

Review Articles

International post-secondary transition programs for people with intellectual disabilities: a scoping review

Programas internacionais de transição pós-escolar para pessoas com deficiência intelectual: uma revisão de escopo

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Abstract

The objective of this article is to characterise the international view on post-secondary education programs in the university context for people with intellectual disabilities, taking as its starting point the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This is a Scoping Review. We analysed thirty-four studies in English or Spanish with young participants and/or adults with intellectual disabilities published between 2006 and 2022. We accessed the following sources: Academic Search Premier, Eric, PsycInfo, CINAHL, Web of Science, Scopus and the gray literature. There was a predominance of programs located in the United States, with an inclusive model, lasting between two and four years. For admission, the need to enrol in High School or equivalent certification, independence in basic activities and interest in the university experience was noted. It is concluded that these programs play an important role in promoting education, inclusion and independent living for people with intellectual disabilities.

Keywords: Special Education; post-secondary education programs; transition; independent adult life.

Resumo

O objetivo deste artigo é caracterizar o panorama internacional de programas de transição pós-escolar no contexto universitário para pessoas com deficiência intelectual, tendo como marco inicial a Convenção das Nações Unidas sobre os Direitos das Pessoas com Deficiência. Trata-se de uma Revisão de Escopo. Analisamos 34 estudos em inglês ou espanhol, com participantes jovens e/ou adultos com deficiência intelectual, publicados entre 2006 e 2022. Acessamos as seguintes fontes: Academic Search Premier, Eric, PsycInfo, CINAHL, Web of Science, Scopus e a literatura cinzenta. Constatou-se o predomínio de programas localizados nos Estados Unidos, do modelo inclusivo, com duração entre dois e quatro anos. Para a admissão, observou-se a necessidade de matrícula no Ensino Médio ou uma certificação equivalente, independência para atividades básicas e interesse na experiência universitária. Conclui-se que esses programas desempenham um papel importante para a promoção da educação, inclusão e vida independente das pessoas com deficiência intelectual.

Palavras-chave: Educação Especial; programas de educação pós-secundário; transição; vida adulta independente.

INTRODUCTION

The signatory countries of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, among other aspects, have made a commitment to promote the right of people with disabilities to enjoy life on an equal basis with others, prohibiting discrimination based on disability, in addition to addressing the right to education, lifelong learning, independent living and employment, stating that people with disabilities have the right to receive necessary accommodations and the right to inclusive environments to participate effectively in society (Brasil, 2009).

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Young adults with intellectual disabilities face significant inequality in opportunities as they move into adulthood. One reason is that transition services are limited or absent for this group. Trainor et al. (2020) pointed out the lack of access to necessary transition services, such as programs or supports available at school that can help achieve better performance after school.

Post-school transition programs - also referred to in the literature as post-secondary education programs, transition programs, adult transition programs, post-school transition programs (Rowe et al., 2015; Lopes, 2016; Luiz, 2020; Avellone et al., 2021; Redig, 2021; Lee; Taylor, 2022) - can improve the process of independent living for people with intellectual disabilities with limitations in both intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviour, which involves the use of conceptual, social and practical skills that are learned and applied in the context of everyday life (Schalock; Luckasson; Tassé, 2021).

According to Pawilen et al. (2018), the central goal of a post-secondary education program is to enable students to become more functional in everyday life and active in society, regardless of disability. A program is not restricted to a set of activities; it is a broader composite that encompasses educational equity, curriculum, and educational policies targeted at students with specific needs.

Studies have been developed in the scientific literature related to post-secondary education programs. Whirley, Gilson and Gushanas (2020) conducted a scoping review with the aim of analysing the literature on post-secondary education programs for youth and adults with intellectual disabilities, developed on university campuses in The United States of America, from 2008 to 2018. A total of 68 studies were included. The authors observed a considerable increase in studies in this area in the last ten years and that, although the research provided information on how the programs work, this was still incomplete; that is, there is little knowledge about these programs, including who they serve and how they measure success.

Avellone et al. (2021) in a scoping review study investigated employment experiences that occurred in the context of post-secondary education programs for students with intellectual disabilities in the American context. The results indicated positive aspects of the programs for obtaining employment that included, for example, professional training courses, integrated internships, and collaboration between the university and the workplace. The authors suggest that further research is needed to investigate how the programs were implemented, their components, and consider the international context in the analysis of post-secondary education programs.

Lee and Taylor (2022) expanded on the study by Whirley, Gilson and Gushanas (2020) and conducted a scoping review to examine the outcomes of post-secondary education programs for individuals with intellectual disabilities developed in the university context and the barriers during the program's development process. Overall, the majority of the 21 included studies focused on teaching employment-related skills, so that programs can positively influence both the included students and the campus and community.

People with disabilities who have participated in post-secondary education programs have empirically demonstrated better post-school success outcomes in areas such as employment or post-school education (Test et al., 2009). Research also indicates increased employability after participation in vocational training programs (Gomes-Machado et al., 2016; Leonard et al., 2016; Pallisera et al., 2018). Furthermore, the professional training process contributes to global development, that is, in different areas, such as self-care, social participation, autonomy, reduced need for assistance and support, and increased quality of life (Gomes-Machado et al., 2016).

Post-secondary education programs have shown to be important for the development of components related to employment, academic skills, self-determination, and independent living. In addition, post-secondary education programs can be a determining factor in changing the trajectory of people with intellectual disabilities, as well as experience and involvement in career and employment activities, involvement in academic courses, independent living activities, and participation in the social life of the university with peers without disabilities. Taking as a reference the research developed abroad, this study is an excerpt from doctoral research that originally investigated international post-secondary education programs for

people with intellectual disabilities developed in a university context. This article aimed to characterise the international view on post-secondary education programs in the university context for people with intellectual disabilities, having as an initial framework the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

METHOD

The proposed scoping review was conducted according to the JBI scoping methodology (Peters et al., 2020) and was registered on the Open Science Framework (2024) platform¹. Scoping reviews are used to explore the breadth of knowledge and key concepts and characteristics of a research field, as well as to identify and map the main sources and types of evidence available (Munn et al., 2018).

For this research, the eligibility criteria followed the PCC structure – Population, Concept and Context. Thus, for the inclusion criteria, studies with different methodological designs that included people diagnosed with intellectual disability were considered, which may be associated with another health or developmental condition, aged between 15 and 59 years old and who participated in some post-secondary education programs. The concept addressed was that of programs carried out after or concurrently with High School that prepare students with intellectual disabilities for independent adult life and help them achieve their post-school goals in education/training, employment and independent living (Rowe et al., 2015). The context in which the programs were developed was limited to the Higher Education environment, with no restrictions regarding geographic location.

The time frame was from January 2006 to December 2022, given the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, whose text was approved in 2006. The languages included in this review were English and Spanish. The development and implementation of the search strategy took place in three stages (Peters et al., 2020).

In the first stage, the terms were mapped, according to the PCC, in the Eric and PsycInfo databases to find the descriptors/words that could compose the final search expression. The titles and abstracts of the studies located were read and the thesaurus of both databases was consulted. terms mapped they were used to develop one research strategy complete for PsycInfo, which was adapted for other databases: ("intellect* disab *" OR "intellect* development*" OR "development* disab *" OR "learning* disab *" OR "intellect* disorder*" OR "development* disorder*" OR "learning* disorder*" OR "cognitive impairment*" OR "mental retardation*") AND ("transition*" AND "program") AND ("post-secondary*" OR "post-secondary*" OR "postsecondary*" OR "post-school*" OR "post school*" OR "postschool*" OR "college*" OR "high-school*" OR "high school*" OR "highschool*" OR "university*" OR "higher*")

In a second stage that took place in January 2023, searches were carried out in the following electronic databases: Academic Search Premier ASP (EBSCO), Education Resource Information Center (Eric), PsycInfo (APA), CINAHL with Full Text (EBSCO), Web of Science Core Collection (Clarivate Analytics) and Scopus (Elsevier). We also performed targeted searches in the gray literature through Google Scholar, Global ETD Search and DART- Europe E- thesis. For searches in the gray literature, the first hundred results of each search were considered for analysis.

After the searches were performed, all records were uploaded to EndNote to remove duplicates. Two reviewers independently read the title and abstract and selected the studies that met the inclusion criteria. Disagreements that could not be resolved by the two reviewers were resolved by a third reviewer.

The search strategy retrieved 3,253 records from the different databases searched. 784 duplicate records were removed, and 2,361 records were excluded because they were not directly related to the research purposes. A total of 108 records were selected, of which 11 could not be retrieved from the databases or after attempts to contact the authors by email. Therefore, 97 records were selected for full reading, of which 73 articles were excluded because they did not meet the established inclusion criteria, leaving 24 articles. Ten studies were included from searches in the gray literature or by consulting the reference lists of the

¹ This is a mandatory and important process for systematic and scoping reviews, as it enables transparency of the process, predetermines the objectives, methods and how the final research report will be prepared.

included studies. This scoping review therefore consists of 34 studies, published between 2006 and 2022 and which are detailed in the list of references of the studies included in the review.

Data analysis was conducted according to the JBI scoping review guidelines and included qualitative analysis. Analysis sections include a) periodicity and geographic context of included studies; b) program design and duration; c) program admission criteria.

The included studies were uploaded in full to JBI for data extraction. The data extraction process was performed by two independent reviewers, using a form developed by the researchers and refined after a pilot test, which contained the following information: identification of the studies; methodological characteristics; characteristics of the participating population; characteristics of the post-secondary education programs.

RESULTS

Periodicity and geographical context of the analysed studies

The analysis indicated that the largest number of studies was published in 2021 and 2018. There was also variability during the publication period of the analysed studies, with a greater concentration in the last seven years, which represents approximately 73.5% of all publications included. Although only two publications were found in 2022, it is possible to infer that the topic is expanding and that there are possibly more recent publications that are not included in this review.

Regarding the geographical location of the studies, the majority were carried out in the United States, with a total of 21 studies (Barnard-Brak et al., 2022; Blixseth, 2022; Lee et al., 2021; Schillaci et al., 2021; Schroeder; Carter; Simpican, 2021; Grigal et al., 2019; Ryan et al., 2019; Prohn; Kelley; Westling, 2018; Knight, 2018; Qian et al., 2018a, 2018b; Sheppard-Jones et al., 2018; Cook; Wilczenski; Vanderberg, 2017; Moore; Schelling, 2015; Rogan et al., 2014; Ross et al., 2013; Folk; Yamamoto; Stodden, 2012; Kirkendall; Doueck; Saladino, 2009; O'Brien et al., 2009; Grigal; Dwyre; Davis, 2006). Research on post-secondary education programs developed in the university context was also located in Spain (Rodríguez Herrero; Izuzquiza Gasset; Cabrera Garcia, 2020; Izuzquiza Gasset; Rodríguez Herrero, 2016; Judge; Gasset, 2015; Gasset, 2012), Australia (Souza; Vongalis-Macrow; 2021; Rillotta; Lindsay; Gibson-Pope, 2024), Mexico (Rubio Jimenez, 2021; Núñez Bueno, 2017), Ireland (O'Brien et al., 2009), Iceland (Stefánsdóttir; Björnsdóttir, 2016) and Colombia (Monsalve-Robayo; Arias-Enciso; Betancour-Alzate, 2014).

Models and duration of developed programs

The programs were classified into three main types, as proposed by Hart et al. (2006). The types are: separate, mixed/hybrid and inclusive.

In the blended/hybrid model, students participate in social activities and/or academic classes with students without disabilities (and may earn credit for the courses taken) and participate in classes with other students with disabilities (sometimes called "life skills" or "transition" classes). In the substantially separate model, students with intellectual disabilities receive services in an after-school setting but participate in classes only with other students with disabilities.

In the inclusive model or inclusive individual support model, students receive individualized services (e.g., educational coach, mentor, technology, natural supports) in college, certificate, and/or degree programs. The focus of this model is to establish a career goal identified by the student that guides coursework and employment experiences (e.g., internships and work-based learning). Built on a collaborative approach through an interagency team (adult, service agencies, community-based services, and the college's disability support services), the agencies identify a flexible range of services and share the costs involved.

The predominant type of program model was inclusive, 22 programs (Barnard-Brak et al., 2022; Blixseth, 2022; Lee et al., 2021; Schillaci et al., 2021; Rillotta; Lindsay; Gibson-Pope, 2024; Rillotta et al., 2020; Grigal et al., 2019; Prohn; Kelley; Westling, 2018; Qian et al., 2018a; Qian et al., 2018b; Sheppard-Jones et al., 2018; Cook; Wilczenski; Vanderberg, 2017; Núñez Bueno, 2017; Izuzquiza Gasset; Rodríguez Herrero, 2016; Stefánsdóttir; Björnsdóttir, 2016; Judge; Gasset, 2015; Monsalve-Robayo; Arias-Enciso; Betancour-Alzate, 2014; Rogan et al.,

2014; Ross et al., 2013; Folk; Yamamoto; Stodden, 2012; Gasset, 2012; Kirkendall; Doueck; Saladino, 2009). The mixed or hybrid model was present in eight programs (Rubio Jimenez, 2021; Souza; Vongalis-Macrow, 2021; Rodríguez Herrero; Izuzquiza Gasset; Cabrera Garcia, 2020; Ryan et al., 2019; Moore; Schelling, 2015; Neubert; Redd, 2008; Grigal; Dwyre; Davis, 2006). Four studies did not report the program model (Schroeder; Carter; Simpican, 2021; Knight, 2018; Cranston-Gingras et al., 2015; Pegalajar Palomino; Xandri Martínez, 2015).

Regarding the duration of the programs, the majority were two years (Lee et al., 2021; Souza; Vongalis-Macrow, 2021; Rodríguez Herrero; Izuzquiza Gasset; Cabrera Garcia, 2020; Prohn; Kelley; Westling, 2018; Qian et al., 2018a, 2018b; Izuzquiza Gasset; Rodríguez Herrero, 2016; Stefánsdóttir; Björnsdóttir, 2016; Judge; Gasset, 2015; Folk; Yamamoto; Stodden, 2012; Gasset, 2012; O'Brien et al., 2009; Neubert; Redd, 2008), followed by programs lasting 3 years (Rillotta; Lindsay; Gibson-Pope, 2024; Rillotta et al., 2020; Knight, 2018; Núñez Bueno, 2017; Ross et al., 2013) and 4-year programs (Blixseth, 2022; Schroeder; Carter; Simpican, 2021; Ryan et al., 2019; Cranston-Gingras et al., 2015; Moore; Schelling, 2015). There were also programs with different duration configurations: a short experience of only 3 months (Kirkendall; Doueck; Saladino, 2009), an experience of 3 months to 3 years (Barnard-Brak et al., 2022), a long duration of 3 to 5 years (Rubio Jimenez, 2021), a program lasting 1 year (Monsalve-Robayo; Arias-Enciso; Betancour-Alzate, 2014), of 1 to 2 years (Pegalajar Palomino; Xandri Martínez, 2015; Rogan et al., 2014), of 2.5 years (Grigal; Dwyre; Davis, 2006) and of 2 to 4 years (Schillaci et al., 2021; Grigal et al., 2019). In two studies it was not possible to identify the duration of the programs (Sheppard-Jones et al., 2018; Cook; Wilczenski; Vanderberg, 2017).

Criteria for admission to programs

In general, the criteria for admission to the programs required a minimum age of 18 and a maximum age of 30. However, it was not possible to identify the requirements for admission in all studies, and it was also found that in some studies the participants were over 30 years old. Another aspect in common between the criteria concerns schooling: most programs highlighted the need for the candidate to have completed or received a Special Education certification at the high school level, or to be enrolled in high school, since programs that accepted students in dual enrolment were identified (Schillaci et al., 2021; Cook; Wilczenski; Vanderberg, 2017; Rogan et al., 2014; Folk; Yamamoto; Stodden, 2012). Some programs required prior knowledge of reading and writing (Monsalve-Robayo; Arias-Enciso; Betancour-Alzate, 2014; Folk; Yamamoto; Stodden, 2012). Other programs included as requirements motivation and interest in participating in a post-school college experience (Schroeder; Carter; Simpican, 2021; Sheppard-Jones et al., 2018; Rogan et al., 2014; Ross et al., 2013).

Another established measure was that participants had a minimum level of independence to move around campus and autonomy for activities of daily living, such as eating and personal hygiene. In addition, some programs required participants to know how to use public transportation (Blixseth, 2022; Judge; Gasset, 2015; Pegalajar Palomino; Xandri Martínez, 2015; Monsalve-Robayo; Arias-Enciso; Betancour-Alzate, 2014; Rogan et al., 2014; Ross et al., 2013; Grigal; Dwyre; Davis, 2006).

DISCUSSION

Most of the studies included were published in the United States. One of the factors that explain the greater number of publications in this country is its federal inclusion legislation that has been consolidated over the last few decades and the funding for research development, in addition to numerous projects in the area of Special Education focused on transition. The Higher Education Opportunity Act (HIE) *Education Opportunity Act* (HEOA) (United States of America, 2008) was the first federal legislation aimed at providing higher education services for people with intellectual disabilities and enabled comprehensive and post-secondary education. In addition, there was funding for 27 model projects called *Transition Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability* – (TPSIDs) and the creation of a National Coordination Center. Before the establishment and funding of HEOA, programs were implemented based on the philosophy of local institutions and did not have an established approach (Grigal; Hart; Weir, 2012).

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Brasil, 2009) establishes a series of obligations that States must fulfil to ensure that persons with disabilities have equal opportunities in all areas of life, including access to education on an equal basis. Despite this, educational opportunities for persons with intellectual disabilities after secondary school are quite limited, and post-secondary education programs are not available or are not accessible to a large proportion of this group in many contexts. Post-secondary education programs represent a significant opportunity for persons with intellectual disabilities, as education is an essential part of achieving other rights and is essential for effective inclusion in society.

As identified, there is great variability in relation to the characteristics of post-secondary education programs, with regard, for example, to the duration of the programs, its main purposes and criteria for student inclusion, among other aspects (Grigal; Hart; Weir, 2012; Whirley; Gilson; Gushanas, 2020; Avellone et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2021). Although the included body of literature covered a wide range of settings regarding program's characteristics and outcomes, some gaps were identified. Few studies reported how interventions were developed in post-secondary education programs contexts; studies typically focused on describing programs or evaluating outcomes in different areas related to adulthood or analysing the effects of long-term outcomes. This represents a significant gap, as many research reports did not present the complete information that would allow the analysis of important aspects of the programs. Similarly, the study by Whirley, Gilson, and Gushanas (2020) found that some research reports did not provide participant data, programs objectives, or information, meaning there was little external knowledge about these programs, including who they serve and how they measure success. And, in the same line, Lee et al. (2021) emphasize the need to understand whether the positive results achieved persisted over time after the programs ended. And, due to the great diversity of programs, it is not possible to determine which components are beneficial to the results achieved.

Currently, there is a growth in post-secondary education programs in several countries, which suggests greater opportunities for progress in the education of people with intellectual disabilities (Alqazlan; Alallawi; Totsika, 2019). One of the pioneering countries is the United States, as already mentioned, where funding and changes in legislation and policy have recently allowed more than 6,000 students with intellectual disabilities to access 310 colleges and universities (Grigal; Dukes III; Walker, 2021; Papay; Grigal, 2019). With the increased investment, there was an expansion of post-secondary education programs options, which contributed significantly to the increase in enrolment of students with intellectual disabilities in these programs (Papay; Grigal, 2019; Whirley; Gilson; Gushanas, 2020).

The literature also reports several direct challenges associated with the participation of young people with intellectual disabilities in these programs, such as the need for more support in vocational rehabilitation and job preparation services, greater funding, the need to expand access, physical obstacles, attitudinal barriers, and transportation. Some of the challenges identified persist in different areas of society, including architectural inaccessibility and attitudinal barriers. These aspects limit the quality and form of participation of these people in the environment in which they are inserted. In reference to the university context, Castro and Almeida (2014) described similar barriers, reported by students, which influence the inclusion process, such as: architectural, communicational, pedagogical impediments, and attitudinal barriers. These limitations correspond to the barriers identified in the study by Poker, Valentim and Garla (2018).

In this sense, when discussing the problems faced by people with disabilities that affect participation in post-secondary education programs, some studies (Petcu; Chezán; Van Horn, 2015; Scheef et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2021) identified challenges in ensuring public transportation for this group. Barriers included restricted or unavailable options for accessing university and work. Girardi et al. (2021) discussed the barriers that people with intellectual disabilities face for leisure and recreation purposes, the lack of autonomy of users in the transportation system, making it necessary to have monitoring, as parents often feel insecure about making the journey alone.

Scheef et al. (2018) identified barriers faced by employees in post-secondary education programs, noting, in addition to limitations and restrictions related to transportation, other

aspects of adversity, such as employer perceptions of the abilities of people with disabilities, inadequate staff hours to support students in the workplace, and students' limited time for action planning and job search. In relation to supported employment, many issues were reported, such as dissatisfaction of people with intellectual disabilities with the work environment, due to the fact that relationships with coworkers are mainly poor and employer demands for an acceptable level of productivity. This has been reported in some studies in the United Kingdom (Hyde, 1998).

There is also a sense of anxiety among employers because they assume that people with intellectual disabilities will not perform as well as people without intellectual disabilities. This is an obvious gap between actual abilities and assumed abilities. It is also assumed that people with intellectual disabilities are not as capable of learning on the job as others and that their level of education is lower (Baker et al., 2018). Employers often prefer to hire people with physical rather than intellectual disabilities. Reasons given include misperceptions regarding competence and task performance, difficulties with the hiring process and, if the individual is hired and does not meet the standards expected for the position, they may have to be dismissed (Kocman; Fischer; Weber, 2017).

As explained above, barriers to employment for people with intellectual disabilities are related to people's attitudes towards the perception of intellectual disability and the individual, and concerns about employment legislation. It is true that the experience in post-secondary education programs can increase the chances of a person with intellectual disability obtaining employment. Therefore, it is important that programs continue to support students with intellectual disabilities to achieve better results in paid and competitive employment, personal development and independence, because, in addition to increasing the level of social participation of these people, inclusion at different levels of society can contribute to greater visibility and breaking down inadequate perceptions of intellectual disability and the skills of these people.

CONCLUSIONS

Scoping reviews are particularly useful for mapping broad and underexplored topics, such as post-secondary education programs for people with intellectual disabilities in higher education. In this study, the approach adopted allowed us to identify relevant trends, as well as important gaps, based on an international sample of studies published between 2006 and 2022.

Although the growing number of programs indicates progress in promoting educational inclusion, the data reveal a strong concentration of experiences in the United States. This predominance is explained, in part, by policies that encourage and finance research, but it also highlights an imbalance in the production and dissemination of knowledge in countries such as Latin America and Africa, limiting the understanding of how transitions to adulthood are being constructed (or not) in different realities.

Furthermore, it was possible to notice that many studies prioritise the general description of the programs, leaving aside important aspects, such as the institutional contexts, the voices of the participants and the challenges faced in the daily implementation of the actions. It is also noteworthy that admission criteria based on levels of autonomy or functional behaviour can function as hidden barriers to access, which goes against the principles of equity and diversity that should guide inclusive practices.

The persistence of obstacles—physical, attitudinal, institutional—points to the need for more robust and integrated public policies that are not limited to specific solutions or isolated projects. For post-secondary education programs to truly fulfil their role of expanding opportunities and promoting autonomy, it is necessary to address the structural barriers that still restrict access to higher education and the world of work for this group.

Finally, future research is needed to advance in listening to people with intellectual disabilities themselves and in the articulation between universities, families, support services and public policies. The aim is to collaboratively build possible paths so that the post-secondary education programs cease to be an exception and becomes a real and accessible stage in the life trajectory of these people.

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