

# **PRACTICE BRIEF**

## **Inclusion in the Workforce for Students with Intellectual Disabilities: A Case Study of a Spanish Postsecondary Education Program**

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### **Abstract**

The Autonomous University of Madrid (UAM) is the first Spanish university to provide training to young people with intellectual disabilities (ID) in the university environment, which qualifies them for inclusion in the workforce. In this practice brief we describe the UAM-Prodis Patronage Chair program, a successful model used at Spanish universities within the European Higher Education convention framework, which addresses the inclusion and occupational training of young people with ID in order to help them obtain employment. We begin with a review of the special education system for young people with ID in Spain. We report outcome data for students with ID who completed the program at UAM during its first four years of implementation. These outcomes indicate that the UAM-Prodis Patronage Chair program has become one of the main strategies to achieve independent living and community integration of people with ID through a postsecondary education option.

*Keywords: Employment, inclusion, postsecondary education, intellectual disability*

### **Literature Review**

There is a growing trend for developing innovative postsecondary education (PSE) options for students with intellectual disabilities (Grigal & Hart, 2010; Thoma et al., 2011). The Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 and the promising practices for transition services as required by the IDEA (2004) have increased the opportunity for students with intellectual disabilities (ID) to participate in PSE options. Postsecondary educational experiences for students with ID include a wide range of options within two- or four-year colleges or universities, or adult education programs.

Although a range of PSE options are available nationwide (Thoma et al., 2011; Kleinert, Jones, Sheppard-Jones, Harp, & Harrison, 2012), the three most common types of PSE programs for students with ID are inclusive/integrated, hybrid/mixed, or separate. Table 1 shows the different types of PSE

programs, their features, and examples of program types; however, one program may look very different from another even though it may be categorized as one of these common types. Even with the range of options available, Thoma et al. (2011) found in a recent review of the literature regarding the PSE experiences of students with ID that there is a paucity of information about the PSE experiences of students with ID and their outcomes. It is crucial that the disability research community closely examine ways to support better PSE outcomes for individuals with ID. Given that PSE options for individuals with ID are still new and relatively rare, efforts in other countries serve as resources for additional evidence-based practices from which to learn.

In Spain, special education has a long and successful history (Cardona, 2009). Over the past several decades, significant legislation reveals a definitive trend towards inclusion. The most recent legislation,

Table 1

*Types of PSE Programs for Students with ID*

Classification	Descriptions	Examples
Separate/ Stand-alone	Offers specific classes designed exclusively for student with ID. May include inclusion in residential life and extracurricular activities. Curriculum is focused primarily on skills, with rotation through a limited number of work experiences.	Austin Community College- STEPS  West Texas A&M University- WTLC
Inclusive/Integrated	Students with and without disabilities take existing coursework together. Includes inclusion in residential life and students are active members of the campus community. Students receive individualized supports and services for academic and social inclusion. All services are student centered, based on student choices and preferences. May offer internships and employment-related supports.	Virginia Commonwealth University- ACE-IT  College of New Jersey- Career and Community Studies  University of Tennessee, Knoxville-FUTURE
Hybrid/Mixed	Provides a combination of specific and integrated courses or provides separate coursework for students with ID but inclusion in residential life and extracurricular activities. Students are provided academic support in inclusive college courses, but most of the curriculum is focused on functional skills, with rotation through a limited number of work experiences.	University of Iowa- REACH  University of Alabama- CrossingPoints  University of Arkansas-LAUNCH

*Note.* Hart, Grigal, Sax, Martinez, and Will (2006) identified three types of PSE programs for students with ID based on a level of inclusion with their peers without disabilities.

the *Ley Orgánica de Educación* (Act on Education), establishes the resources needed to achieve inclusion and integration of students with the specific need of educational support, which includes students with special educational needs (Abellán et al., 2010). Thus, the majority of students with disabilities are being served in inclusive settings (Cardona, 2009).

In the Spanish education system, basic education is compulsory and free for everyone. It consists of primary education and compulsory secondary education (ESO), which covers ten years between the ages of 6 and 16. Compulsory lower secondary education establishes the first tier of secondary education and the final stage of basic education. Students who meet all the standards set for this stage of education are awarded a Compulsory

Secondary Education Certificate, which provides them access to the second tier of secondary education. This tier includes either the two-year Bachillerato or intermediate vocational training. Students who do not achieve the objectives at the ESO level receive an Education Certificate stating the number of years of attendance and the marks obtained. The Bachillerato lasts two academic years from ages 16 to 18 and, if students obtain passing grades in all subjects, they receive a Bachiller certificate that enables them to access higher education. Students who successfully complete the intermediate vocational training studies are awarded a Technical Certificate, with which they have access to the Bachillerato program. In order to study advanced vocational training, it is necessary to hold the Bachiller certificate.

### The Problem

Although there is no common definition of ID in Spain, the definition most often used is that of the American Association on Mental Retardation (2002), which defines ID as involving significant impairment in both intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior and stresses the link between limitations in social, conceptual and practical skills and age of onset before 18 years (Verdugo, 2003). In addition, the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (World Health Organization, 2001) is used as the basis for definition and classification of disabilities in Spain (European Intellectual Disability Research Network, 2003).

Students with disabilities are provided basic compulsory education (6 to 16 years of age) and Programs for Transition to Adult Life (16 to 19 years of age). Students at these institutions may be enrolled up to the maximum age of 21. However, to gain access to the upper level of secondary education, students with disabilities must obtain the Compulsory Secondary Education Certificate, which means that they have met all of the standards at the ESO level. However, few students with ID obtain the Compulsory Secondary Education Certificate because of the academic subject specialization and rigor of the program and, therefore, have limited access to higher education. According to Cardona (2009), less than 1% of students with disabilities are enrolled in Bachillerato programs in Spain. Thus, the most significant challenges of meeting the needs of students with disabilities are in secondary education and postsecondary education.

### Participant Demographics and Institutional Partners/Resources

Observing this problem, the Prodis Foundation, a Spanish non-profit institution whose purpose is to maximize social and employment inclusion of individuals with ID, and the Autonomous University of Madrid (UAM), a large public university, created UAM-Prodis Patronage Chair, a PSE option for individuals with ID between the ages of 18-30 years who live in the Community of Madrid. This paper will describe this innovative program and the outcomes for students with ID enrolled at UAM during its first four years of implementation.

The UAM-Prodis Patronage Chair program's first cohort of students enrolled at UAM in Fall 2005 with 15 students. Each fall semester thereafter, a new cohort of 15 students were enrolled in the program. The participants described here represent the first four cohorts consisting of 60 students with a 100% completion rate. Thirty-four (57%) students were female and 26 (43%) were male. The majority of the students were under 25 years of age (69%) while 31% were over 25 years of age.

### Description of Practice

The overarching purpose of UAM-Prodis Patronage Chair is the provision of PSE for young people with ID in the university environment and the promotion of supported employment in an inclusive work environment. The specific objectives of the program are:

1. Provide training, tailored to individual differences, to enable youth with ID to work in inclusive work environments;
2. Provide continued employment support to promote equal opportunities in the maintenance and promotion of employment;
3. Provide ongoing training throughout the life of participants in order to continue exercising their right to work in inclusive work environments; and
4. Provide the necessary support for individuals with ID to achieve independent living as full members in their community.

The training takes place over two academic years and is conducted through the College of Professional Training for Teaching and Education at UAM. As the resources are unfortunately limited, the number of students accepted into the program needs to be restricted to an average of 15 students per year. One of the selection criteria is to have a group of students with a wide range of disabilities, including Down Syndrome and other developmental and cognitive impairments, in order to promote inclusion and diversity within the group itself. In addition, students must be able to safely navigate the campus and use public transportation.

During the first year, students receive more training in the classroom whereas during the second year a greater emphasis is on practical application. Table 2 provides the plan of study for the two academic years (70 credits total). The plan of study is very specific and the classes are held in the College of Professional Training for Teaching and Education at UAM. The most important feature is its humanistic character as it seeks to develop youth with ID who accept themselves, satisfactorily relate to others, and can work in teams. These classes and the curriculum are designed solely for UAM-Prodis Patronage Chair students. The courses are taught by professors in the Department of Teaching and Theory of Education at UAM and special education professionals from the Prodis Foundation.

The practicums are one of the fundamental aspects of training during the second year. The theoretical framework of the practicums is based on the methodology of supported employment that is considered one of the strategies more efficient for the successful inclusion of people with disabilities in regular employment. It has

Table 2

*The UAM-Prodis Patronage Chair Program Requirements*

First Year	Credits	Second Year	Credits
Interpersonal relationships in business	4	Labor relations	3
Developing social skills I	3	Developing social skills II	2
Specific labor skills	4	Banking and documentation	2
Utilization of community services	3	Filing and organization	5
Thinking strategies	3	Culture and society	2
Business technologies I	2	Business technologies II	2
English I	2	English II	3
Foundations for learning I	3	Foundations for learning II	2
Logic and accounting	4	Practicum	14
Development of values	3		
Quality of life skills	2		
Organization and planning skills	2		
Total	35	Total	35

an objective of individualized support through a series of strategies that allows youth with ID to develop successful and autonomous employment skills (Salvador, Argos, Ezuerra, Osoro, & Castro, 2011).

Prior to placements, students meet with the academic director to identify career interests and abilities in order to decide the best placement and necessary supports. These supports may be adaption of spaces, working times, and job assignments. During the first semester of the second year, students take classes three days a week and are placed in a practicum work experience at UAM for two days. Such placements may include departmental offices, libraries of the various colleges, research centers, and administrative offices. A typical UAM undergraduate student majoring in education is matched with each student with ID to provide individual support and mentoring during the practicum experience. The UAM undergraduate students receive three hours of university credit for this volunteer experience.

During the second semester of the second year, students are placed in a full-time practicum in one of over 50 public agencies or private companies in the Community of Madrid that have partnered with the program. Under this model, the university provides labor mediators as job coaches and employers provide internship opportunities and worksite managers to

act as mentors. By providing sufficient opportunities to gain work experience while still in a supportive environment, students with ID can develop employment histories, decide their career preferences, and identify the services and supports that will maximize their opportunities for employment success. During the final semester, students seek paid employment in their chosen career, which is often in their practicum placement. Upon successful completion of the two year program, students participate in a graduation ceremony and receive the certificate of "Training for Employment Inclusion."

However, on-going training continues after the completion of the program. When the graduates begin their paid employment, a labor mediator of the Supported Employment Services of the Prodis Foundation develops a training process and prepares any supports as required for successful integration. The labor mediator provides continuous monitoring (although different in intensity and time) to help maintain the balance with all the changes that are occurring through the working life of the employee with ID. In addition, participants may continue taking a weekly course offered at UAM that focuses on socio-occupational competencies and leisure management skills. This continuing education program is optional and takes into account the individual needs of each participant. More information

about this program can be found at <http://www.fun-dacionprodis.org/programas/catedra-de-patrocinio/>.

### Evaluation of Observed Outcomes

Of the 60 students who completed the program by Spring 2010, 55 (92%) are currently employed. Of those employed, 74% have permanent contracts, which is equal to workers who are not disabled (75%; Izuzquiza Gasset, 2012). The graduates work in a wide range of business sectors with 94% of the graduates working part-time and 6% working full-time. While the goal of the program is for students to be gainfully employed part-time, few full-time positions exist because the number of working hours has been reduced and the amount of part-time jobs has increased because of the current economic crisis. With regard to annual salary levels, taking into account that 94% had part-time positions, 21% earn \$11,050, 45% earn between \$11,050 and \$13,810, 24% earn between \$13,810 and \$16,575, and 10% earn more than \$16,575. These annual salary levels also are equal to part-time workers who are not disabled.

As can be seen from Figure 1, the business sectors in which the graduates are employed are varied since the university training that the students with ID received is more generic. When they begin the practicum and paid employment, the supported employment methodology enables them to learn the specific job skills. These commercial and public businesses range from public administration, travel agencies, banks, law firms, pharmaceutical, advertising, insurance, construction, food, communication, printing, and real estate. However, the majority of the graduates (70%) are working as assistants for commercial businesses. The degree of satisfaction of employers with workers with ID is high with the graduates are rated highest in the areas of responsibility and enthusiasm at work by their employers.

A computer-assisted telephone interview with structured questionnaire was used to collect data from 268 members in the university environment on their attitudes and the impact of the integration of students with ID at UAM. All members of the university community surveyed reported that the PSE program for young people with ID abolishes stereotypes and promotes values such as solidarity, openness, flexibility, and inclusion. They considered that the acceptance in the university makes this a benchmark of social accountability. In addition, the graduates of the program are highly valued by their line managers and directors of the companies in which they are working.

### Implications and Portability

The UAM-Prodis Patronage Chair program has become one of the main strategies people with ID in the Community of Madrid can use to achieve independent living and community integration. The UAM was the first Spanish university to provide students with intellectual disabilities a certificate program that qualifies them for inclusion in the workforce. Otherwise, students with ID can receive vocational training at the Programs for Transition to Adult Life, which is organized into a two-year duration cycle and may be extended according to the student's educational process and the employment opportunities. In these programs, students receive instruction in vocational training in order to promote the development of work-related attitudes as well as the acquisition of multi-purpose employment skills.

Outcomes from the first four cohorts who have completed the program suggest that there are many more factors of success than risk. High levels of satisfaction were obtained from the university professors, students, and administration, employers, youth with ID and their families. In all companies, and mainly in the private sector, the program has achieved very high rates of satisfaction without sacrificing the quality and efficiency goals. The program has received high levels of employability and provides quality assurance to companies that employ people with ID by the professionalism of its labor mediators trained at UAM. It has been recognized as "Good Practice" in the context of "Active Inclusion of Young People with Disabilities or Health Problems" by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions. Students and graduates with ID showed a deep appreciation for their acceptance in the university environment and stated that the university has given them the opportunity to increase their autonomy and self-confidence. In 2012, the model was implemented at the Saint Anthony Catholic University in Murcia, Spain. The UAM-Prodis Patronage Chair program maintains continuous collaboration with this university to promote the dissemination of the model. However, the current economic crisis in Spain hinders its dissemination to other Spanish universities. When the Spanish economy begins to improve, the need to design a dissemination plan involving other universities is warranted.

The program is recognized by UAM and continually adapts to the needs of students with ID and the labor market demand. In spite of these successes, there are several areas of concern. Because of the limited number of students with ID allowed to enter the program each year, there is a waiting list. However,

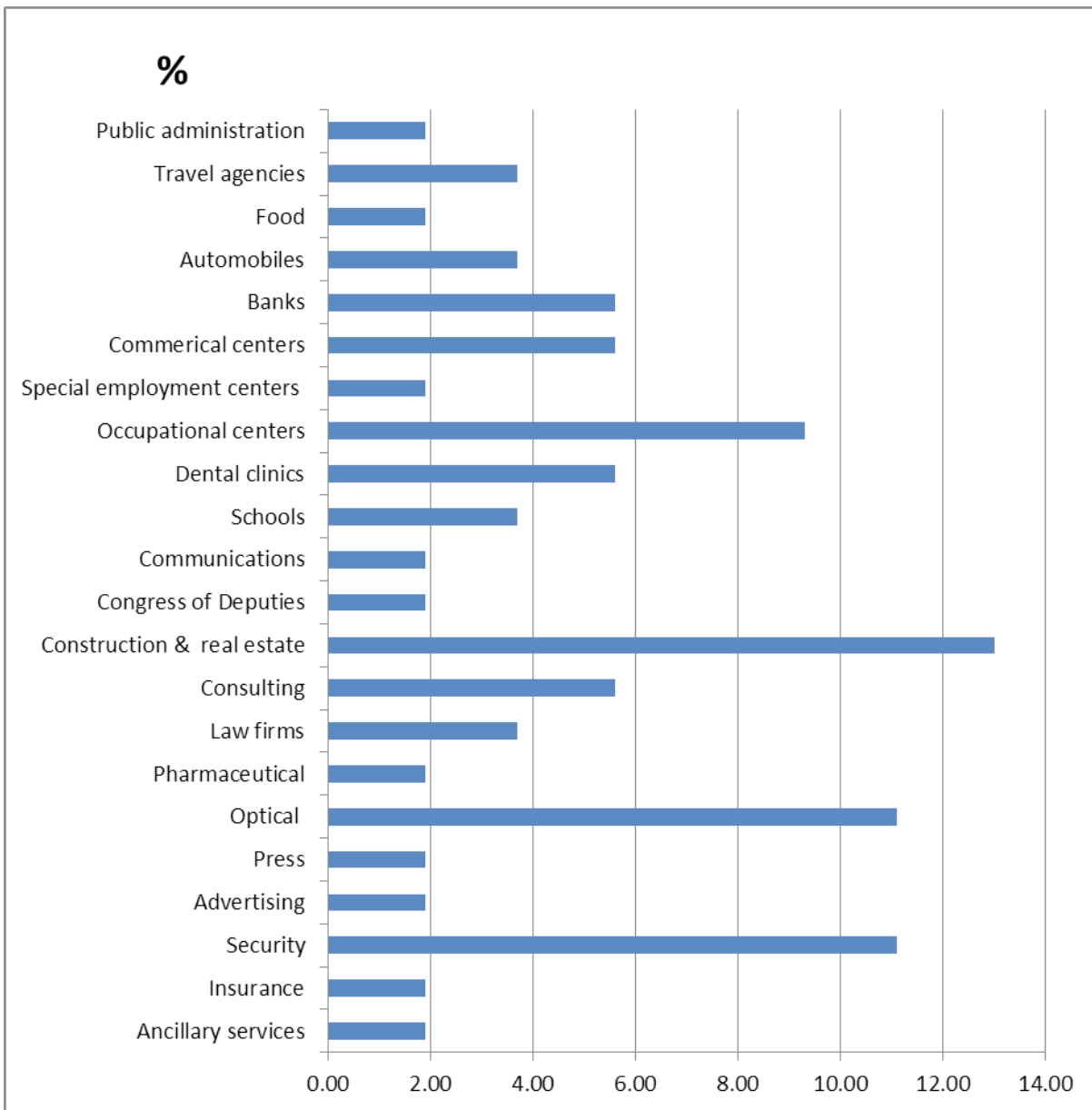


Figure 1. Business sectors in which graduates with ID are employed.

everyone on the waiting list will be accepted. The lack of physical space at UAM also limits the number of students with ID in each course.

The UAM-Prodis Patronage Chair program is a resource for additional evidence-based practices from which to learn. Given that inclusive PSE options for people with ID are still new in Spain and many other countries, this innovative model provides an example of an educational option for young people with ID to attain meaningful, inclusive, competitive employment while being integrated in a university environment. Just as with other university students, young people with ID have the opportunity to develop their employment skills before starting their real inclusion in the work environment of private and public sector companies.

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