

# Strategies for Inclusive Learning: A Marketing Faculty's Journey with Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

Ana Estima<sup>1</sup> , Ana Carolina Carvalho<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>GOVCOPP, ISCA, University of Aveiro, Portugal, <sup>2</sup>ISCA, University of Aveiro, Portugal

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## Abstract

*The Multidisciplinary Individual Study Program (MISP), initiated in 2021 at the University of Aveiro, provides inclusive opportunities for individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD) in Higher Education. Developed in collaboration with a Portuguese retail sector company, this program allows students with IDD to enhance scientific, pedagogical, personal, and social skills. Promotes unique educational experiences, combining formal education, personalized curricula, and real work internships. In this innovative project, stakeholders, including students, families, faculty, mentors, and business partner, play crucial roles in the success of the program. This article focuses on the teaching experience of two marketing teachers who had some of these students in their classes. It aims to explain the program characteristics and highlight the challenges, adopted strategies, and transformative impact on student development. The emphasis is placed on stressing the feasibility of inclusive higher education programs and providing suggestions and implications for fellow educators and institutions.*

**Keywords:** *Teaching experiences; Intellectual and developmental disabilities; Inclusive education; Inclusion; higher education; marketing education.*

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## 1. Introduction

The participation of individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD) in Higher Education undeniably contributes to their overall development, fostering the acquisition of relevant skills that will enhance their employability and social participation. The University of Aveiro (UA) implemented, in 2021, a pioneering program in Portugal called the Multidisciplinary Individual Study Program (MISP). Its main objective was to "provide meaningful (inclusive and supported) opportunities for social and personal development for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities in Higher Education, through

participation in academic and social life within the University" (Jordán de Urríes et al., 2022, p. 63).

Based on scientific evidence that already documents both the advantages and skills, and the challenges that students with IDD can gain when fully included in regular educational environments (e.g. Corby et al., 2022; Grigal et al., 2019; Heras et al., 2021), and other international experiences (Machado et al., 2020), the program was developed in partnership with *Jerónimo Martins Group, S.A.* (a Portuguese business group in the food distribution and specialized retail sector).

This program allows individuals with IDD to develop scientific, pedagogical, personal, and social skills, as well as enhance their employability profiles. As UA students, they can not only attend classes but also participate in all institutional and academic initiatives and have access to internships in a real work environment. These students can choose from a range of available course units across various UA programs, enabling them to tailor their academic path. Integration is truly comprehensive and inclusive, as these students attend these curricular units alongside their university peers in regular classes (with no specific units designed for this purpose). Now in its third academic year, it is already possible to share the success of this innovative initiative and some related best practices.

The purpose of this paper is to share the pedagogical and teaching experience of two marketing teachers who willingly embraced this project by integrating students into the curricular units they teach. Faced with this proposal for inclusive education, there were several challenges in pedagogical practices when aiming to include all students in the teaching/learning process while simultaneously addressing the specific needs of students with IDD.

Hence, this paper will provide a more detailed explanation of the program and delineate the roles of each stakeholder involved. Subsequently, an exposition of the teaching experience will ensue, explaining challenges encountered, the roles assumed by teachers and regular students, employed strategies, and offering suggestions and implications for fellow educators and institutions.

## **2. The Multidisciplinary Individual Study Program (MISP)**

As previously mentioned, this course was established in 2021 and resulted from the collective effort and involvement of various stakeholders and institutions. Its primary objectives, as outlined in the creation decree, were: "i) equipping individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD) with specific skills in selected scientific areas, as well as personal, social, and transversal competencies, by providing them with the opportunity to study in Higher Education alongside their peers; ii) fostering the development of skills necessary for individuals with IDD to enhance their employability profile and increase their civic

participation; and iii) promoting the mobilization of knowledge, capabilities, and attitudes relevant to the inclusion of individuals with IDD in the community" (Universidade de Aveiro, 2021).

The proposed course facilitated a unique combination of formal educational offerings from various university departments, allowing students to create a customized curriculum aligned with their personal, academic, and professional goals. Outside the classroom, students received mentoring and support in regular classes and participation in campus activities.

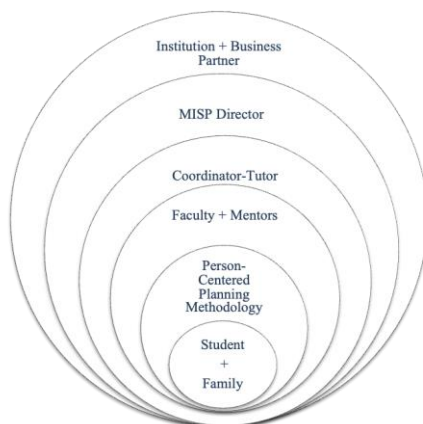
The course spans four semesters, during which students attend classes alongside their peers in regular environments. Additionally, it includes two internships in employment settings, at the end of the second and fourth semesters. Students are required to complete five course units per academic year, taking two or three units each semester, totalling 60 European credit transfer and accumulation system (ECTS).

In general, the course was designed with the characteristics outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1. Summary of the main characteristics of the course.**

<b>Project</b>	Multidisciplinary Individual Study Program
<b>Curricular Program</b>	10 optional curricular units for Higher Professional Courses and 1 <sup>st</sup> cycle courses at the University of Aveiro (5 curricular units/academic year)
<b>Legal Framework</b>	Subparagraph e), point 3, Article 4, Decree-Law N.º 65/2018 of August 16, non-degree-granting course
<b>Target Audience</b>	People with Intellectual and/or Developmental Disabilities (IDD) holding a certificate of completion of compulsory education
<b>Location</b>	Course based at the Department of Education and Psychology, involving multiple Departments and Schools of the University of Aveiro
<b>Duration and ECTS</b>	Two academic years and 60 ECTS credits

Regarding the involved stakeholders, as depicted in Figure 1, there are numerous actors, each with a specific and crucial role well-defined, and extremely important for the success of the course.



*Figure 1. Stakeholders of the Multidisciplinary Individual Study Program (MISP).*

Following this, we move on to the identification and brief explanation of each participant and their roles, delving into the specifics of how each individual contributes to the overall success of the course:

- Student and Family: The student serves as the focal point of the entire program and its offerings, with all decisions centered around them. The family plays a crucial role in providing support and coordinating with the university team.
- Person-Centered Planning: The individual at the core of the program makes decisions, with professionals supporting and facilitating access to information for informed choices.
- Faculty: Teachers play a key role in welcoming these students into their disciplines, promoting their inclusion, and establishing dynamics to help enhance their skills.
- Mentors: Each program student is paired with a regular student in each course, serving as a mentor who provides support inside and outside the classroom. This support is established at one hour per week and operates on a voluntary basis.
- Coordinator-Tutor: This figure is vital, providing support to program students, offering training to mentors, and serving as a liaison between all involved parties: students, families, teachers, and mentors.
- Course Director: Like any other university course, this program has a director who, in addition to coordinating scientific and pedagogical matters, bridges with other university bodies and partner institutions.
- Business Partner: Support is provided for maintaining the coordinator-tutor role, offering scholarships, facilitating curriculum internships, and participating in the project team and a course monitoring and evaluation committee.

- Institution: The university hosting the course ensures structures and support, as well as handling all formal aspects related to the general administration of the course and its implementation.

### **3. Teaching Experience**

The teaching experience extends beyond a mere act of transmitting knowledge; it is a collaborative process fostering both academic and personal development. The role of a professor, particularly when working with students with IDD, has proven to be a distinctive and enriching journey.

Initially, all professors at UA were invited to participate by volunteering to host students with IDD. The challenge posed by the program management transcended mere experimental pedagogical practices; it entailed integrating one or more students with IDD into regular classes. In this case, it specifically involved teaching marketing curricular units (CUs) within the Marketing undergraduate degree and the CTeSP in Sales and Marketing Management. These included Marketing I, Merchandising and Point of Sale Management, and Sales and Marketing Project.

As students enrolled in our courses, questions arose: How can inclusive practices be developed? What methodologies can facilitate inclusion, participation, and learning for everyone? How can the other students be sensitized to differences? These inquiries were addressed with the support of the coordination team and relied heavily on a trial-and-error approach, constantly adapting to the specific needs of each student.

Building upon this principle and rejecting the utilization of specific teaching methodologies tailored solely for students with IDD, the initial step involved gaining a deeper understanding of what was presented to the professor and the profile of the student(s) attending the courses. In this regard, the significance of the coordinator tutor as a supportive element for both students and professors is underscored.

The next step involved sensitizing the classes beforehand about the existence of this program, its functioning, and the imperative to integrate students with IDD. This prior awareness-building proved indispensable and facilitated the preparedness for receiving students with IDD, fostering collaboration and respect for individual dignity. During this phase, students in the class were encouraged to assume the role of mentors. Each student on the course had at least two mentors for each semester, per course. Finding volunteers for this role was never an issue, as there were consistently students eager to contribute. The mentors' responsibilities included aiding in integration, clarifying doubts, and assisting with studies both inside and outside the classroom. The students' generosity pleasantly surprised us. Across all courses, there was a palpable willingness to support these students and collaborate on projects within and outside the

classroom. These mentors played a pivotal role throughout the process, ensuring not only complete integration but also offering study support and liaising with instructors regarding these students' challenges. This comprehensive support system was instrumental in the program's success. Inside the classroom, it is crucial to consider the specific challenges of each student with IDD and tailor methodologies and materials to meet these individual needs.

The pedagogical approach involved actively engaging students with IDD in all regular course activities, including participation in work groups, completion of in-class assignments, and involvement in extracurricular activities (e.g., projects, competitions, study visits, among others). Fostering collaborative learning among peers contributed to building trust, enhancing acceptance, fostering a sense of belonging to the community, and promoting the social skills of all students. In these activities, students with IDD had specific objectives tailored to their circumstances, while maintaining consistent expectations and rigor in treatment and assessment. This approach ensured they felt equally treated, mitigating discrimination and stigmatization. Naturally, individual assessments were customized to each student's limitations, and the assessment model was adjusted to accommodate the student's profile. This adaptation included changes to issues such as the response format—opting for true or false questions instead of open-ended ones—and, in another instance, allowing a student to answer questions electronically rather than manually. This flexibility in assessment was essential to accommodate diverse student profiles.

Throughout their education, students with IDD actively participated in various educational and recreational activities alongside their peers. This collaborative engagement contributed to the development of their personal, social, and professional competencies, fostering their socio-professional inclusion. It is crucial to emphasize once more the kindness of colleagues who welcomed these students, both inside and outside the classroom. Their support played a fundamental role in establishing inclusive environments and fostering a genuine educational community.

This teaching experience underscores the growing importance for professors to leverage empathy and prioritize interpersonal relationships, enabling a better understanding of the emotions, interests, and challenges faced by these students. Particularly, fostering motivation and facilitating learning and development requires professors to be attuned and available—a foundational aspect of the teaching role. Being prepared for teaching involves the ability to navigate the daily demands presented by a diverse student body at any educational level. Our teaching experience has been immensely enriched through collaboration with these students. It represents an ongoing journey; every challenge overcome, and every connection is a step towards a deeper comprehension of the authentic essence of inclusive education.

The outcome at the end of the semester's conclusion goes beyond numerical assessments, highlighting the remarkable progress exhibited by students with IDD. It signifies more than

academic accomplishments—it serves as a testament to an educational community that acknowledges, values, and empowers each student, irrespective of existing barriers.

#### **4. Conclusions and Future**

The acquisition of marketing skills has proven particularly beneficial for individuals with IDD, enhancing their communication abilities, as highlighted by Heras et al. (2021). In our marketing classes, we prioritize communication skills and self-expression through presentations, case study discussions, pitches to external juries, and various pedagogical activities. Active participation of students with IDD in these activities promotes social interaction and inclusion across different classes.

These methodologies, inherent to marketing education, facilitate the enhancement of social skills in students with IDD, fostering relationships, friendships, and a sense of inclusion in diverse social contexts. Additionally, the mastery of personal skills acquired in marketing classes contributes to increased self-confidence and self-esteem among students with IDD.

These students actively contribute to effective teamwork, express their perspectives, and adapt to changing circumstances, preparing them for active roles in professional contexts. Skills such as expressing ideas, problem-solving, creativity, and resilience, stimulated by marketing education, enable their integration into the labour market, aligning with the findings of Grigal et al. (2019) and Papay et al. (2018). Beyond technical skills, students gain insights into market dynamics, relationships between economic agents, consumer literacy, and civic and citizenship skills, promoting active social participation.

Despite facing challenges, the teaching experience based on this innovative project in Portugal offers valuable insights. Recommendations include broader program communication to standardize the presence of these students in higher education, in line with Corby et al. (2022). Professors should be familiar with student profiles in advance, facilitating better course preparation and adapting materials, assessments, and necessary support. Effectively promoting inclusive education requires sensitizing professors to inclusive pedagogy, emphasizing the human and relational dimensions of teaching and learning. Collaborative efforts among educational institutions, professors, and students are essential for successful inclusive practices.

Despite challenges, the observed evolution and changes in students—emotionally, socially, and intellectually—within their limitations demonstrate the empowering impact of this experience on individuals with IDD, fostering their integration into the community and the labour market.

The success achieved in this first edition underscores the possibility of making higher education more inclusive and democratized, aligning with the findings of Rodríguez Herrero et al. (2020). The experience not only enriches students with IDD but also provides an opportunity for

professors and students to engage in a project that transforms mentalities and enhances ethical and human dimensions.

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