What is university success? Graduates with disabilities define it

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Abstract

This article explores the concept of university success from the perspective of 95 Spanish graduates (62.1% women and 37.9% men) with different types of disabilities, identifying situations in which the participants felt that they were successful at university. The data of this qualitative study were gathered through a semi-structured interview and analyzed with an emerging and progressive system of categories and codes. According to the obtained results, university success is a dynamic and multidimensional concept that consists of different elements, and it is defined through eight components: graduating, attaining the set goal, learning process, social experience, personal growth, professional success, obtaining good marks, and recognition. These results must be considered by universities to promote success among students with disabilities, by fostering their participation in the university experiences and offering them opportunities to attain their academic and professional goals. Future research on university success must delve further into the concept of university success from a holistic perspective that contemplates all these elements.

Keywords University success concept · Graduates with disabilities · Higher education · Inclusive education · Qualitative methodology

The concept of university success has been defined by psychology students from London as a relative concept that is subject to the interpretation of each individual (Lynam et al., 2022). Therefore, the meanings that students provide about university success are diverse,

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and they include elements such as achieving great academic targets, finishing academic courses, and/or completing university degrees, with the subsequent attainment of a professional title, personal satisfaction, skills, competencies, and goals (Lynam et al., 2022; Thomas et al., 2021).

However, although the concept of success at university has been widely studied, there is little research on how it is defined by graduates and undergraduates with disabilities, with the studies of Russak and Hellwing (2019) and Wilke et al. (2023) standing out, which were carried out in Israel and Midwestern USA, respectively. In the few studies that have been published on this specific topic, success has been explored through both quantitative indicators—marks, proportion of credits passed, etc.—(McEwan & Downie, 2019) and qualitative indicators—social and affective development, personal growth, learning, etc.—(Lombardi & Murray, 2016) .

Throughout this manuscript, the term "graduates with disabilities" is used instead of "disabled graduates," since, according to the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (ONU, 2006), disability refers to the situation of a person who, due to their physical or mental conditions, faces important barriers that hinder or prevent their social participation. The term "graduates with disabilities" strengthens the idea that, above all, the person with a disability is a human being and, consequently, a subject with rights. In this work, we focused on the social model of disability, which emphasizes the rehabilitation of a society that must be conceived and designed to face the needs of all people, managing the differences and integrating diversity (Barton & Oliver, 1997).

The aim of the present study was to analyze how success is defined by university graduates with disabilities, as well as the situations in which the participants felt that they were successful at university.

University success from the perspective of graduates with disabilities

The scientific community has analyzed the barriers and facilitators that have been identified by university students with disabilities (Moriña & Perera, 2020), the way to carry out inclusive teaching practices (Hockings, 2010; Sánchez-Díaz & Morgado, 2023), and the teaching methodologies that facilitate inclusion (Carballo et al., 2020). However, few studies have explored the concept of success from the perspective of graduates with disabilities. Russak and Hellwing (2019) found that graduates with learning disabilities conceived success at university as a multifaceted, subjective, complex (composed of different elements), and changing concept. Specifically, the mentioned authors reported that some graduates defined university success as a process with different stages: setting reachable goals, developing and following a working plan, not giving up in the face of difficulties and challenges, searching for alternative solutions, and persevering to triumph against all odds. Similarly, many students referred to subjective dimensions to define success, such as vocation (doing something one loves and is good at), acceptance of oneself, and obtaining positive feedback from others. Likewise, it has been found that other graduates related the concept of university success to the external support they had received through positive comments, constructive criticism, and measurable results, such as obtaining good marks (Russak & Hellwing, 2019; Wilke et al., 2023).

Along the same line, the studies of Huber et al. (2016) and Lizotte (2018), with participants from the USA, and Tuomi et al. (2015), referring to women in Tanzania, pointed out that graduates with disabilities not always agreed in the definition of success or in the internal and

external factors that lead to it (Moriña & Biagiotti, 2022; Russak & Hellwing, 2019). Regarding the former, Tuomi et al. (2015) found the following guarantees for success: persistence to obtain the degree despite the barriers, student interest and motivation toward the chosen degree, satisfaction with the undertaken studies, favorable expectations of the academic outcomes, and adjustment between the capacities of the individual and the academic demands of the degree. Moreover, in the studies of Accardo et al. (2019)—carried out in the USA— Goegan and Daniels (2020)—in the Canadian context—and Russak and Hellwing (2019), the graduates believed that their disabilities were the main reason for their success, as well as the driving force that pushed them to persist in their studies (Moriña & Biagiotti, 2022).

With respect to external factors, the family, faculty, and peers play an important role in university success. The family contributes to the continuation and completion of academic education, with the role of mothers being significant in both processes (Russak & Hellwing, 2019; Tuomi et al., 2015). The faculty and peers also contribute to success, by showing complicity in the realization of the academic tasks, providing emotional support, and helping to detect the need for physical accessibility in the context of the classroom (Lorenzo-Lledó et al., 2020; Tuomi et al., 2015).

The university as a context that offers opportunities for inclusion and university success

Among the external factors, universities, as institutions, are key to the academic continuation and completion of students with disabilities. As indicated by studies by Hewett et al. (2023), carried out in the UK, and Isaeva et al. (2023), performed in Azerbaijani universities, higher education (HE) and subsequent graduation is a structural element for people with disabilities, as it poses the achievement of a goal and an important challenge, which they face with the expectation of developing more participation, independence, and autonomy in this formative and vital stage. In this line, many students with disabilities consider that graduating from university can be an opportunity to improve their quality of life, achieve an independent life, and increase their possibilities in the job market, as Carballo et al. (2021) concluded in a Spanish study.

As highlighted by Méndez et al. (2023), in their work conducted with undergraduate and graduate students with and without disabilities from Europe and Latin America, and Vaccaro et al. (2015), in their work carried out in the USA, people with disabilities perceive the university student role as a complex framework that includes not only academic success (good marks) and mastering the student tasks, but also the recognition from other people and the feeling of belonging to the university community as legitimate members. In fact, some students with disabilities feel that they are responsible for facilitating their own access and continuation in HE, and they identify more barriers than supports in the university environment (Accardo et al., 2019).

However, a considerable number of studies have questioned this "forced" self-defense of students, highlighting the fact that, in some cases, university contexts are not inclusive (Carballo et al., 2021; Hewett et al., 2023). These authors urge universities to implement inclusive practices, understanding educational inclusion as a process that helps overcome the barriers that hinder the presence, participation, and success of all students (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2017). Inclusion allows everyone to have access to opportunities and resources, which in turn contributes to the creation of a fairer and more equitable society.

Thus, universities not only offer the possibility of achieving academic goals and a degree to obtain a qualification and enter the job market, but they can also provide the opportunity to rebuild an identity that deteriorated in previous educational stages (Hewett et al., 2023) and live an experience of participation and social inclusion with peers, inside and outside of the university classrooms (Vaccaro, et al., 2015).

The present study

This study is based on a concept of university success that is related not only to accessing, continuing, and completing a degree in order to graduate, but also to the very university journey, academic and social opportunities, and living an inclusive experience throughout the university studies (Moriña & Biagiotti, 2022).

Study context

In the academic year 2021–2022 (Spanish Ministry of Universities, 2023), in Spain, a total of 354,201 students graduated from university, distributed by education level as follows: 207,646 BSc students (58.6%); 135,419 MSc students (38.2%); and 11,136 PhD students (3.1%). Although there are no updated data on graduates with disabilities by fields of knowledge, the available data indicate that the field of Social and Legal Sciences is the one that receives the largest number of undergraduates with disabilities (Universia Fundation, 2021).

With regard to the time spent to complete the degrees, it is worth highlighting that, while 40% of new students obtained their degree in the established theoretical time (i.e., 4 years), 53% took an additional year to complete it (Spanish Ministry of Universities, 2023). These times are slightly longer in the case of students with disabilities, since one of the strategies they follow to adapt the teaching load to their specific needs is to extend the duration of their studies (Jiménez et al., 2022).

Most Spanish universities have a student disability service, from which each case is individually attended to, offering personalized supports (personal assistants, sign language interpreters, etc.) and/or technical supports (frequency modulation systems, adapted computers, specific software, etc.) required for educational inclusion. Moreover, these services also carry out different training and/or awareness activities for the entire university community.

Given the need to delve into the concept of success from the voice of people with disabilities, the aim of this work was to (1) understand how Spanish graduates with different types of disabilities define university success and (2) identify situations in which these graduates felt that they were successful during the university studies. Two questions guided this research:

Research question 1: What do graduates with disabilities understand by university success?
Research question 2: In what situations did the graduates with disabilities identify success?

Method

This study is framed within a larger research project, entitled "University Success Histories of Graduates with Disabilities: An Ecological Analysis of Personal and Contextual Factors," whose aim is to analyze the personal and contextual factors linked to the university success experiences of graduates with disabilities.

A narrative design was used to explore the success stories of graduates with disabilities. The narrative design is a qualitative research approach in which the researcher gathers data about the life histories and experiences of certain people to describe and analyze them (Hernández-Sampieri et al., 2023) .

Participants

A total of 95 graduates with disabilities participated in the study, with 59 women (62.1%) and 36 men (37.9%). The average age was 30.5 years (SD = 8.03), with a range of 20–66 years. Almost one-third of the sample had a physical/motor disability (32.6%), 20% presented a visual disability, 12.6% had been diagnosed with ASD/Asperger's disease, and 8.4% presented auditory disability. In relation to their university studies, the graduates came from different fields of knowledge, with Social and Legal Sciences being the most frequent (61.1%). Almost half of the participants had completed a postgraduate degree in addition to the BSc (48.4%), requiring 5 years of study, on average, to obtain their first university title ($M = 5.25$; SD = 1.92) (see Table 1).

Procedure

Four criteria were used to select the sample: (a) being a graduate with a disability; (b) having obtained a degree in some Spanish university between the academic years 2016/2017 and 2021/2022; (c) diversity of age, disability, gender, and field of knowledge; and (d) availability to participate.

The sampling was conducted in three ways. Firstly, in the academic year 2021/2022, the staff of the student disability service of the different Spanish universities were contacted, and they were asked to reach graduates with disabilities who met the inclusion criteria of the study. Secondly, the snowball technique was used (Dusek et al., 2015) to contact former students with disabilities known by the researchers of this study, as well as other colleagues of different fields of knowledge who knew and had had students with disabilities in their classrooms in previous years, and associations of people with different types of disabilities from the entire Spanish territory. Lastly, with the aim of accessing the maximum number of participants, different social networks were used. The final sample consisted of 95 graduates with disabilities from 27 Spanish public universities.

Instrument

The data were gathered through a semi-structured interview, following an ad hoc instrument design process, with different phases:

Table 1 Characteristics of the sample

	Number	Percent
Sex		
Man	36	37.9
Woman	59	62.1
Age range		
20–29 years	53	55.8
30–39 years	34	35.8
40–49 years	3	3.2
50–66 years	5	5.3
Type of disability		
Physical/motor	31	32.6
Visual	19	20.0
ASD/Asperger's disease	12	12.6
Auditory	8	8.4
Cerebral palsy	4	4.2
Mental	4	4.2
Organic	3	3.2
ADHD	2	2.1
Dyslexia	2	2.1
Physical and mental	2	2.1
Physical and visual	1	1.1
Physical and auditory	1	1.1
Physical and psychosocial	1	1.1
Visual and auditory	1	1.1
Intellectual	1	1.1
Narcolepsia	1	1.1
Skin disease	1	1.1
Psychogenic, unspecified (rare disease)	1	1.1
Degree studied		
BSc	49	51.6
BSc and MSc	46	48.4
Age at the beginning of the degree		
≤ 18 years	29	30.5
19–28 years	38	40.0
30–35 years	6	6.3
≥ 40 years	4	4.3
Did not remember/did not answer	18	18.9
Number of years spent to complete the degree		
Three	1	1.1
Four	44	46.3
Five	26	27.4
More than five	24	25.2
Field of knowledge		
Arts and Humanities	13	13.7
Social and Legal Sciences	58	61.1
Health Sciences	16	16.8
Science	3	3.2
Engineering	5	5.3

– Collaborative construction of the instrument, mainly based on the studies of Moriña and Biagiotti ([2022](#)) and Russak and Hellwing ([2019](#)).
– *Expert validation*. A total of seven professionals from five different Spanish universities carried out an expert judgment, to guarantee the relevance, clarity, interest, and adequacy of the questions with respect to the purpose of the study. Five of the judges are faculty members (two are experts in inclusive education and three are people with disabilities), and two of the judges are staff of the disability service. All the professionals who participated in the expert judgment have a minimum accredited experience of 6 years in the position held. After analyzing the experts' valuations, the instrument was revised considering the recommendations made by them.
– *Pilot test.* This test verified the response times, clarity, and understandability of the questions, and the necessary changes were made. Two Spanish graduates with disabilities (physical and visual) participated in the pilot test, since they could not be included in the sample, based on the criterion that they obtained their university degree before the academic year 2016/2017.

As some participants expressed themselves more fluently than others, the interviews lasted 90 min on average (with a range of 50–120 min) and were conducted by members of the research team, who had extensive experience interviewing people with disabilities. At the beginning of each interview, the participants were informed that they could take a break during the interview if they wished to. In order to adapt to the needs of the students (limited time availability; great diversity in terms of places of residence, which made it difficult to conduct face-to-face interviews; etc.), most of the interviews ($n=72$; 75.7%) were performed online. Regarding the remaining interviews, 19 (20.0%) were carried out face to face, three (3.2%) were conducted via phone call, and one interview (1.1%) was completed by the participant by typing the answers to the questions and sending them to the research team via email.

Positionality

The authors are all Caucasian Spanish women residing in Spain. Only one of the authors has a disability (visual). All authors work in different Spanish universities. Most of our activity is carried out in HE institutions, and we hold PhDs in different disciplines (two of the authors have a PhD in Psychology and the other has a PhD in Pedagogy). As researchers, we believe that knowing and understanding how graduates conceive success are relevant to contributing to experiences of university success.

Data analysis

The data analysis was deductive, inductive, qualitative, and emergent, using a system of categories and codes to make sense of the gathered information (Kuckartz & Rädiker, [2019](#)). All authors read and/or listened to each interview to familiarize themselves with the stories of the participants and individually constructed a coding system, simultaneously developing descriptive codes. In the team meetings, the authors revised the codes that were individually identified, discussed and resolved the discrepancies, and agreed upon a common system of categories and codes (Table [2](#)). Then, each of the authors compared once again the coding to verify the decisions that were made.

Throughout the entire analysis, peer debriefings were established to help the researchers identify possible biases, question their interpretations, and consider alternative explanations, since these conversations increase the rigor and credibility of the study, by guaranteeing that the conclusions are based on the data and on the relevant literature, rather than merely on the personal perspective of the researcher (reflexivity).

With the aim of ensuring that the analyzed data were recognized by the participants as a true approximation of what they thought and felt, the interviews (audio recordings) were transcribed verbatim and returned to each participant, who was asked to verify their accuracy and correct any possible mistakes. Each participant was free to correct or remove any piece of information that, in their opinion, did not express what they wanted to say or did not want to be disseminated, thus guaranteeing that the findings were as credible and accurate as possible (credibility). Most of the participants did not make any changes. Once the accuracy of the transcriptions was verified by each participant, to facilitate the processing and management of the abundant information obtained, the MaxQDA v22 qualitative analysis software was used.

Ethical considerations

In the first contact, the participants were informed about the aim of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their required commitment to initiate the data collection. Once they agreed to participate, the graduates signed an informed consent form, agreeing to the recording and use of their data for the indicated research purposes. After obtaining the informed consent, they were asked to provide different sociodemographic

Table 2 System of categories and codes

Categories	Codes
1. Concept of success	1.1. Passing or graduating from university
	1.2. Achieving the set goal
	1.3. Process of academic and personal learning
	1.4. Social experience
	1.5. Self-improvement
	1.6. Professional success
	1.7. Getting good marks
	1.8. Recognition
2. University success (valuation)	2.1. Success
	2.2. Half success
	2.3. No success
3. Experiences of university success (examples)	3.1 Experiences of passing and/or graduating from university
	3.2. Experiences of achieving the set goal
	3.3. Experiences of processes of academic and personal learning
	3.4. Social experiences
	3.5. Self-improvement experiences
	3.6. Professional success experiences
	3.7. Experiences of getting good marks
	3.8. Experiences of recognition

data (age, type of disability, education level, start year, completion year, etc.). All data were stored in password-protected files, which could only be accessed by the members of the research team.

It was proposed to identify the participants by pseudonyms, although several of them rejected the idea of both choosing and being assigned a pseudonym. In this situation, the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants were guaranteed, replacing their real names with numbers in order to identify them (P1–P95). Moreover, the ethical principles of the Spanish Research Agency were followed, as well as the principles of ethics and practice of processes (Moriña, 2021). Lastly, the research project to which this study is linked to has been approved by the Ethics Committee of the Autonomous Community of Andalusia (code: 156/2021).

Results

Based on the definitions of success provided by the different participants, the data analysis revealed that most of them (87.4%) defined themselves as people who had been successful at university, while 6.3% considered that they had only been successful in some aspects, since they had not attained all the goals they had set for themselves when they started their university studies: "I was only half successful, because I did not learn everything I wanted to" (P49). A minority, 2.1%, were convinced that they had not been successful at university. P90 provided a clear example of this: "No sir! Not at all," while 4.2% did not answer this question.

As for the meaning attributed by the participants to this concept of university success, the results obtained in this study show that university success did not have a univocal meaning, but it was understood as a dynamic and multidimensional concept composed of different elements. In fact, success was defined through eight components: graduating, attaining the set goal, learning process, social experience, personal growth, professional success, good marks, and recognition. As is shown in Table 3, most of the participants (82%) attributed multiple meanings to university success. In addition, success was conceived as a dynamic element that evolved according to the expectations and the different academic, professional, and personal experiences of the participants:

> … it depends on the different stages. Right now in the MSc I am studying, I am happy with a pass mark, because what I want is to be successful at learning. I mean, for me, success, at this moment... is to make the most of what I am studying in the MSc, but it is true that getting good marks is convenient when you are studying a degree. (P22)

Success as passing the subjects or graduating from university

Most of the participants of the study (67.4%), when defining success, referred to the fact of passing the subjects or obtaining a title at university. However, only 8.4% ($n = 8$) of these participants defined success exclusively as the result of passing or graduating: "To me, university success is to obtain the degree." (P45).

Table 3 Concept of university success

Definition of university success	Participants	n	Percent
1. Passing the subjects or graduating from university	P2 P3 P4 P5 P7 P10 P11 P12 P13 P14 P15 P17 P20 P21 P22 P24 P25 P26 P28 P29 P32 P33* P34 P35* P36* P38 P39 P40 P41 P44 P45* P46* P47 P49 P51 P52 P54 P56 P57 P58 P60 P61 P62* P64 P65 P67* P69 P70 P71 P72 P74 P78 P79 P80 P82 P83 P84 P85 P87 P89 P90* P91 P92 P93	64	67.4
2. Achieving the goal set	P1 P3 P4, P6 P8 P9 P11 P12 P13 P14 P16 P17 P19 P22 P24 P25, P26 P27, P30 P31 P38 P42 P56 P57 P59 P60 P65 P68 P69 P71 P72 P73 P74 P76 P80 P82 P83 P85 P87 P91 P92	41	43.1
3. Process of academic and personal learning	P1 P3 P6 P11 P12 P14 P15 P16 P17 P22 P23 P24 P26 P32 P34 P37* P39 P44 P47 P48* P49 P53* P54 P61 P64 P65 P66 P68 P69 P70 P73 P76 P77 P78 P80 P86 P87 P88* P95	39	41.0
4. Social experience	P4 P14 P15 P23 P24 P25 P26 P29 P30 P31 P32 P39 P43 P47 P55 P59 P60 P64 P65 P73 P76 P77 P78 P81* P91 P93	26	27.4
5. Self-improvement	P5 P6 P7 P8 P10 P14 P15 P25 P27 P28 P31 P32 P38 P39 P40 P42 P44 P47 P50* P51 P52 P76 P79 P83 P89 P91	26	27.4
6. Professional success	P2 P6 P11 P14 P16, P28 P32 P34 P41 P43, P47 P51 P55 P58 P63* P70 P72 P77 P82 P84 P85 P86 P89 P93 P95	25	26.3
7. Getting good marks	P3 P4 P6 P9 P11 P18 P20 P21 P22 P23 P27 P30 P38 P52 P56 P59 P64 P65 P75* P78 P93	21	22.1
8. Recognition	P6 P7 P18 P19 28 P52 P56 P66 P74 P87 P94*	11	11.6

The participants identified with "*" are those who defined success based solely on the concept indicated. The rest included two or more concepts in their definitions

Therefore, these participants identified the following as successful experiences: when they passed certain subjects, the day they graduated and completed their studies, and when they finished their final degree project (FDP).

> I suppose that when you pass, at least the most difficult subjects..., obtaining the English degree, and finishing the FDP had very positive results, because they were the highest point and, obviously, those were moments of success. (P39)

The remaining participants (58.9%), in their concept of success, in addition to passing and graduating (as is described in the following sections), added other aspects, such as getting good marks, acquiring learnings that were useful for their professional development, enjoying what they studied, meeting new people, having a degree that would help them to make a living or find a desirable job, and completing the degree in the established time.

> Success means many things. Firstly, getting good marks and passing; secondly, learning and enjoying what you are doing; thirdly, making a small social network to find a job and create employment in the long term, like an entrepreneurial project and... it also means that you motivate yourself everyday… (P65)

Success in attaining the goal set

Almost half of the participants (43.1%) included in their definition of success the fact of attaining the goal they set for themselves when they initiated their university studies, such as graduating in what they wanted, being satisfied with what they did and achieved, being happy, and showing great motivation and passion for what they studied.

> ... being passionate, having the interest for… having some type of motivation, that is the word, because... as a person, you set a target for yourself… and, with perseverance… reaching your limits, and even going beyond your limits. (P8)

These participants provided examples of situations in which they felt successful at university, identifying their interests, passion, and vocation for what they did.

> For me, the practicum was among the most special moments of my entire degree, because I learned a lot. I was very happy to do what I had studied, and that was the most successful moment for me in the degree, especially because I was in a place I had chosen and I liked. (P88)

Success as a process of academic and personal learning

University success, in addition to being perceived as a result, was also conceived as a learning process (41.0%), both academic and personal, and as a life experience.

> The learning I acquired throughout my entire degree, after all, is success in my opinion, more than completing the degree itself. I mean, I can describe university success as all the knowledge I got from the degree, at both the professional and personal level. (P64)

Therefore, success involves the need to learn at university and make use of the resources provided for it, such as sharing with peers and faculty members. This learning would help them in the future with the necessary training for professional performance. An example of this was given by P44: "For me, success is true learning; that is, learning needs to be internalized, because it is of no use to me to have a degree if I did not learn anything."

The graduates gave specific examples of success in academic learning. For instance, according to P6, success was "learning English or knowing how to conduct museum exhibitions," whereas other participants, such as P58, valued the practicum as a successful experience, due to the great learning acquired in it.

The participants defined success as a process that had to be enjoyed. They did not believe that success was exclusively linked to obtaining a title or passing the subjects. On the contrary, they thought that it should be related to the quality of the personal learning acquired throughout university studies.

> I believe that university success... cannot be measured quantitatively, but based on quality, on the learning you get... I measure success according to the quality of the education you receive and the personal learning you reach in that journey. (P1)

When they gave an example of success as a process that had to be enjoyed, P9 recalled how she felt when she studied, valuing it as pleasurable, and that it made her feel good to take an exam knowing that she had learned enough to face it.

> What I found most enjoyable was studying. For me it was very gratifying to go to an exam well prepared, knowing everything very well, and being able to relate one thing to the other. I realised that what I really enjoy is knowledge. (P9)

This learning posed a personal growth that led them not only to acquire personal competencies for an independent life, as was stated by P47 ("I have learned to be more decisive and autonomous, and to go around alone in many places"), but also to improve as a human being, as was expressed by P17: "I consider that success is what I have learned and I have improved as a person by completing this degree, not because I got great marks and distinctions."

Success as a social experience

For 26 graduates (27.4%), success was the opportunity to be socially successful. These participants agreed that studying for a university degree was not only about studying and obtaining a title, but it was also a chance to meet new people, establish social relationships, have fun, and enjoy the independence that university provides: "To me, university is more than just the academic component. It is also the social part, the sports, knowing, moving around." (P4).

In this sense, the participants highlighted social relationships with peers and the importance of having a social network. This was clearly observed when they valued the friendship relationships that were generated throughout their university studies: "Making new friends, who acted as a very important network of support at university." (P64).

Social support was also mentioned, as they shared with their peers the same goals and supported each other to attain the academic and professional objectives:

> Well, in my opinion, being successful at university is having a group of peers who have the same objectives as you, or at least similar goals, and finding a group of people with whom you are comfortable, with whom you can grow professionally, regardless of whether we all go different ways in the future. (P31)

This support network facilitated their university journey, by sharing academic tasks and granting social support. They even mentioned that it improved their self-esteem.

Some participants pointed out that they had successfully completed their studies and thrived thanks to their classmates. They felt understood and helped by their peers.

> I was successful because I had a very good network of social support, excellent classmates who have helped me and understood that I could not hear properly. So, to me, success is to feel comfortable with your classmates, to feel supported and, thanks to that, you can thrive. (P81)

P56 valued social success above all, since she had faced many barriers in previous educational stages and, for the first time, she felt recognized and valued by her classmates at university: "And so I felt very good, because I have gone through rough times in my academic life, and it was at university when I first felt truly loved by my classmates."

One of the examples provided by several participants as social success was being chosen by their peers to represent the class in the graduation speech.

> I gave a graduation speech, because my classmates chose me. So, for me, that was a spectacular moment. I believe that, if your classmates choose you to give the speech, it is like they recognise "what a better person to give the speech in such an important day?..." (P31)

Lastly, having the support of the faculty was also considered a successful social experience. They valued those faculty members who cared about them and helped them with their academic objectives.

> The fact that the faculty understood me was a success for me. In the end, having someone telling you… "I am here if you need anything", I see it as a success, to be able to say "wow, there really are people who are involved in this". (P21)

Success as self-improvement

For 27.4% of the participants, university success implied the word "self-improvement" or, in other words, showing what one can do, demonstrating that one deserves it, overcoming barriers, personal effort, giving the most of oneself, adapting, persevering, not giving up and/or achieving autonomy, and fighting for one's and others' rights.

> I also consider that I was successful when I faced a faculty member who did not want to upload the slides to the platform for me and she thought that I did not need them. After one day of rage and frustration, the next day I said "I am going to talk to this person and I am going to tell her what I need, and that if she does not give it to me in good terms, I will go to the disability service and file a complaint! And so I faced her. I went to the service and everything went well, but the fact that I stood up to her was a success for me. (P25)

Success as professional integration

Likewise, 26.3% of the graduates with disabilities included in their definition of success the attainment of a qualification to enter the job market and working in the area of knowledge they had studied, performing a job that would allow them to live an independent life, making a living thanks to the title they had obtained: "I can say that I had been and currently am successful thanks to the fact that, nowadays, I have a job related to my studies" (P16).

Success as getting good marks

A total of 22.1% of the participants pointed out in their definition of university success the fact of getting good marks. These participants were not satisfied with merely passing the subjects, highlighting the importance of getting good marks. One of the participants (P75) expressed that the concept of university success was exclusively based on getting good marks in the different subjects.

> For me, university success is being able to study at university and getting good marks… it indicates that you are doing things right, and that you are making the most of what you are being offered in terms of education. (P75)

In this sense, they identified that they had felt successful when they obtained great marks in some subjects.

> … for example, when I got a distinction in some subject, that was like a recognition, and I said to myself "Jesus!"... I have worked hard in this subject and look... that was also a great motivator, as well as the fact of completing the degree or the FDP with a 10. (P52)

Success as recognition

Lastly, enjoying recognition from the faculty and/or classmates was a key element in the definition of success provided by 11.6% of the graduates.

> Well, I finally understood what university success was, in the good sense: A person with a disability completing the degree with good marks and being applauded by her faculty and peers when presenting the FDP. They told me that, in the years they had been in that degree, they had never had anyone like me. (P16)

It is also worth mentioning the idea of being a referent or a role model and contributing to helping other people with disabilities, which, although they were only expressed by two participants (P26 and P56), reflect the importance of the activism shown during the university studies and the contribution not only to their success, but also to that of other people with disabilities.

> Achieving rights for people with disabilities. As I was in the Board of the Faculty, I fought very hard to get things for students with disabilities. […] I feel very proud

of myself for that. It was a success, because not only did I thrive, but I also tried to help my peers with disabilities in their academic life. (P56)

Discussion

The results obtained in this study show how the graduates with disabilities defined university success, in which situations they experienced success, and whether they considered (or not) that they had been successful at university. Therefore, these data provide a view of a topic that has been barely explored from the scientific scope, since the concept of university success has been scarcely studied from the voice of graduates with disabilities themselves (Russak & Hellwing, 2019; Tuomi et al., 2015). Unlike the cited works, the present study analyzed the concept of university success with a larger sample of graduates from different Spanish universities ($N=95$), with different types of disabilities and from all fields of knowledge.

According to Russak and Hellwing (2019), in most of the studies that have addressed the concept of success, the latter has been predetermined by the researchers themselves. However, the main contribution of the present work is that the definitions of success were provided by graduates with disabilities. Thus, since conceptions represent the beliefs of an individual, the former were multifaceted, situational, and based on personal experience (Bostock, 2014). Specifically, the participants defined university success through eight components: graduating, attaining the set goal, the very process of personal and professional learning, the social experiences that take place in the university stage, self-improvement, achieving professional success, obtaining good marks, and social recognition.

Our results are in line with those obtained by Russak and Hellwing (2019), since the participants defined success as a broad concept that is related not only to the completion of the university studies and/or graduating within the established time, but also to the university journey itself, the academic and social opportunities that are offered to learn and participate, and, consequently, persisting and living an inclusive experience throughout the university studies. In this way, coinciding with the results reported by Wilke et al. (2023), the graduates with disabilities were against the metrics that reduce success to a single normative datum (e.g., the average mark). An implication of this work is that universities must nurture the teaching–learning processes, and other university spaces that enable social inclusion, such as cultural and sports activities, must be among the measures to advance toward inclusion. The improvements introduced by universities may benefit all students, not only people with disabilities, since advocating for inclusion implies increasing the academic and social participation of all students, the feeling of belonging, and quality learning.

In line with previous research (Accardo et al., 2019; Russak & Hellwing, 2019), the concept of success of graduates with disabilities is composed of internal and external factors. Regarding the internal factors, in line with the findings of other researchers (Accardo et al., 2019; Goegan & Daniels, 2020), the participants of the present study saw disability as an opportunity to show their capability, to not give up (self-improvement), and/or to achieve independence and fight for their rights and those of others. Moreover, as in the study of Valle et al. (2014), carried out with Spanish participants, the graduates believed that a success factor was the acquisition of new learnings which allowed them to obtain a qualification that helped them to enter the labor market and find a job they liked. In this sense, and in relation to the internal factors linked to success, through formative plans,

universities may contribute to improving the personal competencies of students, which are fundamental for their retention and the completion of their studies.

With regard to the external factors, one of the elements on which the participants based their concept of success was the social experience that university life provided them. According to the graduates, classmates are an external support and, therefore, another factor that contributes to success, in both the academic and social scopes. In the same vein, Accardo et al. (2019) concluded that the support received from classmates allows students with disabilities to progress in their learning (helping them set goals, providing academic material, or working in groups). Social support offers them the opportunity to live an inclusive university experience. It is important to underline that studying at university is not only about the academic component, as it can also be a chance for participation and social inclusion (Langørgen & Magnus, 2020; Rodríguez et al., 2021). Thus, as an implication, universities must be sensitive to how success is perceived and base their practice not only on the academic and quantitative elements, but also on the promotion of actions that facilitate the social and professional inclusion of all their students. Considering this and the fact that faculty members are a key factor for university success, it is necessary that HE institutions design and develop formative actions to qualify their faculty in universal design for learning and educational and social inclusion. In this way, faculty members will be better prepared to support the academic and professional success of all their students, thereby contributing to the promotion of inclusion and equity in HE.

Limitations and future directions

This study has some limitations that must be considered. Firstly, since it is a qualitative study with a large sample, the data analysis was very complex, which delayed the process. Another limitation is related to the use of a single data-gathering instrument: a semi-structured interview. The combined use of other instruments, such as photo-elicitation and self-report, might have provided other meanings of the concept of success.

Furthermore, this study could have a greater impact if conducted in other countries, thereby enabling the analysis of differences between the university systems of the different countries. Future studies should analyze whether the concept of success differs as a function of the type of disability (visible-invisible) and gender.

Similarly, it would be convenient for future studies to contemplate different voices with the aim of exploring the concept of university success, since such a concept may vary depending on who defines it—e.g., faculty vs. students—(Lynam et al., 2022). Lastly, further studies should delve into the reasons that lead students with disabilities to choose, in most cases, degrees in the field of Social and Legal Sciences, as well as why the times to complete the degrees are slightly longer in the case of students with disabilities.

Conclusions

Knowing and understanding how graduates conceive success are relevant, since, in a neo-liberal environment, institutions create and use success metrics to demonstrate the value of HE (Wilke et al., 2023). This study shows that university success is a complex concept, composed of different elements, that goes beyond mere quantitative results. Therefore, the commitment of universities must transcend the guarantee of access, continuation,

and graduation of students with disabilities. To this end, the administrative staff must take into account that the concept of success is multifaceted, complex, and dynamic, in order to provide support and resources adjusted to the needs of each person and contribute to their experience of university success.

All this is clearly connected to the proposition of Biesta (2020), who suggests that education must be oriented toward three domains, which he coined as qualification, socialization, and subjectivation. The latter dimension is understood as the existence of the student with a life of their own and the freedom to act in and with the world in a mature manner. In this sense, Biesta (2010) pointed out the complexity of currently understanding good education, highlighting the need to address this issue more precisely, attending to ethical, political, and democratic dimensions of education.

In this context, although universities have made great efforts in the last decades to advance toward inclusion, different barriers persist (physical, social, attitudinal, etc.), which may hinder the university success experiences of students with disabilities. Therefore, it is necessary to detect any exclusion practices and remove the imbalances that prevent a university education for everyone.

Data availability The data (anonymized, with no identifying information) are available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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