of the Quality Assurance System.
Associated CNA quality factors: All factors.
Strategic line 2 (Academic Processes)
Implement strategies that allow to identify the factors associated to desertion of the members of the institutional community and to design programs that favor their continuance, taking into account their particularities.
Strategic line 3 (Flexible curriculum)
Promote the implementation of a flexible curriculum that facilitates learning and the development of capacities, competencies, and potentialities of student diversity.
Strategic line 4 (Institutional set up)
Associated CNA quality factors: 1 (Institutional Mission and Project), 2 (Students), 3 (Professors), 4 (Academic Processes).
Strategic line 5 (Community and Environment at ECR)
Develop strategies and implement mechanisms to accompany graduates, as part of a policy of follow-up and support for employment that includes differential analysis variables by population groups.
Associated CNA quality factors: 1 (Institutional Mission and Project), 7. (Relevance and Social Impact), 9. (University Welfare).
Strategic line 6 (Human Talent)
Promote flexibility measures of labor that facilitate the labor performance of workers according to their role and particularities.
Associated CNA quality factors: 3 (Professors), 9 (University Welfare), 10 (Organization, Management, and Administration).
Strategic line 7 (Administrative Management)
Create an institutional committee to support inclusion.
Build in a participatory manner an institutional policy that promotes inclusive higher education.
Allocate resources and ensure the sustainability of inclusive education strategies.
Disseminate to the entire institutional community the actions being carried out to promote inclusive education.
Associated CNA quality factors: 10 (Organization, Management, and Administration), 12 (Financial resources).

Strategic line 8 (Physical and Technological Infrastructure)
Promote the progressive elimination of architectural and urban barriers through the construction and adaptation of infrastructure in compliance with the requirements of the existing accessibility standard norms for Colombia.
Include, in the equipment of the institution, pedagogical, didactic, technical and technological materials accessible to promote access to knowledge according to the particularities of each person.
Associated CNA quality factors: 11 (Academic Support Resources and Physical Infrastructure).

Discussion and Conclusions

In Colombia, diversity of all kinds –people, cultures, territories–, the inequity expressions, and the post-conflict process pose the challenge of inclusive education as a central strategy in the search for a more just, pacific, and productive society. In this context, higher education institutions play a fundamental role in training human beings capable of identifying and responding to social needs, including the realization of human rights. The INES application in the ECR allowed us to recognize how the institutional community perceives the attention to diversity. It is a starting point for the creation of improvement actions that allow to move forward towards a more equitable, relevant, and quality education, following the guidelines proposed at the World Conference on Higher Education (UNESCO, 2009).

Some research has found that financial resources, the organizational structure and inadequate physical infrastructure are common obstacles in the implementation of inclusive education (Ackah-Jnr & Danso, 2019; Aponte, 2008; Bravo, Bermúdez & Vargas, 2010; Castaño, Gallón, Gómez & Vásquez, 2008; Eitel & Ramírez-Burgos, 2016; Gubbels, Coppens, & de Wolf, 2018; Himmel, 2002; Timberlake, 2018). Results in this study agree with such research given that indicators related to factors 10 (Organization, Management, and Administration), 11 (Academic Support Resources and Physical Infrastructure), and 12 (Financial Resources) are placed in a low perception. Slight differences among the participants' assessments on the existence and relevance of inclusive education in ECR are logical due to the diverse ways in which the different groups of the institutional community can evidence the inclusive education process. The lowest perception was that of professors, a finding that supports the idea that professors are more critical of the inclusive education process (Savolainen et al., 2012; Yada & Savolainen, 2017).

The identification of actions using the metaphor of a traffic light made it possible to locate specific aspects that require a priority solution within a specific time, being this the basis for building management indicators and thus being able to monitor change. It is proposed the establishment of an institutional commitment to support the inclusion transversal in all bodies of the HEL, in such a way that inclusive education is not understood as the exclusive responsibility of welfare departments. In this sense and in line with what has been reported by other research (Álvarez & López, 2015; Lopez, Moriña, & Morgado, 2019, Lissi, Zuzulich, Salinas, Hojas, & Medrano, 2009, Salinas, Lissi, Medrano, & Hojas, 2013; Vargas, 2014), it is essential to generate political and financial viability to ensure the development of actions proposed and favor the attention to diversity.

To reduce inequity and simultaneously to improve quality in the Colombian Higher Education System implies that the policies, strategies, processes, and bodies of the National Accreditation System give proper attention to inclusive education as an axis transversal to the required conditions for institutional and program accreditation. To motivate HELs to achieve levels of equity, efficiency, quality, and relevance, a strategy for resource allocation must be designed, as recommended in the report of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2016).

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