

**Planning and implementing actions for students with disabilities:
Recommendations from faculty members who engage in inclusive pedagogy**

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is to explore the advice given to colleagues by 119 Spanish faculty members who engage in inclusive pedagogy, to help them plan and implement actions aimed at including students with disabilities. We carried out an exploratory qualitative study with individual interviews. We analysed them using a system of categories and inductive codes. The results revealed five recommendations: listen to students and get to know them and the needs deriving from their disability; be empathetic and emotionally engaged and strive to facilitate students' learning; establish a universal, accessible, flexible and open syllabus; view having students with disabilities in class as an opportunity and part of the job; and actively seek information and training. The analysis includes a series of recommendations that may help other faculty members eager to make their planning and practice more democratic, fair and inclusive.

Keywords: Higher education; Faculty members; Inclusive pedagogy; Recommendations

Introduction

Inclusive education is a fundamental human right that cannot be questioned or violated (United Nations, 2006). Consequently, a high-quality university education cannot be considered as such unless it is accessible to and fair for everyone, including people with disabilities (Kilpatrick et al., 2017; Riddell, Tinklin, & Wilson, 2013). In this context, faculty members are key pieces in this puzzle who must be open to lifelong learning. They must also be willing to change their attitude towards the way they teach and to implement innovative strategies which will enable them to be more inclusive in their practice (Moliner, Yazzo, Niclot, & Philippot, 2019).

Faculty attitudes impact the permanence and success of students with disabilities, as do the help provided by the institution's support, administrative services and the coordination of professionals. All these are essential to defend the rights of this student body and ensure their inclusion at university (Knight, Wessell, & Markle, 2016; Zhang, Rosen, & Li, 2019). Nevertheless, although many universities have made a commitment to guaranteeing access for students with disabilities, there is still a very high drop out rate among this population (Becker & Palladino, 2016; De los Santos, Kupczynsk, & Mundy, 2019; Kilpatrick et al., 2017; Veitch, Strehlow, & Boyd, 2018). In this context, the perspective of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in Higher Education shows how the syllabus itself can be 'disabling' and can serve as a tool for exclusion and oppression when it does not take everyone into account (Collins, Azmat, & Rentschler, 2019; Waitoller & Thorius, 2016).

Some studies identify faculty as the most important stakeholder in both the classroom and the lives of university students with disabilities (Kezar & Maxey, 2014; Lovett, Nelson, & Lindstrom, 2015; Nancy, Ellen, Kirsten, & Autumn, 2017; Sandoval, Morgado, & Doménech, 2020). Consequently, if faculty members do not celebrate diversity and do not incorporate the principles of UDL into their subjects, then ensuring the real participation of everyone will be far from easy (Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Larkin, Nihill, & Devlin, 2014; Nancy et al., 2017).

Other authors have concluded that the learning, motivation and commitment of all students (although particularly those in more vulnerable situations) are not achieved only through effective teaching methods. For this reason, in an inclusive teaching-learning process is also essential to establish close relationships and personal, emotional bonds between faculty and students (Clément & Dukes, 2017; Kezar & Maxey, 2014; Quinlan, 2016; Stein, 2014). The study by Titsworth,

Quilan, and Mazer (2010) highlighted the importance of faculty being approachable and listening to students with disabilities in order to understand their needs. This type of relationship makes students feel emotionally supported and more secure about voicing their concerns and worries. According to this approach, the emotional and affective component of teaching and learning is vital (Clément & Dukes, 2017). To Scott, Loewen, Funckes, and Kroeger (2003), inclusivity depends on the type of interactions which take place between students and faculty. In this sense, faculty members are encouraged to make personal connections with their students.

Indeed, Thomas (2016) found that students who did not feel they had a good relationship with faculty were more likely to leave university before earning their degree. However, including practical and relevant contents for the future, positive peer interactions, continuous assessment and feedback, active participation and personal tutoring have been found to significantly reduce the likelihood of drop out.

Evidence has also been presented by research focusing on giving voice to students with disabilities regarding what faculty members who contribute to inclusion are like (Griffiths, 2010; Moriña, Cortés, & Molina, 2015). These studies describe faculty members as humane, respectful, flexible, approachable, understanding, helpful and with a positive attitude towards disability. Stein (2014) also identified other characteristics, such as concern and interest in students' wellbeing (responding to their messages, being available during tutorials and making reasonable adjustments). For their part, Lipka, Forkosh, and Meer (2019) reached similar conclusions, finding that empathy, care and accessibility are valued by students with disabilities. Moreover, Murray, Wren, and Keys (2008) reported that this attitude could be favourably influenced by faculty members' experience of and training in disability. Getzel and Thoma (2008) found that students with disabilities received more support from faculty members who were more aware of and had received training in their characteristics and needs.

Similarly, Bunbury (2020) and Sakız and Sarıcalı (2017) called for more faculty training, arguing that UDL and an inclusive pedagogy not only benefit students with disabilities, but also the entire student body. From this perspective, having students with disabilities in higher education and implementing UDL constitutes an opportunity to improve students' quality of life, bring down barriers to everyone's participation and rethink the quality of learning environments (García-González, Gutiérrez Gómez-Calcerrada, Solera Hernández, & Ríos-Aguilar, 2020; Järkestig Berggren, Rowan, Bergbäck, & Blomberg, 2016).

In short, if we really want to achieve universities more inclusive, we should strive to do away with traditional, rigid, 'one-size-fitsall' approaches. It is therefore urgent for both faculty and institutions themselves to be given guidelines and recommendations for designing learning environments for everyone. This could be because many faculty members still continue to design their subjects in a standardised manner, and do not feel themselves to be fully prepared or capable of planning their classes to provide a response according to the needs of all students (Adefila, Broughan, Phimiester, & Opie, 2020; Griful-Freixenet, Struyven, Verstichele, & Andries, 2017; Ortiz, Agreda, & Colmenero, 2018). Moreover, several studies have found that 'effective' pedagogical recommendations concerning students with disabilities may also help raise awareness among faculty and encourage them to implement more inclusive practices for everyone (Kendall, 2016; Lombardi, Murray, & Gerdes, 2011; Redpath et al., 2013).

The current literature contains no studies that provide recommendations from faculty for colleagues wishing to become more inclusive in their practice, although some have given voice to students, asking them for proposals in this sense (Morgado, Moriña, & López-Gavira, 2017; Moriña et al., 2015). In these studies, the recommendations made by students included the need for faculty members to have a positive attitude and to establish relationships built on trust and empathy. They also highlighted the use of alternative methodologies to the traditional lecture, participatory and active classes, the use of new technologies and continuous training in disability and inclusive education.

In short, with this article we aim to fill a gap in the existing international literature. On the one hand, unlike previous studies, here we give voice to faculty members from different areas of knowledge. On the other side, in this case the experiences and recommendations of this faculty may serve to inspire both their colleagues and different universities to design and act for everyone, rather than only for some. The research question we seek to answer with this study is as follows: What recommendations do faculty members who engage in inclusive pedagogy make for planning and implementing actions designed to ensure that students with disabilities can learn and participate?

Method

Participants

The results presented in this article form part of a broader research project entitled 'Inclusive Pedagogy at University; Narratives by faculty members (ref. EDU2016. 76587-R)', which analyses the beliefs, knowledge, designs and actions of inclusive faculty. In this work, we explore only the results pertaining to designs and actions.

During recruitment, participants were selected by their students with disabilities, who nominated those faculty members they felt had contributed to their inclusion at university. This process was mediated by disability support services from universities in different parts of Spain. The staff working with these services sent information about the project to students with disabilities, in order to make their voices heard, and asked them to voluntarily nominate faculty members who, in their opinion, had practised inclusive pedagogy. To facilitate this nomination of participants, we provide a description to students of the characteristics of inclusive faculty members: "They believe all students have potential; use methods designed to foster activity and participation; are flexible and willing to help; motivate their students; establish close relationships with them, and/or make their students feel an important part of the class".

A total of 119 faculty members from 10 Spanish universities and all knowledge areas participated in the study. Of these 24 (20.16 %) taught Arts and Humanities (Participants P1-P24), 14 (11.76 %) taught Science and Engineering (P25-P38), 16 (13.44 %) taught Health Sciences (P39-P54), 25 (21.01 %) Social and Legal Sciences (P55-P79) and 40 (33.61 %) Education (P80-P119). As regards gender, 58.33 % were men and 41.66 % were women. The average age was 47.61 and the standard deviation was 8.28. The majority were aged between 36 and 60, with seven (7.78 %) being under 35 years of age and four (4.42 %) being over 60. Most (68.35 %) had over 10 years' experience, with only six (6.25 %) having less than five and 24 (25.4 %) having between five and 10. All had experience responding to the needs arising from disabilities. Of these, the most frequent were sensory disabilities, i.e. visual and hearing impairments (40.97 %), followed by physical (23.68 %), mental (18.79 %) and organic (10.52 %) disabilities and learning difficulties (6.01 %).

Data collection instruments and procedure

During an individual interview, we asked each participant two open-ended questions: 1) What recommendations would you make for designing/developing an inclusive syllabus that includes students with disabilities; and 2) If a colleague who was going to teach a student with a disability for the first time asked you for advice, what would you recommend they do?

The majority of interviews were held face-to-face ($n = 89$). Nevertheless, 18 faculty members conducted their interviews via Skype and 12 did so over the telephone, since it was impossible for them to attend in person. Audio recordings were made of all interviews and faculty members gave their written consent to being recorded and for the data provided to be used for research purposes. The study also met the ethical requirements established by the Spanish Ministry of the Economy and Competitiveness.

Data analysis

We transcribed and analysed the information using a progressive qualitative data analysis technique, generating a system of inductive categories and codes which enabled meaning to be attached to the information gathered (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We established two categories: recommendations for designing/teaching an inclusive syllabus and recommendations for faculty members. We included ten codes in the first category: getting to know students; listening to and communicating with students; attitude to teaching; being proactive; flexible and open planning; universal and accessible syllabus; negotiated assessment that uses different assessment methods; contact with disability support services; information; and training. The second category comprised nine codes: tutoring students; attitude to teaching; dealing with students with disabilities; subject flexibility; accessible materials and exams; opportunity; responsibility as a faculty member; seeking information and asking for help; and training.

Results

In this study, participants made five recommendations for planning and implementing actions designed to include students with disabilities: 1) listen to students and get to know them and the needs deriving from their disability; 2) be empathetic and emotionally engaged and strive to facilitate students' learning; 3) establish a universal, accessible, flexible and open syllabus; 4) view

having students with disabilities in class as an opportunity and part of the job; and 5) actively seek information and training.

Listen to students and get to know them and the needs deriving from their disability

Almost all participating faculty members mentioned ongoing tutoring and personalised attention as inclusive actions that enabled students to make their real needs known. Although they also alluded to the importance of knowing about different types of disability, they highlighted the relevance of knowing the needs of each student from the beginning of the course. This would be useful to make the necessary reasonable adjustments and ensure that their subject is accessible to all.

I always ask them for help, in the sense that I ask them to tell me what they need. That's the first thing I ask them. What do you need? Do you need to be closer to me in order to hear me better? Do you need a comfier chair? It's important to know what they need to make their time at university 'normal'. (Participant 5, Arts and Humanities)

Nevertheless, some of those mentioning this point also added that it was not enough just to ask students what they need and how they can help them. Rather, they stated that it was also necessary to establish a relationship of trust through dialogue. Listening calmly both to students with disabilities and those who accompany them throughout their academic career was mentioned as a key means of ensuring a friendly learning environment.

I would recommend they have an open conversation with the student, in which they feel they can talk freely and list everything they need. Only in this way will they have the same opportunities as other students. (Participant 58, Social and Legal Sciences)

Be empathetic and emotionally engaged and strive to facilitate students learning

The second recommendation made by most participants was that faculty should strive to develop a series of personal characteristics to foster inclusion. The most frequently mentioned feature was the need to act as a facilitator. To this end, professionals should not be seen as a barrier by students with disabilities. This faculty must be considered as someone who is approachable, welcoming and willing to create the conditions required for everyone to have a successful learning experience and be treated as they deserve.

I always stood very close to her so she could hear me. I said hello to her as she came in and goodbye at the end of every class. I'd stay with her until someone came and picked her up. And I think I did all that because I believe it's what you should do. So that's what I'd say to someone who asked me for advice: do that, because it fosters inclusion. (Participant 15, Arts and Humanities)

Empathy was another quality that participants said faculty should strive to develop in order to be more inclusive. Interviewees said that it was essential for faculty to put themselves in the student's shoes every day. From their perspective, this prompts them to rethink the methodology and contents used in order to make them more accessible and ensure an adequate response to the different needs present in class.

I think empathy is key. Sitting down with him or her and getting them to open up to you. The problem is when they break down because they feel they can't cope and want to throw in the towel. If that happens, what you have to do is listen to them and ensure they get the resources they need. (Participant 48, Health Sciences)

In this scenario, participants said it was necessary to treat students with disabilities just like any other student. They were convinced that it was not a case of giving them special treatment or overprotecting them, but rather of communicating with them and being empathetic and considerate. They said it was important to appreciate the effort made by each student in their studies. In fact, they considered essential to respect everyone's right to receive the help and support they need in order to enjoy equal opportunities for learning.

I'd recommend that they treat them just like any other student. You don't have to do anything special. It's best not to treat them in such a way that they feel special or different, in the negative sense of the term. Just treat them normally, just like any another member of class. (Participant 6, Arts and Humanities)

Being emotionally engaged was mentioned as another key means of making students feel safe, comfortable, wanted and respected in class. To this end, participants said it was important to be 'a good person'. In other words, they claimed it was vital to be sensitive to the problems of any student, be concerned about them, help them become more resilient and accept the social reality, and be available, open and willing to help in response to any kind of query or request. Moreover, participants said faculty should strive to generate a positive climate in which everyone could

express their emotions, pointing out that respect for students lies at the heart of any emotional connection with them.

What is at the heart of all this, what underpins it, is respect for students. You have to respect students, who are here for a certain period of time, and you have to respond to them. And not just some of them - all of them. And this commitment is what gives rise to everything else. (Participant 101, Education)

In this sense, only three participants alluded to the need for faculty to adopt a proactive attitude, meaning that they should be prepared for and capable of anticipating any barrier to students' success in the classroom.

They should be more proactive rather than reactive. In other words, everything they do should contemplate the need for students with disabilities to be able to participate just like everyone else. (Participant 58, Legal and Social Sciences)

Establish a universal, accessible, flexible and open syllabus

The third suggestion made by the majority of participants was closely linked to UDL. Faculty explained that it was not merely a question of adapting subjects only to the needs of students with disabilities. For these professionals an inclusive design ensured the best way of teaching each subject for all students, planning activities in which everyone can take part and incorporating varied and well-ordered materials.

I'd say they should try and plan assignments and activities that involve everyone, not just some. I'd recommend they try and get everyone to participate throughout the entire year. (Participant 68, Social and Legal Sciences)

Rather than talk about adjustments, participants referred to a set of minimum criteria that should be taken into consideration in any subject. For example, they mentioned adding subtitles to audio-visual materials, not being complicit in erecting or maintaining physical barriers. They also recommended providing class notes in Word format, using different assessment methods (not only for students with disabilities, but also to foster work-life balance), avoiding traditional methods, designing attractive activities focused on real practice, using calendars and timelines and giving students the freedom to carry out assignments individually or in groups.

My basic recommendation, which is very simple, is to provide them with information in Word format, or upload it to the platform in Word. This way they can enlarge it, add things, delete things ... and it's not really any more work for us either. (Participant 88, Education) The majority of participating faculty stated that it was important not to design a subject in a rigid and immovable manner. For them, it was essential to ensure flexibility and to take the needs of students with disabilities into consideration right from the start. Specifically, participants alluded to social justice and the need to plan a syllabus with achievable goals. They also said it was important to accept that it is faculty members who are responsible for coming up with alternatives and different possibilities, and for adapting to students' needs in relation to the subject.

My recommendation would be to design as open a teaching guide as possible, taking into account the fact that some years you may have students with disabilities in your class. You should always have certain activities or alternatives available for everything you do. (Participant 16, Arts and Humanities)

In this non-rigid planning, assessment plays a key role. Participants stated that this activity should be negotiated and that different methods should be used. The most important, in their opinion, was to establish a dialogue with students in order to reach an agreement regarding the type of evaluation to be used. In general, participants referred to customised, formative, continuous and non-exclusive assessment for all students. They also said that exam dates should be open to modification, exam durations should be flexible and the format should be linked to the classes taught in the subject, as well as being adapted to different learning needs (font size, for example) and styles.

The disability support service told me I had to give him 20 % more time in the exam than everyone else. At the end, if the exam was originally going to last an hour, I gave everyone, not just him, one hour twenty minutes. As I said before, unless you do it like that you're making him stand out as different. (Participant 73, Social and Legal Sciences)

View having students with disabilities in class as an opportunity and part of the job

The fourth recommendation was to view having students with disabilities in class, not as a problem, but rather as an opportunity. Participants explained that not only was the presence of

these students an opportunity which enriched the entire class. In fact, it was more importantly, it prompted them to rethink their teaching practice and made them better professionals. Indeed, having students with disabilities in class enabled faculty to put into practice different strategies and skills that they had not thought of before, and made them feel good about themselves. In short, it made them better people.

Everything they are going to get from these students will enable them to improve in terms of teaching strategies and problem solving. It's a process of improvement and personal growth. (Participant 119, Education)

Participants also said that their duty, which derives from their responsibility as faculty members, was to help all students to learn. Another recommendation made by only a small group of participants was that faculty should think deeply about their priority functions. For these faculty members, making sure all subjects were inclusive was not a favour owed to students with disabilities, but rather their duty as professionals. Although they acknowledged that doing this properly required time and effort (meetings and coordination with fellow faculty members), they also stated that there was no excuse for not doing it, because it formed part of their professional responsibility.

I would say it is their responsibility as faculty members. It's nothing special - it's part of what you get paid for. You don't have to do anything special, just make sure that that student, who is in your class, learns, just like the rest of their classmates. (Participant 107, Education)

Actively seek information and training

Finally, almost all participants coincided in stating that it was vital to seek help from the disability support service, external stakeholders and non-for-profit social organisations (such as, for example, the Spanish National Blind People's Organisation). They also mentioned the need for information and self-guided training on current regulations, and the importance of exchanging experiences and attending practical courses with other colleagues.

I would tell them to talk with the people at the university's disability support service, because they are the ones who can really help. (Participant 24, Science and Engineering)

Some participants highlighted the need for more training in diversity. Moreover, although the vast majority had many recommendations for colleagues, a few said that it would depend on the specific case. However, there were some faculty who did not feel competent enough to give advice to other colleagues because of their lack of experience or training.

I don't really know how useful I can be. You try to help and be inclusive, but sometimes you simply don't know enough to make recommendations in such cases. (Participant, 62, Social and Legal Sciences)

Discussion

Previous studies which gave voice to students with disabilities themselves (Morgado et al., 2017; Moriña et al., 2015) have reported similar results. Coinciding with the recommendations made by faculty in our study, in these studies students recommended that faculty provide personalised tutoring; receive training in different types of disability; treat students with disabilities just like any other student; adopt a proactive attitude to helping and make the subject accessible right from the start; use non-traditional teaching methodologies and make minimum adjustments to the syllabus; develop an emotional bond with students, characterised by empathy and trust; and ask for advice and help from other professionals. The voices of students with disabilities and inclusive faculty have coincided. This makes us think about the need to listen to both points of view at university in order to promote accessible teaching practices. It would be useful to create different meetings in the faculties in the first weeks of the course highlighting these issues, as well as training to sensitize the faculty.

Some previous studies, such as those by Stein (2014), Titsworth et al. (2010), and Thomas (2016), have already outlined how making an effort to get to know students, showing an interest in how they can help and holding personalised tutorials can contribute to inclusion at university. In addition to this, however, our study shows the importance of links and contact with not only students with disabilities, but also with other people from their immediate environment. These people may provide faculty with valuable information that will help make their practice in the classroom more inclusive. Thus, if faculty really want their students to be successful in their studies, they should pay more attention to the way they treat them and the attention they give them. Therefore, faculty should create and enhance a learning culture among staff and have a strong belief in and a commitment for networking for learning.

However, fair, humane treatment cannot be translated into action unless faculty facilitate this process, forge an emotional connection with students and are approachable and empathetic. The studies by Clément and Dukes (2017), Lipka et al. (2019), Moriña et al. (2015), Quinlan (2016) and Thomas (2016) support this claim, and call for the need for faculty to be sensitive and understanding with each and every student. Our study revealed that respect and consideration for each and every individual who decides to study a university degree are paramount, and that faculty should monitor and take an interest in their progress. In this sense, faculty members should receive training in emotional education, not only in order to assess content and grade work, but also to establish good relations with students and ensure their wellbeing. For this reason, listening to and learning from the experiences of students with disabilities could sensitize faculty members and help them become more empathetic and competent in their work.

In relation to the development of syllabuses, the studies by Bunbury (2020) or Sakız and Sarıcalı (2017) highlight the need to plan on the basis of UDL. In order for syllabuses not to be disabling (Collins et al., 2019; Waitoller & Thorius, 2016), faculty should strive to design their courses for everyone right from the very beginning, using varied materials and a range of different formats. Moreover, the results of our study identify an element of the teaching process that may constitute a barrier for students with disabilities and which had not been previously mentioned in other works, namely assessment. Thomas (2016) recognised the need for continuous assessment and feedback, but the professionals participating in our study emphasised the need for assessment to be negotiated with students. Assessment is much more than grading. It has to be considered as a powerful tool for understanding and improving learning and teaching. This means that it should be approached on the basis of respect for students' different ways of being and learning. Faculty should be trained in UDL and offer a variety of options to demonstrate student learning, regardless of their educational needs. For their part, the studies by Getzel and Thoma (2008), Järkestig Berggren et al. (2016), Larkin et al. (2014) and Nancy et al. (2017) highlighted the benefits of having students with disabilities in the classroom as a means of improving teaching practice and learning environments. The participants in our study also felt that having students with disabilities should be viewed as an opportunity to reflect on one's own work and experiment with new ways of doing things, although they also saw it as a possibility for personal growth. In this sense, they stated that professionals should welcome all students, rather than viewing disability as an obstacle or problem to be resolved in the classroom. It would be recommended for faculty members to have

the opportunity to receive training on disability and human rights regulations. In addition, it would be desirable for faculty to share experiences with other colleagues and together try to improve attention to all students.

As regards training and information, the participants in our study recommended seeking help from other professionals and services in a position to give advice about inclusive strategies. The study by Moriña et al. (2015), which gave voice to students, mentioned the need for third parties capable of helping faculty do their job better. In this sense, we coincide with the findings reported by Knight et al. (2016) and Zhang et al. (2019) who argue that the link between the institution itself, its services and the people who make it up is a key requisite for ensuring that students with disabilities can participate fully, be successful in their studies and feel that they truly have equal learning opportunities. Moreover, faculty training is of paramount importance, which is why universities should design training policies which include contents in the field of disability and inclusive education.

Finally, although the participants in our study were all considered to be inclusive by their students, some said they felt they still lacked training in order to ensure that all learners find as few barriers as possible during their university career. The studies by GrifolFreixenet et al. (2017) and Ortiz et al. (2018) also stated that some professionals still feel they lack sufficient training to deal effectively with diversity.

Limitations and future research

The main limitations of this study are the time required for contacting faculty members considered to be inclusive by their students and the scheduling problems for arranging the interviews. Nevertheless, this process was necessary in order to guarantee the quality of the participants. Another limitation is that the faculty interviewed came exclusively from Spanish universities. In order to broaden the scope of the research and explore other recommendations, it may have been better to have included participants from universities in other countries also.

Future research may wish to include the voices of students with disabilities alongside the discourses of inclusive faculty members. To do so, focus groups could be organised to explore the recommendations in more detail with a view to enabling accessible design.

Similarly, interviews and working sessions could be held with representatives of disability support services, students with disabilities and their classmates. This could help to determine which

suggestions they all agree upon, thereby enabling the establishment of recommendations based on a broad consensus.

Conclusions

Faculty members who practice inclusive pedagogy recommend to colleagues wishing to do the same that, above all, they make an effort to get to know and listen to students with disabilities in order to understand their real needs. They also believe it is important to facilitate educational processes and to view having a student with a disability in class as an opportunity to rethink teaching practice. This study highlights that UDL is essential to contribute to the learning and participation of all students. Therefore, it is recommended that universities design and develop training policies to prepare the faculty in UDL.

In conclusion, the recommendations proposed in this study show that the responsibility of teaching is to be prepared for all students and not just a few. Thus, the voices of these faculty members can help other colleagues who wish to make their planning and practice more democratic, fair and inclusive.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness of Spain and FEDER funds European Union [grant numbers EDU2016-76587-R/ Feder Funds].

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