



FROM INCLUSION TO COEXISTENCE

By Marisol Ortega Guerrero
Photos Carlos Roberto Reyes
Milagro Castro

The Universidad del Rosario has kept its doors wide open to students with disabilities. Through its research, experiences, and new visions, for more than a decade it has built consolidated programs for the effective participation of disabled students in higher education.

There are more than a billion people on our planet with some degree of disability, in other words 15% of the world's population, according to the World Health Organization's (WHO) World Report on Disability and the World Bank. From this figure, an average of 2,700,000 live in Colombia, states the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE).

Lack of opportunities is a constant feature of the lives of a high percentage of these people, and more specifically out of reach is the possibility of enrolling at university and studying a course that might allow them to become professionals. Conditions in infrastructure, mobility, social acceptance, and participation are still not sufficient for this right to be theirs. Concerned about this situation, and aware that disability is a human condition that requires new forms of interpretation and social action—not one synonymous with illness but one for which change and transcendence can be achieved—the Universidad del Rosario has not only led research in this direction but also has its own inclusion and opportunities policies, part of a course subject running for the last 17 years: Disability and Society.

The faculty considers the disability panorama to be one of the social problems that directly impacts human beings and society in general. Within this perspective, it is not regarded as an issue that can be treated on a one-to-one basis, warranting recognition by collectives and the community through the exercise of Human Rights and opportunities for participation by disabled persons, their families, organizations, and carers across all spheres of daily life.

For two years, one research project in particular—*Universidad del Rosario, an inclusive university: a methodological proposal for the construction of an inclusion policy and coexistence with disabled persons in higher education*—built a work team made up from different units within the University, not merely academic departments but also from the administrative side. "The study also involved both state and private universities, nationally and internationally; as well as organizations of disabled people from Colombia, the USA, Mexico, and Costa Rica," explains Professor Karin Garzón Díaz, director of the project and professor at the School of Medicine and Health Sciences of the Universidad del Rosario.

Among the founding principles of this research project are its context of disciplinary convergences in different areas; the influence of its aims



Access ramp for disabled persons, Faculty of Economics.

to expand the involvement of different institutional agencies; the relevance of its interest in building inclusion perspectives in line with its institutional education mission and project; the cohesion shown by its aims to form part of the entire academic, administrative, pedagogical and scientific corpus, as well as the welfare of disabled students; and the innovation it shows through an orientation towards creation-recreation of new ways of interpreting disability in higher education.

Through weaving together observations, aspirations, and even uninformed perspective on the subject, the researchers came across other ways to think about disability, “not only from the point of view of comparison or difference, but from recognition in order to boost the possibilities of channeling new ways, new work models, and the participation at university of students with disabilities,” adds Professor Garzón Díaz.

The results of this research were disseminated through publications currently used in the training of students of Biology, Psychology, Jurisprudence, Medicine, Occupational Therapy, Physiotherapy, and Speech-language Therapy.

INCLUSION, AN EVERYDAY REALITY

Discussions on knowledge and identification of opportunities led the Universidad del Rosario to set up a chair in Disability and Society, a pioneer venture in the field (as mentioned, this has existed since 2001), as well as the Support Program for Students with Disabilities (IncluSer) and its Integral Development Plan (PID 2014-2019), among other actions.

IncluSer gives specialized support to the academic community and, in particular, to students with disabilities, helping them to achieve the goals they pursue. This is how the Universidad del Rosario foment and guarantees inclusion, permanence, and graduation for disabled students with equality of opportunities and within the human rights framework.

“IncluSer will be ten-years-old this November. It offers specialized support, combining technological aid; ongoing accompaniment and counselling; training to teaching staff; and research spaces. It is also a research space in the internship system and, through its coordination, creates projects and receives research proposals from students wanting to do their degree in this area and on this subject,” explains Rocío Molina Bejar, researcher, coordinator, and manager of IncluSer.

“Several products have come from these students, and these include braille signpost-



New narratives

The Universidad del Rosario has always had persons with disabilities amidst its academic community, both as teaching staff and students; it is important to recognise, however, that the last ten years have been especially active in terms of documenting, systematizing, and building specific policies in line with its mission on disability in higher education.

The tasks it has taken on include the goal of finding a consensus on new ways to understand what life is like for disabled persons. And the idea is to achieve this from “a perspective of mutual recognition, through thinking about how we design shared spaces, and not from the point of view of difference,” explains professor and researcher Karin Garzón Díaz.

Narratives have been key in this process, with assumptions being challenged and adjusted because the ways in which society refers to the realities of the disabled come under observation and awareness is created on the use of language. “We began to break paradigms on seeing how language decisively marks out or excludes—sometimes unintentionally—persons with disabilities, specifically when this stems from the angle of difference and not from recognition,” adds Garzón Díaz. New narratives, therefore, include the perspective of coexistence, living together. In the researcher’s own words: “not creating a world for others, but a world with others, one which does not only benefit a few, but where absolutely all of us benefit, and where this principle of joint responsibility is latent. Its presence should come from commitment on both sides.”

ing at the Quinta de Mutis institution and Campus, orientation in the Habitat department using universal design for the benefit of persons with reduced mobility, and a cultural awareness project handled by and aimed at persons with disability,” continues Molina Bejar.

Today, visually impaired students have technological aids at their disposal, such as a smart reading machine for the blind, a braille printer and screen reader software, and human braille reading instructors. The idea is to meet the expectations and needs of disabled students.

“We are also founding members, along with three other universities, of the Colombian Network of Universities Sup-



Professor Karin Garzón explains that this research was carried out with participation from public and private universities, both national and international, similarly assisted by disability organizations from Colombia, the USA, Mexico, and Costa Rica.



IncluSer, the Support Program for Students with Disabilities, offers specialized help, technological aids, accompaniment, and ongoing counselling, explains the coordinator of this initiative, Rocío Molina Bejar.



porting Disabilities, a group interested in inclusive education, one setting up alliances between academia and the disabled. In addition, we are founding members of the Latin-American and Caribbean University Network on Disability and Human Rights, which was set up in 2009 in Buenos Aires (Argentina), helping us achieve recognition and visibility internationally in inclusion-related areas,” explains Prof. Molina.

Thus, the Universidad del Rosario can point to key advances in four pivotal areas: 1. Willing to initiate processes for change and linking up policies, plans, and programs responding to the presence of disability in the University; 2. Center planning and development; 3. Training the University community in all formal and non-formal aspects; 3. Interaction with its environment.

The latter point refers to skills in communicating experiences, incorporating good practices, and generating cooperation and innovation, all relevant to ensure that the impact reaches beyond the campus. ■