

**Success and Self-Determination: A Systematic Review of the Narratives of
Students and Graduates with Disabilities**

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Abstract

The purpose of this article was to explore, from the perspective of students and graduates with disabilities, the skills that are necessary to be self-determined at university, why these are important, and how they can be developed to remain in university and graduate successfully. A systematic review, including 16 qualitative studies with a total of 303 participants, was carried out. The results provide information on: essential skills to facilitate self-determination and successful completion of university studies (problem-solving skills, learning about oneself, goal setting, self-management, self-advocacy) and attributes (autonomy, resilience, and empowerment); the reasons for being self-determined at university (achieving academic goals, overcoming barriers, demonstrating abilities, self-confidence, and academic success); and how self-determination can be learned at university (trial and error; family, faculty and peers; disability services; peers; specific programmes; and information technology communication). The conclusions are encouraging and show that self-determination can be learned in universities with the necessary supports.

Keywords: University success; self-determination; disability; qualitative studies; systematic review

Introduction

Students with disabilities who successfully complete their university studies are characterised by their self-knowledge, knowing what they want and how to achieve their goals. In other words, they are self-determined (Ju et al., 2017). Many studies agree in identifying both personal factors (e.g., self-determination or self-discipline) and contextual factors (e.g., family, friends, support services, faculty, or peers) that influence successful trajectories in university (Aguirre et al., 2021; Méndez et al., 2023).

Therefore, there is agreement in that success at university is multidimensional and depends on multiple factors, although there is no consensus on how to define it. For the graduates who participated in the study of Russak and Hellwing (2019), it is a multifaceted, subjective, complex, and dynamic concept. On the one hand, for some people, it is a process and a vocation, that is, doing something one loves and is good at, accepting oneself, getting positive feedback from others and the environment. However, other people relate it to measurable results, such as, for example, obtaining good marks. These conceptions of success are focused on the academic scope, with the possibility of adding a social dimension. In fact, as is defined in Moriña and Biagiotti (2022), we understand success as a concept that is not only related to staying, completing university studies and graduating, but it is also linked to the university trajectory itself, that is, the academic and social opportunities for learning and participating and, therefore, to stay and live an inclusive experience during university studies.

It is important to highlight that studying at university is not only about achieving academic objectives to obtain a qualification and finding a job; it can also be an opportunity to reinvent an identity that has deteriorated in previous stages (Madriaga, 2007) and to live an experience of participation and social inclusion with other peers inside and outside the university classroom (Lipka et al., 2019). Therefore, a sense of belonging to the university is

also key to success and, in turn, peers are a key to this sense of belonging (Vaccaro et al., 2015). This is not neutral, as it has long been concluded that one of the reasons for staying and not dropping out is to be integrated into academic and social life (Tinto, 1987).

Focusing on self-determination, the central theme of this article, and as has been previously written, self-determination is a personal or internal factor that facilitates success (Ju et al., 2017). As with success at university, there is no general agreement on the meaning of self-determination. For this paper, we draw on the Functional Theory of Self-determination (Wehmeyer, 1999), understanding self-determination as a dispositional human characteristic that allows a person to play an active role in making decisions regarding their own quality of life, free from external influences that might intervene in their purpose. This model operationalises the construct through four essential dimensions that can be observed in self-determined behaviour (autonomy, self-regulation, empowerment, and self-actualisation). In fact, considering the conceptual basis of this model, it is suitable for explaining self-determination in students with disabilities, as evidence supports that, by addressing these dimensions, people with disabilities experience significant improvements in several areas, such as problem solving, personal goal setting, and recognition of their own strengths. In addition, they become more actively involved in decision-making and ultimately acquire a greater capacity to take control of their lives (Kleiner et al., 2014). From this theoretical perspective, self-determination benefits people with disabilities, as it involves a learning process in which they start with a greater need for support, but over time, these supports are gradually reduced, allowing the person to make decisions with greater autonomy and exercise greater control over their own lives.

In this regard, a person with self-determined behaviour is a person who governs and has control over his or her life by setting clear goals and outlining the steps to follow to achieve them. Some other characteristics associated with self-determined behaviour are the ability to

be proactive, to be a problem solver, to be able to make decisions and not give up in the face of difficulties, to be autonomous, to understand one's strengths and weaknesses, to use strategies useful to one's disability, to show psychological empowerment, and to believe in one's abilities (O'Byrne et al., 2019). Studies such as that of Anctil et al. (2008) have shown that self-determination is associated with a diverse set of positive outcomes in students with disabilities, including better physical and psychological health, higher self-esteem, and better overall well-being, arguing that higher levels of self-determination promote better quality of life in these students. In the study of Russak and Hellwing (2019), graduates acknowledge that their tenacity and determination, as well as their knowledge of their disability and needs, were key factors in their success. These students define themselves with several shared characteristics, such as a sense of freedom and independence, as well as thinking of themselves as fighters who persist in their goals until they achieve their goal of being like others. They see disability as an opportunity, are used to overcoming obstacles, and are resilient.

Self-determination has been studied extensively in people with intellectual disabilities and at pre-university stages; however, less attention has been paid to it in higher education (Cobb et al., 2009). The literature shows that university is precisely where self-determined behaviour is required the most, since students are expected to be more autonomous, managing their own time and assignments, seeking and requesting the support they need for their learning and participation, either from the disability offices or from the faculty members themselves, in many cases unaware of how the university works and what support services are available (Anctil et al., 2008; Getzel, 2008).

To obtain these supports, the students must first identify themselves as a student with a disability. This is complex and painful for some students, especially for those students with invisible disabilities, who prefer to go unnoticed and not disclose their disability, forgoing the accommodations they are entitled to by law (Getzel, 2008). MacLeod et al. (2018) discussed

the 'cost' of success, as the university has a long way to go to be inclusive, accessible, and based on universal design for learning (UDL), if students want to benefit from the support required, in many cases essential, to be able to continue studying, it is necessary to disclose the disability. Sometimes, students must overcome countless barriers, which may even lead them to drop out of university. In dealing with barriers and seeking and requesting the necessary support, self-determination is essential; however, to do so, they must first face the dilemma of whether or not to disclose their disability (Moriña, 2022).

The results of studies to date are promising, as they demonstrate that self-determined behaviour can be learned, promoted, and developed if appropriate support and intervention strategies are implemented (Getzel, 2008). This leads us to believe that teaching and training students to take control of their college experiences is possible by persisting, advocating for their rights, and making choices that lead to the support necessary for inclusion and university success.

With this systematic review, we aim to provide qualitative scientific evidence that, from the perspective of students and graduates with disabilities, explains what skills are necessary to be self-determined at university, why these are important, and how they can be developed. This review is novel, since most reviews have focused on other educational stages (e.g., Cobb et al., 2009), and those focused on university contexts have explored the analysis of effective educational programmes for self-determination (Ju et al., 2017).

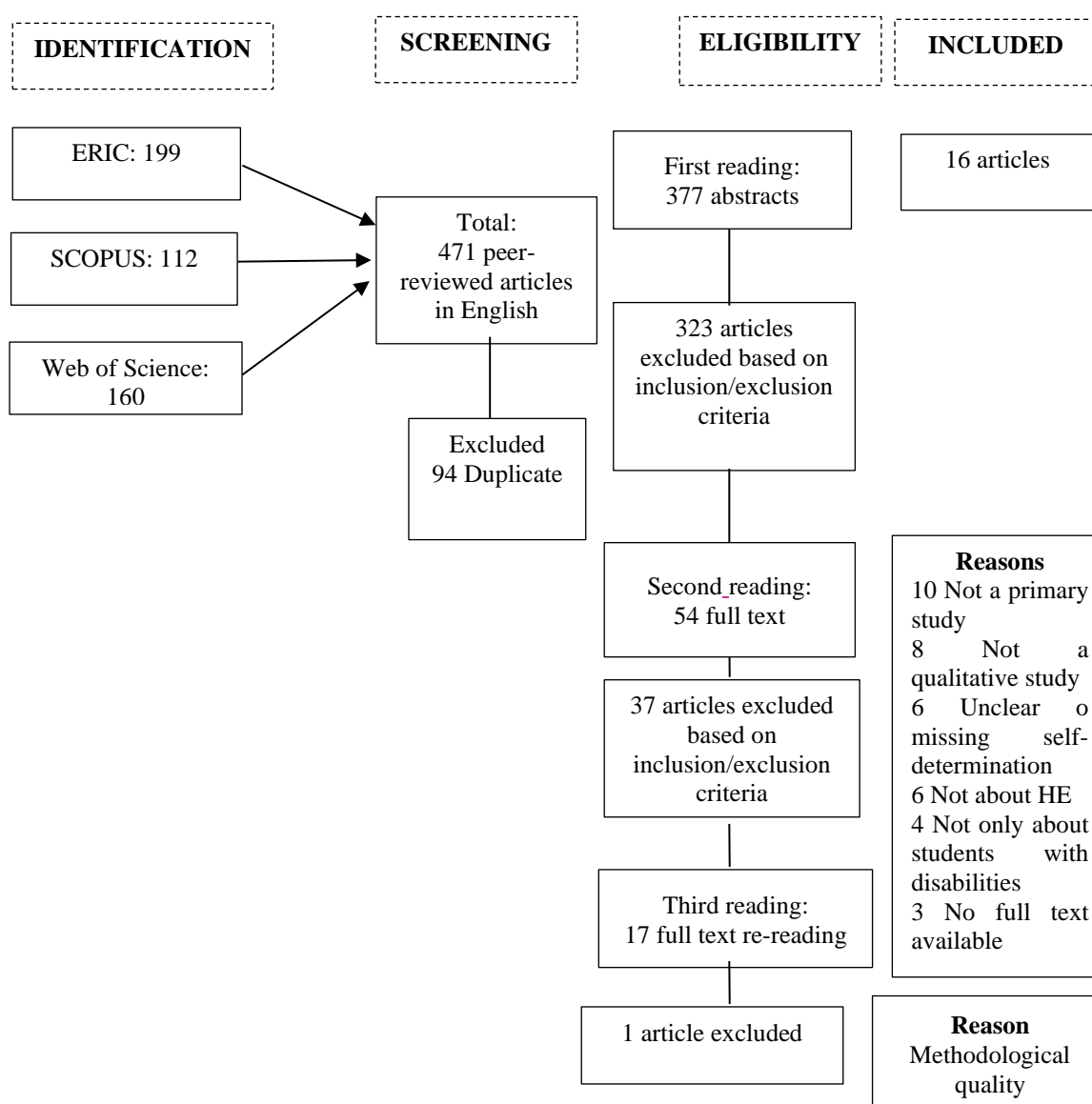
Research methods

This systematic review involved six steps. Firstly, the research questions were formulated. Secondly, search descriptors were defined, and databases were selected. Thirdly, inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined. Subsequently, the methodological quality criteria were established. Only studies that met the quality requirements were included in the review.

Fifthly, data that answered the research questions were extracted after reviewing the papers. Finally, an analysis of the studies was carried out using a category and code system. To ensure the quality of the systematic review, the literature search was based on the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) statement (Page et al., 2021), as is shown in Figure 1 (flowchart).

Figure 1.

Overview of the screening and selection process



Research Questions

Three research questions guided this systematic review:

- 1) What are the essential skills for students with disabilities to be self-determined and successfully graduate from universities?
- 2) Why is self-determination important at university?
- 3) How can self-determination be learned at university?

Exploration and Database Search

The search was carried out in ERIC, Scopus, and Web of Science. These databases are characterised as being viable, reliable, and internationally known. The keywords applied for the search were "self-determination" AND "disability" AND in combination with "university" OR "higher education" OR "postsecondary" OR "college".

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Different search criteria were established to select the articles. The following inclusion criteria were applied: 1) articles published in English; 2) research articles with qualitative methodology; 3) peer-reviewed studies, to meet a minimum standard of reliability and quality in the opinion of other scholars; 4) papers focused on self-determination at university; 5) participants are students or graduates with disabilities (any type of disability, except for intellectual disability, which is mainly linked to special programmes and not undergraduate or graduate degrees); and 6) studies from 2004 to 2022.

Regarding criterion 2 and the choice of exclusively qualitative studies, this decision was based on the fact that, despite recognizing the value of the results obtained by quantitative and mixed-methods research, we were interested in exploring, from the narratives of the participants (students and graduates with disabilities), the skills that are necessary to be self-determined at university, and why these are important. Moreover, as was described by Timmerman and Mulvihill (2015), qualitative research is ideally suited to show the perspectives of people whose voices have been traditionally silenced, such as students with disabilities.

On the other hand, articles were excluded based on the following exclusion criteria: 1) quantitative or mixed studies; 2) other scientific publications, such as books, chapters, conference papers, and theoretical reviews, which are not primary studies; 3) the results analysed do not address self-determination; 4) they do not focus on HE, but on other previous stages, such as Secondary Education; 5) the participants of the study are not only students or graduates with disabilities (e.g. families, faculty, etc.); 6) the text is not accessible.

The search was conducted in September and October 2022. The initial search identified 471 publications, although this number was reduced to 377 after repetitions of publications appearing in more than one database were discarded. All abstracts were read and based on their content, 54 studies were selected and evaluated according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Of these, 37 were discarded. After further in-depth reading of the remaining studies, considering the inclusion criteria, 16 articles were selected for analysis (in the references, these are marked with an asterisk).

Trustworthiness & Relevance of the Studies Included

At all stages of the systematic review, the two authors of this paper reviewed the articles. Thus, in online meetings, we discussed each article one by one and, for those articles where we did not agree on whether to include them or not, we reviewed the work again and, through discussion, consensus was reached. In addition, special attention was paid in the last phase of the review, and the methodological quality of the full texts of the 17 selected studies was assessed using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (2018). After this analysis, 1 article was excluded for lacking methodological rigour, including a very superficial methods section, and failing to show the information required in this section (participants, data collection instruments, data analysis, etc.). Finally, we included 16 articles.

Data Extraction and Analysis

Data from the 16 articles in this systematic review were extracted in a table with six columns: article reference, research questions or objectives, participants (number and type of disability), country, data collection, and results. This allowed us to systematise the analysis of the publications and facilitate their comparison, thus differences and similarities could be identified and examined. In the second phase of the data analysis, we developed a system of categories and codes (Table 1) to analyse each paper.

Table 1.

Categories and Codes System

CATEGORIES AND CODES SYSTEM			
Participant	Country	Data Collection Method	Thematic codes (results)
Total: 303	USA ($n = 13$);	Semi-	Self-determination
Learning disability ($n = 94$);	Czech Republic ($n = 1$);	structured interviews ($n = 13$);	skills:
Sensory ($n = 72$);	New Zealand ($n = 1$);	Focus group 8 ($n = 4$);	1) Problem-solving;
Mental health/psychological disability ($n = 55$);	Norway ($n = 1$).	Observations ($n = 1$);	2) Self-awareness;
Physical disability ($n = 51$);		Data from Social Media ($n = 1$).	3) Goal setting;
Chronic health conditions ($n = 17$);			4) Self-management;
Prefer not to say ($n = 1$).			5) Self-advocacy;
			6) Autonomy;
			7) Resilience;
			8) Empowerment.
			Why self-determination:
			1) Academic goals;
			2) Overcoming barriers;

-
- 3) Demonstrating capabilities;
 - 4) Self-confidence;
 - 5) Academic success.

How self-determination

is learned:

- 1) Trial and error;
 - 2) Family, teachers and peers;
 - 4) Disability services;
 - 5) Peers with disabilities;
 - 6) Programmes;
 - 7) Information and Communication Technologies (ICT).
-

Table 1 shows that most of the studies were conducted in the USA ($n = 13$), using the semi-structured interview as the only data collection instrument ($n = 13$). Pacheco et al. (2019) was the only study to use other instruments in addition to the interview, namely: focus group, observation, and social media. Of the 303 participants in the 16 studies, 60 were graduates and the rest ($n = 243$) were students, with learning disabilities ($n = 94$) being the predominant type of disability. Regarding the type of disability, it should be noted that it does not coincide with the total number of students, since, in the work of Verdinely and Krutner (2016), although the number of participants is known and the disability is indicated, it does not identify the number of students by type of disability. Other studies, such as Webster

(2004), include more disabilities than participants, as a multiple disability category for students with more than one disability is not considered and students with more than one disability are counted separately.

Findings

The results are organised around these three research questions: What are the essential skills for students with disabilities to be self-determined and successfully graduate from universities? Why is self-determination important at university? How can self-determination be learned at university? (Table 2).

Table 2.

Findings

Self-determination at university			
	Essentials	Why it is important	How to learn it
	skills		
Childers & Hux (2016)		Academic goals; Demonstrating capabilities; Academic success.	
Daly-Cano et al. (2015)	Self-advocacy.	Academic success.	Family, teachers and peers.
Getzel & Thoma (2008)	Problem Solving; Self-awareness; Goal setting; Self-management.	Academic success.	

Langørgeren & Magnus (2018)	Autonomy.	Academic success.	
Mask & DePountis (2018)	Self-advocacy.	Academic success.	Disability office.
McCall (2015)	Self-advocacy.	Academic success.	
Miller, M. (2002)	Resilience.	Academic success.	
Mytkowicz & Goss (2012)		Self-confidence; Academic success.	Programmes.
Pacheco et al. (2019)	Autonomy. Empowerment.	Academic success.	ITC.
Scott (2019)	Self-awareness; Self-advocacy.	Academic success.	Disability office.
Skinner (2004)	Self-awareness; Self-advocacy.	Academic success.	
Strnadová et al. (2015)		Overcoming barriers; Academic success.	
Thoma & Getzel (2005)	Problem Solving;	Overcoming barriers; Academic success.	Family, teachers, and peers; Peers with disabilities.

	Self- awareness; Goal setting; Self- management.		
Verdinelli & Kutner (2016)		Academic goals; Academic success.	
Webster (2004)	Problem Solving; Self- awareness; Goal setting; Self-advocacy.	Academic success.	Trial and error.
Yssel et al. (2016)	Autonomy.	Overcoming barriers; Academic success.	

What are the Essential Skills for Students with Disabilities to Be Self-Determined and Successfully Graduate from Universities?

Getzel and Thoma (2008) and Thoma and Getzel (2005) explored the necessary skills to become self-determined adults. Four fundamental skills were identified: problem-solving skills, learning about oneself (and one's disability), goal setting, and self-management. It was concluded that these were essential for staying and succeeding at university. These studies have set a benchmark for further research on this topic. Although these two articles are among the studies that have put the most emphasis on analysing these skills, others (n = 10)

have also studied them, although in a peripheral way, and not as the central focus of the study. The present systematic review allowed us to expand these skills, adding the following: Self-advocacy. In addition, some studies identified characteristics or attributes related to self-determination: Autonomy, resilience, and empowerment.

Problem Solving. For students with disabilities, it is necessary to have enough time to think about what needs to be done to solve a problem (Getzel & Thoma, 2008). For this resolution, they need to have interpersonal skills (Webster, 2004):

Another student said that it was important to find out “what works for you, how do you get around problems. It’s important that you know your limitations, set priorities, and focus on those. Every person is different.” Yet another student discussed the need to “learn to be the squeaky wheel [because] 75-80% of the problems [students face] are with others. (Thoma & Getzel, 2005, p. 237)

Self-Awareness. Another key skill from the student's point of view is learning about themselves and especially about their disability, knowing their strengths and weaknesses, what resources and services are available to them at university, and what accommodations they need (Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Scott, 2019; Skinner, 2004; Webster, 1994). For the 34 students who participated in Thoma and Getzel's (2005) study, this was important since others did not understand the disability and even questioned whether they were studying at university. This ability enabled them to be aware of their needs and to ask for the necessary help:

I'm on about it now, but forcing myself to say ‘I'm hard of hearing’, and you have to look at me when you speak, and that has helped me to, you know, get more of what I need and answer questions when people have questions.... (Scott, 2019, p. 18)

Goal Setting. Participants described the importance of setting short and long-term goals. These should be realistic and designed to achieve goals such as financial independence, job placement, postgraduate education, etc. This implied having high expectations when setting

goals (Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Thoma & Getzel 2005). Moreover, for the students who participated in Webster's (2004) study, these goals involved taking risks and persevering to achieve them.

Self-Management. For some participants, this skill enabled them to organise themselves to have time to study and complete assignments. Others commented on the use of daily planners or other methods to write down assignments and plan for assignments that might require more time to complete (Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Thoma & Getzel, 2005).

Self-Advocacy. Another skill for being self-determined was growth in managing their self-advocacy. This involved being proactive, knowing their legal rights, communicating their own needs, making decisions about the support they needed, speaking up for themselves, and making use of supportive people (Daly-Cano, 2019; McCall, 2015; Mask & DePountis, 2018; Scott, 2019; Skinner, 2004; Webster, 2004). For other students, overcoming the first hurdle of having to stand up for themselves was what led them to have more confidence and initiative to speak up. At university, self-advocacy was especially important when they had to ask faculty members to make course material accessible (Mask & DePountis, 2018), even having to explain to them that it was a legal obligation for them to make such accommodations.

At first, I was petrified by the thought of asking a faculty member for accommodations — even if I had my letter from (Disability Services). I know that they thought I was just lazy. I got a little better at this as a junior and senior. Most professors were very helpful. (Skinner, 2005, p. 98)

In addition to these skills, some of the studies highlighted some characteristics or attributes that were identified in those students who were more self-determined: autonomy, resilience, and empowerment.

Autonomy. In the work of Pacheco et al. (2019), several participants showed self-regulation and autonomy by becoming more aware of their strengths and limitations. In this study, it

was concluded that being autonomous was a trait of self-determined behaviour. The demonstrated autonomy allowed them to be independent (Langørgeren & Magnus, 2018; Yssel et al., 2016). In the study by Yssel et al. (2016), all 12 students defined themselves as very self-driven persons.

Resilience. A single study in this systematic review identifies resilience linked to self-determination (Miller, 1997). This study showed that the six more resilient students with disabilities were characterised as being more self-determined than the non-resilient students. On the other hand, the four non-resilient students did not show self-determination; on the contrary, they were characterised by a lack of perseverance.

Empowerment. A final characteristic linked to self-determination, identified in only one study, was a sense of empowerment (Pacheco et al., 2019). All 19 students in the mentioned study coped with the challenges of the transition to university, stating that they felt psychologically empowered. Their sense of control was expressed not only in the belief that they had become the masters of their destiny, but also in the idea that, despite being a difficult journey, the challenges were manageable.

I am the master of my destiny...I would say, probably, it is just the simple acknowledgment that I know how to do things. I think that, in that respect, I have become a little bit more assertive in getting things organised. (Pacheco et al., 2019, p. 1122)

Why is Self-Determination Important at University?

Another question explored in this systematic review is why students with disabilities need to be self-determined at university (n = 9). Students identified that their self-determination, beliefs, and actions positively affected their perceptions of their experiences as university students. Firstly, it enabled them to achieve their academic goals and all 35 graduates rejected the possibility that their disability could hinder that purpose (Verdinelli & Kutner, 2016). Graduates were aware that their goal might take longer than for other students without a disability or that they might need accommodations, although they would not

continue to struggle to graduate. In fact, to this end, students in the study of Childers and Hux (2016) made efforts to improve their academic strategies, such as becoming more organised or taking notes.

Furthermore, in the study of Strnadová et al. (2015), for some participants, self-determination became one of their best characteristics, as it helped them not to give up and to face the difficulties they had encountered: “What she appreciates the most about herself is ‘ . . . perseverance and self-determination. Because you often feel like giving up or just letting it go; and you always get up and keep on going, till the end” (Strnadová et. al., 2015, p. 1090).

Secondly, throughout their university lives, they experienced barriers, such as institutional, attitudinal, and disability-specific barriers (Strnadová et. al., 2015). They had to develop strategies (assertiveness, self-determination, metacognition, efforts to 'fit in', optimism, and career planning) to overcome these barriers. Therefore, self-determination was key to breaking down barriers to inclusion.

In the case of invisible disabilities, only students who identified themselves as having a disability were able to receive the support they were entitled to by law. In many of these cases, when entering university, students preferred to remain unnoticed, invisible, or in the shadow, foregoing the necessary accommodations. Later, when the barriers they encountered became insurmountable, they decided to disclose their disability. It was then that they acted with self-determined behaviour to get the support they needed (Thoma & Getzel, 2005; Yssel et al., 2016).

On the other hand, for other students, self-determination was important, since it allowed them to show their abilities, even though, in previous stages, others did not believe in them and even recommended that they should not study at university. This is described in the study of Childers and Hux (2016), where some students expressed this:

In my freshman year [of high school], I remember the principal of our high school told me that... 'You need to understand that you're never going to college.' So he's a big motivator in the fact that I'm gonna prove him wrong, and I'm gonna graduate (Childers & Hux, 2016, p. 398)

A final point about why it is important to be self-determined at university is that, when students act proactively, advocating for their rights and getting what they need to be able to learn and participate on equal terms with their non-disabled peers, they gain self-confidence, which increases their self-esteem and leads to academic success (Mytkowicz & Goss, 2012).

When I transferred to this college, I felt a sense of rebirth. I started seeing better grades coming across the table. Success was a feeling that I rarely got, and I now feel that success is part of a daily routine (Mytkowicz & Goss, 2012, p. 353).

Finally, in all 16 papers, being self-determined at university was important, as it contributed to academic success, allowed the students to advocate for their rights and find the support they needed, establish relationships with disability offices, faculty, peers, and, ultimately, gain self-awareness and self-knowledge (Daly-Cano, 2019; Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Skinner, 2004; Thoma & Getzel, 2005).

How Can Self-Determination be Learned at University?

Although the greatest efforts to develop self-determination have traditionally been made in designing and developing programmes (Pacheco et al., 2019), this systematic review shows that, for university students, this is not the only way to acquire self-determination skills. As we will describe in the following lines, for some university students there are other more important strategies (Pacheco et al., 2019; Thoma & Gerzel, 2005).

Some students questioned whether self-determination could be taught and argued that the best strategy for learning self-determination was trial and error. The 32 participants in the study of Webster (2004) claimed the opportunity to practice the skills needed to be self-determined (without the overprotection of their families), taking responsibility for the

consequences of their decisions: “Participants reported that they tried something, failed, and then tried again. Some even went as far as to say that [I] don’t think that could be taught” (Thoma & Getzel 2005, p. 238).

Other studies ($n = 2$) concluded that students already entered university with self-determination skills previously taught by families, faculty, and peers (Thoma & Gerzel, 2005). Thus, the eight students who participated in the study by Dany-Cano et al. (2015), before entering university, already had self-determination skills acquired with the support and teaching of families and faculty. However, we found studies agreeing that self-determination skills could be developed or improved at the university itself ($n = 5$), thanks to support services, other disabled peers, specific training programmes, or Information and Communications Technology (ICT).

Indeed, disability support offices played a key role in the development of self-determination. Scott (2019) concluded that coordinating with these offices was empowering. These experiences required ongoing self-advocacy and diligence in working with university disability support services to achieve accessible course materials (Mask & DePountis, 2018).

Moreover, having to get support from other peers with disabilities studying at the university meant developing self-determination skills. They could act as role models or mentors: “Get people with disabilities together to learn from others with disabilities; a strategy that one student suggested would work to learn what your rights are” (Thoma & Getzel, 2005, p. 238).

In terms of specific programmes to teach self-determination, the study of Mytkowicz and Goss (2012) explored how a two-semester university-based programme in the first year of university in 14 students with disabilities increased and improved their self-authorship and self-determination and changed their perceptions toward themselves as learners. However, although these university programmes were useful, the 34 participants in the study of Thoma

and Getzel (2005) stated that they should start earlier, when students were in the ninth or tenth grades, and should be in any format to accommodate all learning styles.

Finally, for Pacheco et al. (2019), self-determination could be learned through the use of ICTs. These authors questioned how self-determination was fostered for students with disabilities transitioning to university, mainly through programmes. While the teaching of skills was useful, ICT should also be valued as a complementary way of developing skills. In this study, the 19 participants at the beginning of the first semester of their first year had not yet developed self-determined behaviour, with a heavy reliance on family support and disability support services to meet the challenges of university life. At the end of the academic semester, using ICTs, they learned to cope with transition and acquired skills to become independent young adults. At this stage, participants were reportedly reaching a familiarity and sense of control of their university experience and the demands of this new educational context.

Discussion

Self-determination, as this systematic review demonstrates, is a factor that can contribute to students with disabilities retaining and completing their studies (Childers & Hux, 2016; Dali-Cano et al., 2015; Thoma & Getzel, 2005). Although this is not the only element that guarantees university success, since, as has been studied, this is characterised by its multidimensionality, involving both personal and external factors, the results of the studies reviewed seem to indicate that it may be key to persisting and not dropping out of university (Russak & Helwing, 2019).

Students' experiences at university are diverse, sometimes their trajectories are not easy, as they must overcome multiple obstacles in a university scenario in which actions based on the medical model of disability continue (Oliver, 1990), and in which there is still a long way to go to make teaching practices inclusive. However, the purpose of this study was

not to analyse and propose what universities need to do to develop inclusive practices; other works have already addressed this (e.g., Aguirre et al., 2021). The present review offers guidelines for thinking about and projecting something as important as being self-determined at university. Although university students, including those with disabilities, are expected to be self-determined, this is not always the case and, therefore, special attention must be paid to students in their first weeks at university, helping and accompanying them to ensure that this behaviour is practised and, if necessary, taught (Ju et al., 2017).

While it is true that not all students with disabilities are self-determined, the 16 qualitative studies analysed also show us that being self-determined is possible, as the participants in the studies analysed are characterised by mastering some of the essential skills linked to the model proposed by Wehmeyer (1999): problem-solving skills, learning about oneself (and one's disability), goal setting, self-management, self-advocacy, autonomy, resilience, and empowerment (Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Scott, 2019; Skinner, 2004; Webster, 1994).

Although this has not been studied to date, the greatest university dropout rate may come from those students with disabilities whose self-determination skills have not been learned or implemented. The eight skills reported in this systematic review could be a benchmark for universities and also for earlier stages of education to be taught and trained. Short self-information and self-training guides could be developed to show, in a very synthetic way, what one needs to know about university and how to act in the first weeks, since, as we know, this period is crucial, and so is self-determination when it is most needed (Tinto, 1987). In this stage, the students, unlike in previous formative stages, have to be proactive, identify themselves to the disability offices, and ask for the help and accommodation they need, both from them and from the teaching staff. This rarely happens, sometimes because they are unaware that this is the procedure, sometimes because they think

they do not need help, and sometimes because they do not want to reveal their disability, as in the case of invisible disabilities (Thoma & Getzel, 2005; Yssel et al., 2016), which can be a major obstacle in their university lives, discouraging them and, in extreme cases, leading to university dropout (O'Byrne, 2019; Tinto, 1987). Furthermore, such guides could also be created for each of the eight skills, and practical training workshops could be developed to train them. These would undoubtedly be useful for retention and successful completion of university studies.

On the other hand, given that, at least from qualitative research, what has been studied the most on the subject of self-determination and university are precisely these skills (n=12), it seems that it would be advisable to carry out other studies that design, develop and evaluate initiatives to promote the implementation of skills and the acquisition of these skills. Moreover, in addition to materialising initiatives in training programmes, ICTs should also be used, and peers with disabilities should act as mentors (Mytkowicz & Goss, 2012; Pacheco et al., 2019; Thoma & Getzel, 2005).

In the present review, it is surprising that self-determination is mainly linked to academics and, in the 16 studies reviewed, the social dimension, which is so important for inclusion at university, is absent (Moriña, 2022; MacLeod et al., 2018; Madriaga, 2007). In other words, these articles do not explore success in its broad sense; we could be talking about academic success but not university success. Other studies have concluded that university is not only an opportunity to graduate and obtain a job, but also an opportunity to experience social participation and inclusion with peers inside and outside the university classroom (MacLeod et al., 2018; Vaccaro et al., 2015). Perhaps the social dimension is forgotten by universities, and they should value the social learning that students can have as a result of accessing and remaining at the university. It would be advisable to encourage student participation in social, cultural, and sporting activities, making them visible and

encouraging participation. Research should also pay attention to this dimension, and future studies should explore university success, both academically and socially.

Another important aspect we can learn from this review is that disability itself can be responsible for self-determination. In the study of Russak and Hellwing (2019), graduates recognised that their knowledge about their disability and their needs were key factors in their success. They saw disability as an opportunity, were used to overcoming obstacles, and were resilient. Moreover, in our work, the participants required self-determination to show others that they were very capable and were going to graduate (Childers & Hux, 2016). Demonstrating their abilities and ensuring that disability is not an obstacle to their success, along with achieving academic goals or removing barriers to inclusion at university, are the reasons why they believed they needed to be self-determined (Childers & Hux, 2016; Thoma & Getzel, 2005; Verdinelli & Kutner, 2016; Yssel et al., 2016).

Implications for the Practice

For the transition from secondary education to university, it would be desirable to offer students with disabilities the necessary resources and support to strengthen the different elements that influence adaptation to the transition to university. In different universities, some actions have been gradually developed to favour the adaptation of new students and guarantee their permanence at the university. Examples of good practices include university transition programmes that aim to develop self-determination, academic skills, interpersonal relations, academic and professional expectations, habits that promote health and wellbeing, commitment, and acculturation to university contexts. The initiatives that can be put in place to support the transition are very diverse. Some may take place before these students enter university, such as summer bridging programmes that generally aim at academic enrichment, fostering leadership skills, increasing students' expectations and engagement, and acculturation to university contexts. Other initiatives will take place in the first weeks of the

first academic year, such as orientation programmes, specific training courses for students with disabilities, peer mentoring, and faculty mentoring programmes. Overall, these initiatives can support incoming students by providing them with academic, social, and personal strategies to succeed at university and prevent them from dropping out.

Limitations

This review may have limitations in that quantitative and mixed studies have not been included in the choice of primary studies, thereby generating selection bias, which may affect the conclusions drawn in this type of research. In addition, since some of the articles included in the review are more detailed than others, some relevant information may be missing in the analyses. It should also be noted that another limitation might be reflected in the fact that most of the studies included in this review represent the experiences of students from the USA, questioning the representativeness of the 8 skills that appear in this systematic review for students from other countries. Another limitation may be that we have not been able to access three articles and, therefore, the review may be incomplete, as we were not able to review these studies.

Conclusions

Permanence and successful completion of studies is a challenge for today's university systems. The policies developed so far are bearing fruit and are helping more and more students from diverse backgrounds to gain access. This is undoubtedly a step forward, although it is not enough, and specific actions should also be implemented to guarantee permanence and success at the university. These initiatives are especially necessary in the first weeks at university. We know that the measures can be multiple and affect different groups (including faculty members).

About self-determination, we know from our study that self-determination can be learned and that there are different ways to achieve it. From our point of view, all options are

feasible, and we cannot choose one or the other, whether they are taught by their families, faculty, programmes, or peers, practised by trial and error, or learned through the mediation of technologies (Pacheco et al., 2019; Thoma & Gerzel, 2005; Webster 2004). What people with disabilities need to have, are diverse opportunities to acquire and practise self-determination, as it is crucial to their lives.

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