Design2Freedom

ENGLISH VERSION

Good practices guide

Promoting Person-Centered Design for disability in higher education

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COCEMFE

CREATIVE DISTRICT

TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY OF KOŠICE
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1. Introduction

The Design2Freedom (D2F) project, funded by the Erasmus+ programme under the KA220-HED call (No. 2023-1-ES01-KA220-HED-000154427), is a transnational cooperation initiative that runs from December 2023 to June 2026. its general objective is to promote the incorporation of participatory and inclusive methodologies for teaching Person-Centered Design, fostering collaboration between higher education institutions and social organisations, and ensuring the active involvement of PwD throughout the process. This goal is articulated through a pedagogical and organisational strategy that integrates teacher training, methodological innovation, the creation of digital tools, and the generation of shared knowledge among universities, social organisations and PwD.

The project is structured around five main Work Packages (WP): WP1 (Coordination and Management) ensures good governance of the consortium; WP2 fosters the methodological and curricular development of training processes; WP3 includes the international mobility and peer learning activities (Learning, Teaching and Training Activities, LTT); WP4 focuses on the implementation, evaluation and improvement of innovative university pilot actions; and WP5 addresses dissemination, sustainability and impact. These components are accompanied by the production of innovative materials such as a digital toolkit, an educational MOOC, a map of experiences, and this good practices guide.

The consortium is composed of five European entities with complementary roles: the Spanish Confederation of People with Physical and Organic

Disabilities (COCEMFE), acting as the lead and coordinating organisation; the Universidade da Coruña (UdC), a key reference in inclusive education and accessible technologies; Vilniaus Kolegija (VIKO), a Lithuanian institution experienced in inclusive vocational education; the Technical University of Košice (TUKE), with a strong focus on engineering and universal design; and Creative District (CreaD), a Belgian organisation specialised in social innovation and co-creation processes.

1.1 Who we are and what we do

The Design2Freedom project is a transnational initiative aimed at transforming European university systems towards inclusive, accessible and participatory models grounded in the rights of PwD. To achieve this, a diverse and interdisciplinary consortium has been established, composed of universities, social organizations, and entities specialized in social innovation and accessibility from Spain, Slovakia, Lithuania, and Belgium. Below is a description of the project partners and their main areas of expertise.

Spanish Confederation of People with Physical and Organic Disabilities (COCEMFE) – Spain

COCEMFE is a Spanish non-governmental organization founded in 1980, whose mission is to promote the full inclusion and active participation of PwD in all areas of society by defending their rights and strengthening the associative fabric of the disability sector. It is composed of 94 territorial and sectoral organizations, bringing together more than 1,600 associations and representing over 2.5 million people with disabilities in Spain.

With a strong track record in policy advocacy, program management and social innovation, COCEMFE has led the provision of key pedagogical and training tools in D2F. Its lines of work include inclusive education, employment, accessibility, independent living, international cooperation and socio-health coordination. It also participates in official advisory bodies such as the National Disability Council and the Royal Board on Disability. Its experience in human rights and social action has been essential to articulate the project's rights-based approach aligned with the CRPD and the SDGs.

Universidade da Coruña (UDC) – Spain

The Universidade da Coruña, founded in 1989, is a public university located in Galicia with two campuses (A Coruña and Ferrol), offering 52 undergraduate degrees, 67 master's programs and 39 doctoral programs. It has over 17,000 students and more than 2,500 teaching and administrative staff. UdC participates in D2F through the Centre for Information and Communication Technology Research (CITIC) and the TALIONIS research group.

CITIC is an interdisciplinary center conducting applied research on ICT for health, mobility, accessibility and inclusion, using advanced methodologies such as virtual reality, 3D printing, robotics and collaborative platforms. TALIONIS, composed of researchers in engineering, health and social sciences, focuses on inclusive design and technological development to improve the quality of life of PwD and older people. In D2F, UdC has led pedagogical innovation through the development of prototypes, student pilots and the use of accessible technologies.

Vilniaus Kolegija (VIKO) – Lithuania

VIKO is the largest university of applied sciences in Lithuania. Founded in 2000 through the merger of eight higher education institutions, it currently hosts over 6,600 students enrolled in 45 study programs across seven faculties, including Health, Electronics and IT, Arts and Creative Technologies, Pedagogy, and Economics. Its staff includes 460 educators, of whom 60 hold PhDs.

VIKO is distinguished by its practice-oriented approach, commitment to innovation and strong focus on internationalization. It has participated in numerous European programs including Erasmus+, Nordplus and Creative Europe. Its experience in education management, institutional cooperation and curricular adaptation has been essential to implementing the D2F pilot in the Lithuanian context, integrating a rights-based approach and engaging PwD. It has also facilitated partnerships with local disability organizations.

Technická Univerzita v Košiciach (TUKE) – Slovakia

The Technical University of Košice is one of the leading higher education institutions in Slovakia, established in 1952. It includes nine faculties and

offers a broad academic portfolio ranging from engineering to social sciences. It hosts approximately 10,000 students from 45 countries and employs 1,500 staff.

TUKE's main partner in D2F is the Access Center (AC TUKE), created in 2000 as a specialized pedagogical unit to support students with specific needs. Its work focuses on ensuring an accessible academic environment, providing technical advice, training university staff, and coordinating national inclusive education efforts. AC TUKE is one of only two institutions officially designated as methodological centers for inclusive education in Slovakia. Its contribution to D2F has been crucial in applying inclusive methodologies, digital accessibility, and the full participation of PwD in all project phases.

Creative District (CreaD) – Belgium

CreaD is a Belgian social innovation organization based in Brussels. Its mission is to promote transformative projects in the fields of culture, education, social entrepreneurship and sustainable development. It acts as an incubator for local and transnational initiatives, creating synergies between public, social and economic actors. Its interdisciplinary team has expertise in European project management, training, methodological tool development and knowledge transfer.

Within D2F, CreaD has supported co-creation processes, participatory methodologies and strategies for communication and impact. Its experience in social innovation has enabled the articulation of practices that are replicable, adaptable and transferable, based on the needs identified by participants and communities. CreaD has also provided strategic input for the design of the good practices guide, the development of the toolkit and the building of sustainability partnerships for the project.

1.2 What is a good practice and why collect it?

The concept of good practice has been widely addressed in the fields of international cooperation, public policy and social intervention as a tool to identify, assess, replicate and transfer actions that have proven to be effective, sustainable and useful in solving complex problems.

The United Nations – United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) – (2008) defines a good practice as:

> "(...) a successful initiative that has a demonstrable and tangible impact on improving quality of life, resulting from effective partnerships between the public sector, private sector and civil society, and which is sustainable from a social, economic, cultural and environmental perspective" (p. 2).

For its part, the European Website on Integration (2025) states that a good practice can be understood as "strategies, approaches and/or activities that, according to research and evaluations, have proven to be effective, efficient, sustainable and/or transferable, and reliably lead to the desired outcome".

Likewise, a systematic review conducted by Sandu and Birtha (2020), within the framework of the European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research, summarises the key attributes of a good practice into eight dimensions: effectiveness (ability to achieve expected results), efficiency (relation between resources and results), sustainability (lasting over time), replicability (potential to be successfully transferred), coherence (alignment with other policies), relevance (adaptation to needs), participation (involvement of target groups), and institutional commitment (structural support from the organisations involved).

Other organisations, such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO, 2016), the World Health Organization (WHO, 2017), and the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE, 2018), add complementary criteria such as ethics, innovation, equity, cultural sensitivity and the capacity to generate measurable social impact. All of them agree that a good practice is not simply an intervention "that works", but rather a documented experience, rigorously evaluated, capable of adapting to new contexts and with the potential to structurally influence the field of application.

From this perspective, collecting good practices not only helps to systematise institutional learning, but also facilitates continuous improvement processes, inspires new actions, and builds useful evidence for the design of inclusive public policies. In the specific case of D2F, this guide aims precisely to identify, analyse and disseminate those pedagogical, organisational and methodological practices that have proven to be effective in including persons with disabilities (PwD) as active agents in higher education.

The D2F project itself can be considered, as a whole, an international good practice. This is justified by its participatory and rights-based approach, its capacity to mobilise diverse actors, the creation of high-value pedagogical outputs, and its alignment with strategic frameworks such as the European Pillar of Social Rights, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015), and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, United Nations, 2006).

1.3 Criteria for identifying a good practice

Identifying good practices is a key tool for systematizing, transferring, and scaling validated learnings from real experiences. Within the D2F project framework, and in line with the rights-based approach, the social model of disability, and the Erasmus+ programme's principles of educational quality, a specific set of criteria has been defined to recognise and assess those practices that can be considered exemplary.

These criteria are inspired by standards recognised by international bodies such as the United Nations (2008), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2016), the World Health Organization (WHO, 2017), the European Commission (2025), and the European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research (2020). From these frameworks, a synthesis has been derived and adapted to the specificities of the project, based on the evaluation processes implemented in work packages WP3 and WP4, particularly in the pilot experiences developed by the partner universities and systematised in LTT3.

This formulation of criteria does not merely respond to a technical or procedural logic of evaluation, but incorporates a comprehensive perspective guided by principles of inclusion, participation, and relevance. Its goal is to identify practices grounded in the active involvement of PwD, that foster institutional co-responsibility and contribute to the structural and sustained improvement of educational environments.

The six criteria that guide the selection and analysis of good practices in this guide are presented below:

- **Impact**
  The practice has generated tangible improvements in the living conditions, learning, participation, or wellbeing of its target population, especially PwD. This impact can be documented through qualitative or quantitative data collected via the evaluation systems implemented during the project.

- **Sustainability**
  The practice can be maintained over time beyond occasional or extraordinary support, integrating into existing organisational and policy structures. It is especially valued when institutional factors are identified that ensure its continuity or expansion.

- **Transferability and adaptability**
  The practice can be replicated or adapted in other geographical, institutional, or cultural contexts, respecting local specificities. This criterion is reinforced when the practices show methodological flexibility and alignment with international frameworks such as the CRPD or the SDGs.

- **Innovation and contextual relevance**
  The practice introduces novel approaches, tools, or processes, or creatively adapts existing ones to new realities or emerging needs. Innovation may be technological, methodological, organisational, or social, as long as it addresses a clearly identified need.

- **Participation and co-responsibility**
  The practice actively involves stakeholders in its design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. The degree of collective agency and the role of diverse actors in knowledge production and decision-making will be assessed.

- **Evaluation and empirical validation**
  The practice includes evaluation mechanisms (quantitative and/or qualitative) that allow its effectiveness, quality, and relevance to be assessed from the perspective of participants and key stakeholders.

These mechanisms should be systematic, ethically grounded, and enable feedback for continuous improvement.

Taken together, these criteria provide a coherent framework for the analysis and selection of good practices that not only meet technical indicators, but also align with a transformative, participatory, and rights-based approach, as promoted by the D2F project.

1.4 Purpose and target audience of this guide

This document aims primarily to identify and systematize those actions, strategies, and methodologies that have proven effective in promoting the genuine inclusion of PwD in higher education. It also seeks to disseminate this knowledge among key actors in the educational and social ecosystem to enhance its transferability and sustainability.

Without excluding other stakeholders, the guide is especially addressed to:

- Higher education institutions interested in transforming their pedagogical and organizational models.
- University teaching staff and curriculum planners aiming to innovate from an inclusive perspective.
- Social sector entities working in the field of disability rights.
- Public administrations responsible for education, social affairs, and accessibility policies.
- PwD and their families.
- Civil society at large.

In line with the objectives of the Erasmus+ programme, this guide is also aligned with the commitments of the European Pillar of Social Rights and SDGs, in particular SDG 4, which advocates for inclusive, equitable, and quality lifelong education.

2. Conceptual framework

The D2F project is grounded in a conceptual framework that integrates the core principles of the social model of disability and the human rights-based approach, as promoted by the CRPD SDGs, particularly SDG 4 on inclusive and quality education. In contrast to charitable or rehabilitative approaches, this model considers persons with disabilities (PwD) as active rights holders and recognises that disability arises from the interaction between individual conditions and social, attitudinal and environmental barriers. In this sense, education must be conceived as a transformative space, where equity, active participation and universal accessibility are not compensatory measures, but structural principles.

In line with this perspective, the project adopts the above-mentioned paradigm and translates it into pedagogical practices that give concrete expression to the CRPD commitments, particularly Article 24, which establishes the right of PwD to inclusive, quality education on an equal basis with others. Furthermore, the guide is aligned with other international instruments such as the 2030 Agenda, the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), and UNESCO's Education 2030 Framework for Action (2015), reinforcing the role of universities as key agents for active citizenship, equality, and respect for diversity.

On this basis, the following sections present the key principles and methodological-pedagogical approaches that guide the design, implementation and evaluation of the D2F project. Each of them will be analysed from both theoretical and practical perspectives, demonstrating

their relevance for the transformation of the university system towards a more inclusive, just, and rights-based model for all.

2.1 The Person-Centered Approach

One of the key conceptual and methodological pillars of the D2F project is the Person-Centered Approach (PCA) (or Person-Centered Model, PCM), which represents an ethical and practical orientation where PwD are not seen as objects of intervention but as active agents of their own development. This approach marks a paradigm shift from traditional assistentialist, rehabilitative, or charitable models, promoting self-determination, active participation, and independent living for PwD.

The PCA is grounded in a human rights perspective, acknowledging that social barriers—not individual limitations—are the main obstacle to inclusion. Thus, the motto of the Stockholm Declaration of the European Institute for Design and Disability (2009), "Good design enables, bad design disables," takes on a deeper meaning when PwD themselves participate in shaping solutions, ensuring that environments, processes, and products truly reflect their needs and aspirations.

According to Rodríguez (2014), Person-Centered and Integrated Care (PCIC) refers to an approach that:

> "(...) promotes the necessary conditions to achieve improvements in all areas of life quality and personal well-being, starting from full respect for the person's dignity and rights, their interests and preferences, and with their effective participation" (p. 22)

This conception incorporates essential values such as self-determination, shared responsibility, recognition of individual uniqueness, and involvement in decision-making processes.

In the context of D2F, this approach is not merely theoretical: it materializes through the direct involvement of the target group in every phase of the project. PwD have actively participated in identifying needs, designing training content, developing tools, running university pilots, validating outcomes, and proposing improvements. This represents a qualitative leap from previous projects, as PwD are no longer passive

beneficiaries but co-producers of knowledge and co-responsible for creating solutions that improve their own living conditions.

This model is also directly aligned with the CDPD, which affirms the right of all people to fully participate in social, educational, cultural, and political life on equal terms. The Convention emphasizes principles such as individual autonomy, universal accessibility, non-discrimination, equal opportunities, and full inclusion—all of which are embedded in the design and implementation of D2F. The adoption of the PCA in this project represents an innovative, transformative commitment that aligns with the highest international standards for inclusion and equity. Moreover, integrating this model into university settings opens the door to a paradigm shift in higher education, steering it toward more democratic, inclusive, and egalitarian models.

To fully understand the scope of the PCA within the project, it is essential to clarify several key concepts. Personal autonomy refers to the capacity of each individual to make life choices and actively engage in their community. Functional independence refers to the ability to carry out daily life activities with or without support, respecting each individual's pace and style.
The right to independent living relates to the possibility of living in the community with adequate support, without being subject to institutionalized models that limit personal choice. Personalized supports include resources and strategies tailored to the specific needs of each person, ranging from personal assistance and assistive technologies to environmental adaptations and self-management training programs.

These elements reinforce the idea that each person is unique and that their needs, preferences, and aspirations must guide the planning and provision of support. The PCA is based on central principles such as self-determination, understood as the right of every person to set their own goals and receive the necessary support to achieve them; active participation, which implies moving beyond paternalistic approaches to ensure PwD can express themselves and make decisions freely and knowledgeably; comprehensive and personalized care, which addresses all dimensions of life—health, education, employment, leisure, personal relationships—through flexible and coordinated interventions; universal accessibility, which involves removing physical, communicative, and attitudinal barriers in all environments, from homes to public and digital

spaces; and dignity and human rights, which entail recognizing the intrinsic value of every person and ensuring respectful and equitable treatment.

The PCA is also framed within the broader concept of PCIC, which combines two essential dimensions: comprehensiveness, which considers all factors affecting a person's life—from biomedical to social and environmental—and personalization, which involves active participation in support planning so that values, preferences, and decisions of each individual are central to the process. This model breaks away from assistentialist approaches in which professionals unilaterally determined what people needed. In contrast, PCIC asserts that interventions must be designed in collaboration with the person, respecting their autonomy and ensuring their well-being.

The implementation of the PCA and PCIC within the D2F project has significant impacts both for PwD and society as a whole. Among its benefits are:

- The promotion of independence and self-determination by advancing toward a model that empowers individuals to make decisions and act, moving away from dependency-based systems.
- The guarantee of full participation in society by removing barriers and providing appropriate support that enables development on equal terms.
- The improvement of life quality by ensuring access to appropriate services, opportunities, and resources that allow PwD to fulfill their personal and professional aspirations.
- The prevention of institutionalization by providing community-based support that avoids segregation in closed environments and fosters social inclusion on equal terms.
- The promotion of cultural and social change by transforming societal perceptions of PwD and promoting values of inclusion and equity.
- From an organizational perspective, this model also yields benefits by enabling more efficient resource use, focusing on what each individual

truly needs and avoiding standardized services that are often ineffective or irrelevant.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the PCA transforms educational relationships. It entails abandoning unidirectional and hierarchical models in favor of dialogic, collaborative, and horizontal processes. The role of educators is not merely to deliver content but to accompany, facilitate, and adapt learning environments to the characteristics, motivations, and expectations of students. This approach also aligns with the thinking of Paulo Freire (1970), who envisioned education as a practice of freedom aimed at transforming reality. As opposed to vertical models, the Brazilian author proposed a dialogic pedagogy in which educators and learners participate as active subjects in the construction of knowledge, recognizing each other as individuals situated within historical and social contexts. As Freire wrote in his classic work "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" (1970):

> "Education as the practice of freedom—as opposed to education as the practice of domination—denies that people are abstract, isolated, independent, and unconnected beings; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from them" (p. 81)

Nevertheless, this approach also faces several challenges. A shift in mindset is required among professionals and institutions, which necessitates specific training to move away from traditional intervention models. It also calls for adapting regulations and public policies to support personalized assistance and deinstitutionalization. Resource availability and funding are crucial, as flexible and individualized care demands investment in tailored support services. Finally, ensuring the real participation of PwD is essential by creating effective mechanisms that guarantee their voice and decision-making power throughout the entire process.

2.2. Universal Design

Universal Design (UD) is an approach that originated in the fields of architecture and industrial design at the end of the 20th century. However, it has gradually been adopted across multiple sectors, including education, as a cross-cutting principle to ensure equity and accessibility from the early stages of any process. Formulated by the Center for Universal Design

at North Carolina State University (USA), UD is defined as “the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design” (Connell et al., 1997, p. 1). This definition breaks away from the traditional logic of retrofitting or individual compensation and instead proposes inclusive planning from the outset, designed for the full range of human diversity.

The UD approach is articulated through seven key principles that have guided its development: equitable use, flexibility in use, simple and intuitive use, perceptible information, tolerance for error, low physical effort, and appropriate size and space for approach and use. Although originally formulated for architectural and industrial design, these principles have proven applicable in much broader fields, including education, communication, and digital technology. Together, they aim to create environments that effectively serve as many people as possible without requiring segregated or individualized solutions.

In education, UD implies the proactive planning of content, spaces, materials, and methodologies to ensure access, participation, and learning for all students, regardless of their abilities or personal characteristics. According to Burgstahler (2015), applying UD in higher education not only improves accessibility for PwD, but also enhances the quality of learning for the student body as a whole, by offering multiple means of accessing information, participating actively, and expressing knowledge. Thus, an academic environment that adopts UD not only removes barriers but also fosters creativity, pedagogical innovation, and a culture of respect for diversity.

This approach is deeply aligned with the principles of the CDPD, particularly articles 9 (accessibility) and 24 (education). Specifically, article 24.2 requires State Parties to “ensure that persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability and that they can access inclusive, quality, and free education on an equal basis with others.” This entails designing education systems that respond to diversity without requiring students to conform to a normative model. This marks a clear shift from a rehabilitative model to a social one, in which the responsibility for adaptation lies with the system, not the individual.

Furthermore, the UD paradigm is directly linked to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4, which calls for “ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all.” In this sense, UD becomes a concrete strategy for achieving this goal, as it operationalizes the principles of inclusion and equity in specific pedagogical and organizational practices. It is not merely a statement of intent but a framework for action that guides the design of policies, materials, and processes.

From a pedagogical perspective, UD translates into actions such as using accessible texts in multiple formats, employing visual and auditory aids, designing assessments with diverse options, creating flexible learning environments, and training educators in inclusive competencies. Authors like Rose and Meyer (2002), in their proposal of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), emphasize that these strategies benefit not only those who face barriers but also enhance the overall teaching and learning process. For example, offering oral, written, or digital formats for an exam can benefit a student with reading difficulties as well as another who simply learns better through oral expression or technology. UD in education allows for addressing diversity without labeling students.

Within the D2F project, UD has been one of the guiding principles. This has been reflected in the design of educational materials such as the MOOC and the Toolkit, ensuring they are available in accessible and understandable formats for all. The activities developed during the LTTs were also planned according to these principles, ensuring that PwD could participate on equal terms. Additionally, digital accessibility audits, inclusive language reviews, the incorporation of multi-format resources, and training sessions on UD for teachers and technical staff were carried out. These actions not only met technical accessibility criteria but also fostered an organizational culture more attuned to diversity.

UD in D2F has not been limited to material or technological aspects but has also influenced the project’s methodological and ethical design. In this way, it has promoted an institutional culture more sensitive to diversity, encouraging the elimination of attitudinal barriers and strengthening the capacity of participating universities to become genuinely inclusive spaces. A concrete example was the inclusion of co-creation dynamics in which students, educators, and PwD collaborated in the design of tools and

content, demonstrating that UD is also a collaborative work framework that gives voice to traditionally marginalized actors.

As Meyer et al. (2014) emphasize, UD is not merely an accessibility technique but a strategy for justice. In this sense, D2F aligns with a transformative pedagogy that not only acknowledges diversity but celebrates it as a source of innovation, equity, and democratic legitimacy. This implies understanding that change is not limited to technical adjustments but requires a broader cultural transformation in how learning, teaching, and the role of educational institutions in society are conceived.

The experience of D2F highlights that applying this paradigm goes beyond the immediate benefits of accessibility. Its effects reach the entire educational community, fostering more flexible, resilient, and innovative environments. The participating universities not only achieved more accessible materials but also built organizational capacity to sustain these practices in the future, demonstrating that UD is not a one-off resource but a sustainable institutional strategy.

2.3. Accessibility

Accessibility is a core principle of the social model of disability and one of the fundamental pillars for ensuring the full exercise of human rights. It is not merely a technical matter but a necessary condition for equality, autonomy, and active participation in all areas of life, whether or not one has a disability. At the international normative level, the CDPD enshrines this principle in Article 9, which states that State Parties must take appropriate measures to ensure that PwD can access, on an equal basis with others, the physical environment, transportation, information, communication, and other facilities and services open or provided to the public.

From this perspective, accessibility must be understood in its universal dimension, meaning as a condition that benefits everyone, regardless of their personal circumstances. It includes not only physical or architectural aspects but also cognitive, sensory, communicative, digital, and attitudinal dimensions. As jurist Rafael de Asís (2020) points out, our concept refers

to “the condition that environments, goods, products, services, and rights must meet to allow access and enjoyment by all people, eliminating barriers that prevent full participation” (p. 3). This definition goes beyond physical or architectural accessibility and encompasses a comprehensive view that includes legal, social, and symbolic dimensions. Within the framework of the social model of disability, accessibility becomes an indispensable prerequisite for the effective exercise of human rights, since without it, equality of opportunity, personal autonomy, and active participation in community life cannot be guaranteed.

In education, accessibility is an essential requirement for realizing the right to inclusive education. Article 24 of the CDPD states that learning environments must be accessible and that necessary measures must be taken to support PwD in developing their potential, self-esteem, and full participation. This includes the availability of adapted materials, assistive technologies, accessible physical environments, educators trained in inclusion, and institutional policies sensitive to diversity.

Pedagogically, ensuring accessibility means diversifying the ways information is presented, allowing multiple forms of participation and expression, using plain language, employing visual and auditory aids, designing alternative assessments, and removing communication barriers. It also involves fostering an institutional culture that values difference, promotes respect, and actively encourages equity.

Within the D2F project, accessibility has been conceived as a cross-cutting principle. From the design of training activities to the development of intellectual outputs, accessible tools, multi-channel formats, digital platforms compatible with assistive technologies, easy-to-read materials, and subtitled audiovisual resources have been prioritized. In addition, the LTTs were held in fully accessible physical spaces, with personalized support according to each participant’s needs.

Ultimately, the commitment to accessibility in D2F has had an impact not only on pedagogical design but also on the transformation of the participating institutions themselves. Through internal reflection processes, ongoing training, and dialogue with disability expert organizations, universities and partner entities have strengthened their capacity to become more inclusive, sustainable, and human rights–aligned environments.

2.4. Participation and empowerment

Full and effective participation, along with empowerment, are fundamental dimensions for the social and educational inclusion of PwD. From the social model and human rights perspective, participation does not simply mean being present or informed, but having the means, recognition, and necessary conditions to meaningfully influence the processes that affect one's own life. In this regard, Article 4.3 of the CDPD establishes that State Parties must closely consult with PwD and actively involve them in the development and implementation of policies that concern them.

Participation, moreover, is not limited to the institutional sphere. It has pedagogical, community, and personal dimensions that directly challenge how education is practiced. As UNESCO (2020, p. 200) emphasizes, an inclusive education system must ensure that all students—regardless of their background, situation, or abilities—actively participate in all aspects of the learning process. This participation involves engaging effectively in knowledge construction, making decisions about one's own learning, and contributing to the development of a more just and inclusive educational environment.

Empowerment, in turn, is a process through which individuals acquire or strengthen the capacity to take control of their lives, exercise their rights, and transform their reality. As conceptualized by Zimmerman (2000), empowerment is manifested at the individual, organizational, and community levels. In education, it translates into processes of self-awareness, agency, critical skills development, and the building of support networks.

Authors like Paulo Freire (1970) highlight the emancipatory dimension of education, conceived as an act of freedom. In his pedagogy of the oppressed, empowerment emerges through horizontal dialogue, problematization of reality, and the development of critical consciousness. From this perspective, participation and empowerment are indispensable conditions for a transformative education that not only transmits content but also contributes to the democratization of knowledge and social justice.

The D2F project has integrated these principles transversally. From its design phase, it has promoted the active participation of PwD in all stages:

needs assessment, co-design of activities, implementation of pilots, results analysis, and formulation of recommendations. This participation has been real, structured, and recognized, leading to collective ownership of the process and reinforcing the project's legitimacy.

Furthermore, D2F has promoted empowerment through methodologies that encourage autonomy, critical thinking, and collaborative work. Tools such as Design Thinking, Challenge-Based Learning, and Service-Learning have been used, positioning students as protagonists of learning and agents of change. These strategies have enabled PwD not only to access knowledge but to produce, question, and transform it.

In line with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 4.5 (eliminating disparities in education) and SDG 16.7 (ensuring inclusive and participatory decision-making), D2F demonstrates that participation and empowerment are not add-ons, but essential conditions for achieving truly inclusive education.

Finally, the project has strengthened institutional empowerment by raising awareness among educators, administrators, and policymakers about the importance of active listening, recognizing diverse forms of knowledge, and sharing decision-making power. In doing so, D2F has contributed not only to the transformation of individuals but also of educational structures.

2.5. Inclusion

Inclusion is a structural principle and an ethical and political goal in education, especially when addressed from the social model of disability and the human rights–based approach. Unlike integration, which follows a deficit-centered adaptive logic, inclusion requires transforming the educational system as a whole to ensure that all people, regardless of their characteristics or conditions, can learn, participate, and thrive on an equal footing (Booth & Ainscow, 2011).

As previously mentioned, the CDPD establishes in Article 24 the right of PwD to access inclusive, equitable, and quality education within the general education system, rather than in segregated settings. This obligation

implies, among other aspects, the provision of reasonable accommodations, individualized support, and effective measures to remove barriers. Inclusion, therefore, is not an additional resource or compensatory measure, but a basic condition for fulfilling the right to education.

From this perspective, inclusion not only involves changes in physical or technological accessibility, but also in institutional cultures, policies, and pedagogical practices. It requires fostering a shared vision of the value of diversity, building welcoming and collaborative educational communities, critically reviewing exclusionary structures, and adopting methodologies that acknowledge multiple ways of learning and being in the world (Echeita, 2013).

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development reinforces this vision in SDG 4, which calls for "ensuring inclusive, equitable, and quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all," with particular emphasis on SDG 4.5, which aims to eliminate disparities in education at all levels. Inclusion is also linked to SDG 10, which promotes reducing inequalities within and among countries, recognizing education as a key tool to achieve this.

Pedagogically, inclusion translates into practices such as UDL, cooperative learning, formative assessment, attention to different learning paces, and the promotion of a school environment based on respect and justice. It involves shifting from a model in which the student must adapt to the environment to one in which the environment is adapted to welcome and value all students.

Within the D2F project, inclusion has been addressed as a cross-cutting principle guiding both methodological design and organizational culture. The pilot experiences developed by the participating universities implemented inclusive strategies such as interdisciplinary learning, personalized training processes, digital and communicative accessibility, valuing diversity in working teams, and equitable participation in decision-making spaces.

D2F has also promoted teacher training focused on improving inclusive competencies, reviewing biases and stereotypes, and implementing open and accessible pedagogical resources. These actions have strengthened the capacity of institutions to undergo internal transformation, developing a more critical, sensitive, and rights-based outlook toward PwD.

In summary, inclusion in D2F has also been understood as a community-based and relational practice. Collaborative networks were established among universities, Third Sector organizations, and PwD, fostering a logic of shared responsibility and mutual learning. This approach enabled the articulation of technical knowledge, experiential expertise, and innovative proposals in the collective construction of more just and sustainable educational solutions.

2.6. Rights-based approach and human rights

The human rights–based approach is a normative and ethical framework that recognizes all people, in this case PwD, as rights holders—not as recipients of assistance, protection, or goodwill. In education, this approach transforms the traditional logic of intervention by positioning students as active subjects capable of participating, deciding, and demanding equitable and appropriate conditions for their holistic development. Education, from this perspective, is not a privilege but a universal right, indivisible and interdependent with other fundamental rights.

The CDPD is the most advanced international instrument in this field. Adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2006, it represents a historic milestone by incorporating the social model of disability and declaring the obligation of States to guarantee access to inclusive, equitable, and quality education through reasonable accommodations and appropriate support (UN, 2006). As noted, Article 24 enshrines the right of PwD to education without discrimination, on an equal basis with others, promoting respect for diversity, human potential, full participation, and lifelong learning.

Applying a rights-based approach in education means recognizing that the right to education is not fulfilled solely by formal access to the system. It also includes the conditions that ensure sustained participation and equitable graduation. This comprehensive vision requires the availability of appropriate resources, accessibility in all dimensions, and the adaptability of educational processes to student diversity. This logic has been systematized under the “4 A’s” framework—availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability—proposed by former Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, Katarina Tomaševski, and endorsed by the Office of the High

Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR, 2012). This framework provides a useful normative tool for guiding inclusive higher education policies from a human rights perspective.

The rights-based approach is also closely linked to the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, particularly SDG 4 (quality education), SDG 5 (gender equality), and SDG 10 (reduction of inequalities). All of them urge States to implement inclusive, participatory, and people-centered educational policies, with special attention to historically excluded groups such as PwD.

From a pedagogical standpoint, working from a rights-based approach means recognizing the classroom as a political and transformative space, where participation, recognition of difference, learning dignity, and curricular justice must be guaranteed. It also entails training educators in human rights, non-discriminatory assessment, democratic classroom management, and the use of materials that respect cultural, functional, and linguistic diversity.

In the context of the D2F project, the rights-based approach has been the guiding thread of all actions. From its conception, D2F has been framed as a concrete response to international demands for a more inclusive, accessible, and democratic higher education. PwD have been recognized as rights holders, not beneficiaries, and have actively participated in co-creation, implementation, and evaluation processes.

Furthermore, D2F has developed institutional capacities for rights enforcement: educational materials with a rights-based focus have been produced, ethical debates have been promoted within universities, and alliances with organizations defending the rights of PwD have been established. These strategies have not only improved pedagogical processes but also influenced the internal policies of participating institutions.

In sum, applying a human rights perspective in higher education—and specifically within D2F—means moving beyond assistentialist and paternalistic practices to build academic communities that recognize, protect, and promote the rights of all people. Only in this way will it be possible to move toward a more just, equitable, and dignity-respecting society.

3. Our experiences: Pilots developed by the universities

In the framework of D2F, the partner universities —Universidade da Coruña (Spain), Vilniaus Kolegija (Lithuania), and Technická Univerzita v Košice (Slovakia)— developed pilot experiences focused on the practical application of the methodological and pedagogical principles promoted by the project. These pilots were carried out as part of WP4 and were preceded by training activities developed under the LTTs, conceived as key spaces for knowledge transfer, capacity building for teaching staff, and peer-to-peer learning among partners.

The design and implementation of these experiences were supported by the training frameworks provided by COCEMFE and CreaD, which equipped the consortium with essential pedagogical tools, educational resources, and methodological approaches. Based on this support, each university designed and executed its pilot, adapting it to its institutional reality and the profile of its academic community, always keeping the active participation of PwD at the core.

It is worth highlighting that each university worked collaboratively with social organizations linked to the field of disability in their respective national contexts. These alliances were essential to ensure the relevance, quality, and impact of the pilots by structurally incorporating experts by experience as active agents in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the training processes. This approach reinforced the inclusive and

participatory nature of the project by placing the voices of PwD at the center of the educational process.

This chapter presents a synthesis of the three pilots, prepared by the teams of each university. Each one outlines the training objectives, the phases of the process, the methodological strategies applied, the achievements obtained, and the lessons learned, with special attention to their alignment with the project principles and their potential for transferability.

Finally, one of the central methodologies used in the three pilots is briefly introduced: the Design Thinking approach applied to social projects. This methodology will be addressed in the following subsection due to its value as a tool to promote inclusive, collaborative, and person-centered processes.

3.1. Design Thinking in social projects

3.1.1 Concept and origins of Design Thinking

Design Thinking (DT) has gained prominence as a methodology that transcends disciplinary boundaries and provides a structured yet flexible way of addressing complex problems. In her review, Panke (2019) characterises DT as "(...) a mindset, a process, and a collection of methods and techniques that can be applied to ill-defined, complex problems" (p. 282). This perspective underlines the threefold nature of DT: it is simultaneously a way of thinking, a sequence of iterative steps, and a set of concrete tools for practice.

The importance of this characterisation lies in its adaptability. DT is not tied to one profession or domain but can be applied to diverse contexts, from technological innovation to social challenges. Its iterative cycle of empathy, problem definition, ideation, prototyping, and testing reflects a departure from linear models of problem-solving. Panke (2019) emphasises that DT "emerged in the design disciplines but is now increasingly applied in education, business, and other sectors of society" (p. 283). This expansion demonstrates the versatility of the methodology and sets the foundation for its adaptation in inclusive projects such as D2F.

DT is particularly relevant in contexts that require participation and creativity under uncertainty. The methodology, according to Panke (2019), "aims to create innovative solutions that are human-centered, balancing desirability, feasibility, and viability" (p. 284). This balance explains why DT is well suited for educational and social initiatives that need to integrate human needs with practical implementation. For D2F, the focus on desirability —solutions that PwD value and need— is aligned with MCP and CRPD principles.

3.1.2 Design Thinking applied to social projects

When extended beyond its original domains, DT demonstrates significant value in addressing complex social challenges. Panke (2019, p. 289) explains that the methodology is particularly effective in contexts where collaboration across disciplines and engagement with real-world problems are required. This makes it highly relevant for social projects, which often involve universities, NGOs, communities, and PwD working together to co-create solutions.

DT in educational and social environments also brings a transformative dimension for participants. As Panke (2019, pp. 289–290) observes, the methodology integrates cognitive, social, and emotional aspects of learning, helping participants to develop empathy, resilience, and creative confidence. In this sense, social projects using DT not only produce innovative outputs but also empower individuals to become active contributors and change agents in their communities.

Another important aspect highlighted by Panke (2019, p. 291) is that DT is not restricted to generating ideas, but requires testing them in practice, where failure is reframed as an opportunity for learning. This iterative and experimental process ensures that solutions developed with PwD are grounded in lived experiences and remain adaptable to real needs.

Complementing this view, Brown (2009) argues that DT functions as a bridge between what people desire and need, and what is technologically feasible and economically viable. In this regard, the methodology's strength lies in its capacity to transform abstract ideas into practical outcomes that achieve a balance between desirability, feasibility, and viability. This perspective reinforces the usefulness of DT in social projects, where innovative ideas must not only respond to human needs but also be realistic and sustainable.

In summary, DT contributes to social projects by fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, empowering participants through co-creation, and generating solutions that are innovative, practical, and socially meaningful. Its capacity to integrate empathy, creativity, and experimentation makes it particularly suited to inclusive initiatives such as D2F.

3.1.3 Implementation of Design Thinking in the Design2Freedom project

Within the D2F project, CreaD played a pivotal role in adapting DT to the context of inclusive higher education. Its involvement ensured that the methodology was not introduced as a generic innovation tool but as a framework directly linked to MCP and UD principles, aligning with the broader objectives of CRPD and the SDGs. DT was thus embedded as a transversal approach that guided training activities, international exchanges, and the pilots developed by the partner universities.

During the LTTs, CreaD facilitated workshops that introduced DT as both a mindset and a structured process. Participants were trained in methods such as empathy mapping, collaborative ideation, and rapid prototyping. The sessions emphasised the importance of co-creation with PwD, enabling students and educators to experience first-hand how inclusive design requires the integration of diverse perspectives. By doing so, DT became a means of operationalising participation, ensuring that PwD were involved not only as end-users but as co-designers of solutions.

The implementation of DT in the pilots provides concrete examples of its contribution to D2F. At VIKO, the hackathon format was explicitly structured around the DT cycle. Teams composed of students, PwD and NGOs moved through the phases of empathy, ideation, prototyping, and testing. This resulted in innovative proposals such as “Sounding Direction” and “Sense Way,” which addressed real accessibility needs through practical and creative solutions. The process also highlighted the value of teamwork, iteration, and feedback loops, which are central to DT.

At UdC, the Design4Occupation pilot integrated DT into the OT curriculum. First-year students were guided to identify challenges presented by PwD and to co-create solutions through iterative cycles of ideation and prototyping. The outcomes ranged from inclusive dice cups to portable ramps, each

responding directly to specific accessibility barriers. By embedding DT into academic coursework, UdC not only produced innovative prototypes but also fostered in students the mindset and skills needed for inclusive and participatory professional practice.

TUKE also applied DT in its pilot activities, particularly in collaboration with the Access Centre. Here, interdisciplinary student teams worked with PwD to design solutions that addressed accessibility and participation challenges. The process underscored the importance of empathy-driven research and collaborative prototyping, reinforcing TUKE's institutional commitment to inclusion. DT served as a methodology that structured collaboration across disciplines while maintaining the focus on real-life needs identified by PwD.

Across all these pilots, DT demonstrated its value as more than a set of techniques: it became a pedagogical stance that encouraged experimentation, risk-taking, and iterative learning. Participants reported that the methodology enabled them to reframe challenges as opportunities and to see constraints as sources of creativity. This reflects the transformative role of DT in D2F, where innovation was not understood as technological novelty alone but as the creation of environments in which PwD could actively shape their own educational and social contexts.

In summary, the use of DT in D2F illustrates the potential of inclusive higher education to act as a laboratory for social innovation. By integrating empathy, collaboration, and iteration into all stages of the pilots, the project demonstrated that inclusive education requires participatory methodologies. DT provided the consortium with a common language and process for co-creation, empowering PwD, students, educators, and NGOs to jointly design solutions that were innovative, feasible, and socially relevant.

3.2. Vilniaus Kolegija pilot (Lithuania)

The VIKO pilot, part of the Erasmus+ funded project Design2Freedom (D2F) initiative, was designed to promote person-centred design and inclusive education in higher education. It was implemented in collaboration with NGOs such as the Lithuanian Autism Association "Lietaus vaikai" ("Rain

Children"), Lithuanian Union of the Blind and Visually Impaired (Lithuania) and NGO "Draugiški autizmui" ("Autism Friendly").

The pilot aimed to bridge the gap between academic theory and real-world challenges faced by people with disabilities. The pilot was structured around three main components: a community training seminar, a multi-day hackathon, and a Moodle-based course on active educational methodologies. These components were carefully designed to engage students, faculty, and administrative staff in a comprehensive learning experience that emphasized empathy, innovation, and collaboration.

The pilot began with a seminar titled "Do we understand equally what inclusion in higher education means?" which brought together VIKO lecturers, administrative staff, and students from various faculties. The seminar featured presentations on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and neurodiversity, including a powerful testimony from a former VIKO student with autism and her mother, who has ADHD. This session emphasized the importance of empathy, ethical responsiveness, and the creation of safe academic environments. It laid the foundation for the pilot's broader goals by sensitizing the academic community to the lived experiences of students with disabilities.

The second and most intensive part of the pilot was a three-day hackathon held from May 12 to14, 2025. This event brought together 38 students (including 3 with disabilities), 14 lecturers (2 with disabilities), and representatives from NGOs. Participants were divided into 6 interdisciplinary teams and tasked with developing practical solutions to real-life challenges presented by the partner organizations.

All challenges arose from real experiences and needs of everyday life. The challenges experienced by the blind or partially sighted people. Also relevant for people with cognitive disabilities or with autism spectrum disorder:

1. When a bus arrives at a bus stop, a blind or partially sighted person does not know what it is.

2. A blind or partially sighted person has difficulty finding the entrance to an institution.

3. Banks and institutions often use queue management systems. In addition to the touch screen control, blind or partially sighted people cannot see the board or know when it is their turn to see the advisor. They cannot see the box numbers.

4. Blind or partially sighted people find it difficult to navigate large buildings and clinics (e.g. Santara Clinic) and can easily get lost. People with visual impairments cannot read arrows or room signs.

5. The challenge faced by people with ASD, ADHD and other invisible disabilities. Using spoon theory to develop an app to help manage energy levels (strength). The app should help to create a daily routine where each step can be measured by the number of shouts. When many spoons are used up, the app should suggest different breaks/techniques for energy recovery, self-regulation, rest, relaxation.

6. Students with disabilities and/or special needs need to apply to the VIKO for help with their studies. Develop an app for communication between the student and the college's special assistance specialist. The app should include a needs registration form.

Summarizing, these challenges included improving accessibility in public transportation, navigation in large buildings, and queue management systems in institutions, as well as addressing the needs of individuals with autism and ADHD through energy management tools based on the "spoon theory."

The hackathon followed a structured agenda that included theoretical sessions on design thinking, UDL, and Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), followed by intensive teamwork supported by mentors. The event culminated in a prototype presentation session evaluated by a panel of experts from academia and civil society. The winning team developed "Sounding Direction," a prototype designed to help visually impaired individuals identify arriving buses. Other notable projects included "Sense Way," which addressed accessibility in queue systems, and "Takto," which focused on orientation aids in large buildings. These projects demonstrated the creativity and commitment of students to solving real-world problems through inclusive design.

The 3-day hackathon was integrated into the study process as part of the Information Activities Practice course in the Information Systems study program at the Faculty of Electronics and Informatics.

The third component of the pilot was a Moodle course made available to the VIKO community. This course provided theoretical content and self-evaluation tasks on active educational methodologies, including UDL, the PCM, and design thinking. It served as a resource hub for hackathon participants and a broader audience of educators and administrators, reinforcing the pilot's educational objectives. The course also included links to recommended tools and methodical materials, ensuring that participants had access to comprehensive resources to support their learning.

The pilot was evaluated using a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative feedback. Evaluation criteria included innovation, social impact, technical and economic feasibility, and the clarity of presentation. The results were overwhelmingly positive. Student satisfaction averaged 4.14 out of 5, with 90.9% of students feeling like active participants in their learning process. A significant 97.7% of students agreed that the needs of people with disabilities were adequately addressed, and 93.2% found the learning resources appropriate and accessible. These results highlight the effectiveness of the pilot in fostering inclusive learning environments and promoting student engagement. The pilot also assessed the accessibility of the learning environment and the effectiveness of inclusive methodologies. While 56.8% of students reported no prior experience with inclusive learning dynamics, 90.9% felt their voices and needs were valued during the pilot. The average rating for how well the activities were adapted to individual characteristics was 3.77 out of 5. These findings underscore the importance of designing educational experiences that are responsive to the diverse needs of students.

From a curricular perspective, the pilot integrated person-centred design principles into various academic subjects. In the Faculty of Electronics and Informatics, students in the Information Systems and Software Engineering programs engaged in activities such as business process modelling, accessibility testing, and human-computer interaction design. These courses emphasized the application of WCAG standards and universal design principles. In the Faculty of Economics, students learned to plan and cost projects aimed at improving accessibility for people with disabilities. These

interdisciplinary efforts ensured that the pilot's objectives were embedded across multiple academic domains, promoting a holistic approach to inclusive education.

The pilot also addressed broader social needs by strengthening the collaboration between higher education and social organizations. VIKO's existing procedures for individualizing the study process for students with special needs were complemented by the D2F project's focus on active methodologies and participatory design. The challenges presented during the hackathon were based on real-life experiences, ensuring that the solutions developed were both relevant and impactful. This approach not only enhanced the learning experience but also contributed to the development of practical tools that can improve the daily lives of people with disabilities.

One of the most significant outcomes of the pilot was the enhanced capacity of educators to apply inclusive and participatory methodologies. By engaging directly with people with disabilities and co-creating solutions, participants gained practical skills and a deeper understanding of person-centred design. This experience not only enriched their professional development but also contributed to the creation of more inclusive academic environments. The pilot fostered a culture of empathy, collaboration, and innovation, which is essential for building inclusive communities.

The pilot's success was further amplified through communication and dissemination activities. Articles and reports were published on VIKO's faculty websites, highlighting the hackathon and training sessions. These publications helped raise awareness about the importance of inclusion and showcased the innovative solutions developed by students. The visibility of the pilot's outcomes contributed to its sustainability and can encourage other institutions to adopt similar approaches.

In terms of resources, the pilot utilized a range of human and material assets. Training and mentoring were provided throughout the project, and prototype production facilities were set up during the hackathon. Participants received video narratives from individuals with disabilities, which helped contextualize the challenges. Financial incentives and awards were also provided to encourage participation and recognize outstanding contributions. These resources played a crucial role in supporting the pilot's activities and ensuring their success.

Although no assistive technologies were directly used during the pilot, the focus on accessibility and inclusive design ensured that the solutions developed were aligned to meet the needs of people with disabilities. The pilot emphasized the importance of designing environments and tools that are inherently accessible, rather than relying solely on assistive devices. This approach promotes independence and empowers individuals to participate fully in academic and social life.

In conclusion, the VIKO pilot under the Design2Freedom project initiative successfully demonstrated the potential of person-centred design and inclusive education in higher education. By combining theoretical knowledge with practical application, the pilot empowered students, educators, and social partners to co-create solutions that address real-world challenges. The project not only improved the learning experience for students with disabilities but also fostered a culture of empathy, collaboration, and innovation within the academic community. Through its comprehensive approach and strong community engagement, the pilot contributed to the broader goal of building more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable educational environments. The lessons learned from this pilot can serve as a model for other institutions seeking to enhance their inclusive practices and promote social justice in education.

3.3. Universidade da Coruña pilot (Spain)

The UDC implemented a pilot as part of the Erasmus+ funded D2F project, whose aim is to promote the person-centred design and inclusive education in higher education through participatory methodologies. The pilot at the UDC was entitled 'Design4Occupation: Pilot study of the Design2Freedom Project at Universidade da Coruña to transform learning through inclusion' and was carried out between February and May 2025.

This pilot study was embedded in the first-year curriculum of the Bachelor's Degree in Occupational Therapy (OT) at UDC, thus reaching students at the beginning of their professional journey. It also created opportunities for collaboration with participants from other academic disciplines, including Computer Engineering, Education Sciences, Social Sciences, Physiotherapy, and Speech Therapy. This interdisciplinary

dimension strengthened the relevance of the pilot and mirrored real-world professional practice, where collaboration across fields is key to generating inclusive solutions.

A strong feature of the pilot was its cooperation with PwD and NGOs. UDC partnered with the Galician Confederation of People with Disabilities (COGAMI) and the Association of Parents of People with Cerebral Palsy in A Coruña (ASPACE Coruña), both leading NGOs in the disability sector in Galicia. These organisations facilitated direct contact between students and PwD, ensuring that the challenges addressed were authentic and rooted in everyday realities.

Design4Occupation involved 92 participants with diverse roles and academic backgrounds. Such a diverse group of participants created a dynamic environment in which lived experience, academic knowledge, and technical expertise were brought together to co-design innovative solutions.

Design4Occupation aimed to integrate the person-centred practice, inclusive and participatory design into the OT curriculum, while creating opportunities for other academic disciplines. The specific goals of the project were:

- Raise awareness among first-year OT students about disability, diversity, and inclusion by exposing them to real-world challenges and problem-based learning.
- Promote active involvement of PwD as co-creators of solutions, offering students the opportunity to work closely and meaningfully with them.
- Foster interdisciplinary collaboration between OT and other fields, such as Computer Engineering, Social Sciences, Education Sciences, Speech Therapy or Physical Therapy, to co-design innovative assistive technologies that respond to the real needs of PwD.
- Address meaningful community challenges by co-designing prototypes and assistive technologies that directly respond to user-defined needs.
- Test and evaluate the application of the PCA, participatory, and inclusive design with PwD in different university settings, both in terms of student learning outcomes and social impact.

- Strengthen partnerships between higher education institutions and social organizations, creating sustainable links that can continue beyond the project's lifetime.

These objectives reflect the project's dual ambition: to innovate in teaching and learning while simultaneously contributing to the creation of a more inclusive and accessible society.

The pilot was structured around participatory and person-centred methodologies. It unfolded through three main phases: (1) initial phase, consisting of different activities to present the project, basic content and raise awareness first-person about the daily reality of PwD; (2) development phase, with activities focused on students playing an active role in solving challenges, accompanied by PwD and other profiles and (3) final phase, with the presentation of results and a closing ceremony.

3.3. 1. Initial phase

At the start, students were introduced to the objectives, structure, and expected outcomes of the project. Working groups were formed based on students' interests and preferences, and each was assigned a challenge defined by a PwD. Support materials were distributed, and activity timelines were agreed upon. ASPACE and COGAMI also led awareness-raising sessions to help students understand the lived experiences of PwD and the role of OT.

Six collaborators from COGAMI and ASPACE (Joan, Jose, Juan Ramón, José Luis, Sonia, and Jorge) participated in face-to-face and virtual sessions in which they shared the realities faced by many PwD. They also presented specific issues in the form of challenges for students to research and investigate possible solutions. The challenges presented were as follows:

- 'Inclusive dice cup'. Joan explained the difficulties that people with limited mobility may encounter when accessing conventional board games. The students were then given the challenge of promoting the creation of a dice cup for board games that would be accessible to as many people as possible (considering various issues, such as how to roll the dice, size, textures, among other issues).

- ‘Mobile ramp’. Jose focused his participation on asking for the students’ collaboration in finding a solution to the steps commonly found in everyday life that cannot be negotiated by a wheelchair user. It was decided that the possible solution could focus on overcoming steps of at least 10 centimeters and that it should also be portable.

- ‘Stand up’. Juan Ramón explained the difficulties associated with using and handling a walking stick in everyday life, especially the challenge of finding a solution that would allow him to pick it up and put it down independently in different positions and contexts.

- ‘Hold it tight’. José Luis discussed the use of adapted cutlery with a thickener that met requirements to limit the grip area, was adaptable to different types of cutlery, and allowed quick and effective cleaning.

- ‘Bag rescue’. Sonia expressed her desire to continue studying in higher education and the difficulties she faced in carrying her backpack and the various items she needed for her studies. The students were therefore set the challenge of finding an accessible way for her to carry these items independently using an electric wheelchair.

- ‘Long range’. Jorge explained to the students the need to create a device in the form of an object grabber that could handle different types of objects and did not require significant or sustained strength.

Through these authentic challenges, students gained first-hand insight into the lived experiences of PwD and the relevance of OT in addressing everyday barriers.

3.3.2 Development phase

Groups worked on their assigned challenges either in person or online, collaborating directly with users from ASPACE and COGAMI. This stage included follow-up meetings via Microsoft Teams to help students develop solutions and prepare interviews with researchers and lecturers. Students held internal meetings to organize their work and develop project content. Interdisciplinary collaboration was encouraged, particularly with the Computer Engineering Faculty, to co-create accessible and innovative solutions. Project coordinators provided

ongoing guidance, helping teams reflect on their progress, challenges, and learning outcomes.

The 61 participating students were divided into six interdisciplinary teams, each addressing one of the six proposed challenges. Each group was mentored by the person with disability (who proposed the need) and a team of four lecturers and/or researchers. The approach followed the principles of the person-centred approach, universal design, accessibility, and inclusion through participatory methodologies.

Students played a central role in the process, leading the work on interviews and problem-solving, while lecturers and researchers served mainly as support figures.

Problem-based learning and participatory methodologies were employed, allowing students to take ownership of the process and work towards solutions iteratively. UD principles were also integrated, ensuring that solutions considered accessibility and usability from the outset.

3.3.3 Final phase

Each team presented its solution to a mixed panel, including the participating users. To this end, a closing event was held to present the results, evaluate the project, and bring it to a close. Students shared their experiences, emphasizing the importance of the occupational therapist's role and the value of interdisciplinary teamwork.

The evaluation panel was made up of people with different profiles representing key agents for promoting inclusion in higher education: politics, through the Councillor for Social Welfare, Participation and Equality (City Council of A Coruña), the university, through the coordinator of the subject Fieldwork Placements I (OT Bachelor) and NGOS, through representatives of PwD, and professionals from COGAMI and ASPACE.

A collaborative space was created in which students presented their solutions, the best inclusive solutions were recognized, and lessons learned were shared.

Throughout the pilot, methodologies and strategies focused on active participation, the PCA, and UDL were employed. The evaluation

approach was mixed, combining quantitative and qualitative tools under the principles of participatory, person-centred, and results-oriented evaluation. The main instrument was a standardised form developed by COCEMFE, which enabled the homogeneous collection of key information regarding design, implementation, participation level, outcomes, and perceived impact of each pilot.

In addition, in the Design4Occupation pilot, the following data collection tools were used: specific initial and final forms, self-assessment of the skills acquired by students, group and individual reflection (written reflections and audio/video recordings).

Throughout the project, UDL principles were applied to ensure inclusive education: fostering engagement through real-life challenges and direct user interaction; offering multiple forms of representation via written, oral, and audiovisual materials; and enabling various action and expression formats through active participation and both group and individual project outputs in diverse formats.

These tools helped students analyse their personal and professional growth, understand the barriers faced by PwD in daily life, and recognize how interdisciplinary collaboration can generate accessible and innovative solutions.

A total of 92 people participated in the entire pilot programme: 61 students (3 PwD), 12 lecturers, 6 researchers (1 PwD), and 13 representatives from partner organisations (7 PwD). The academic profiles were: OT, Computer Engineering, Social Sciences, Education, Speech Therapy, and Physiotherapy.

The main findings include scores above four points (out of 5) in the main variables and show high levels of satisfaction and perceived benefits: 4.18 in satisfaction with the project; 4.36 in benefit from the project, and 4.93 in utility of the person-centred approach.

In addition, the following scores related to student perception were found:

- Overall accessibility of the learning experience: 4.33/5.
- Respect for the group's diversity through the methodologies used: 4.33/5.

- Personal and academic growth: 4.03/5.
- Impact on well-being and sense of belonging at the university: 4.15/5.
- 100% of students reported being active agents in the learning process.
- 100% of students felt motivated to apply the inclusive principles learned in the future.

Special attention was paid to the process and the students' perspective. The thematic analysis of the qualitative information provided by the students (n=61) shows that the following themes emerged: Person-centered approach, personal and professional growth, awareness of everyday barriers, value of interdisciplinary collaboration, and impact of inclusion.

Most students highlighted the importance of listening to the person, understanding their context, needs, and goals. This was often their first opportunity to apply a person-centered perspective in practice and rethink some beliefs about diversity. Thus, one student indicated, "The interview with Lucas [pseudonym of a PWD participant] pushed me to set aside my assumptions and focus on his real story".

Students appreciated working alongside different professionals and their classmates. This collaboration resulted in more comprehensive, realistic, and inclusive solutions. One student points out this aspect in the following way: "I also discovered the value and importance of teamwork, as during these months, we all contributed as much as we could to find a useful and real solution".

Many participants reflected on how a simple and functional design can significantly improve a person's quality of life. This realization strengthened their motivation and sense of purpose as future professionals. As another participant remarked, "I understood that the person-centered model isn't just a nice concept; it completely changes the way you work. [...]. The opportunity to bring projects like this to life is incredible, and seeing that something we've done can truly help people is very rewarding and motivating".

Finally, a cultural shift towards inclusive approaches was fostered at the institutional level, and cooperative relationships with the social organizations were consolidated.

This process provided valuable lessons learned, which may guide replication in other contexts:

Active participation of PwD is crucial. The project emphasizes the importance of inclusion by actively involving people from ASPACE and COGAMI in the pilot experience. The pilot was based on the PCA, ensuring that PwD were placed at the heart of the process. This approach involved recognizing their needs, preferences, and rights, while promoting their active participation in every phase of the project.

Individuals with disabilities from ASPACE and COGAMI were not merely beneficiaries; they actively collaborated in defining and addressing the challenges. Direct communication with students was encouraged so that the lived experiences and knowledge of these individuals could guide the learning process.

Their role as mentors and co-designers ensured authenticity and relevance, and is a key element for real inclusion.

Authentic challenges increase motivation. The challenges addressed were based on real problems identified by the users themselves, ensuring both relevance and practical applicability. Students were more engaged when solving real problems with visible impact.

Empowerment and autonomy. The pilot fostered the self-determination PwD by allowing them to teach students and express their opinions, needs, and expectations. Their role as agents of change was reinforced, supporting their autonomy in decision-making regarding solutions and strategies.

It is also important to actively encourage student participation so that they become active agents in the teaching-learning process.

Interdisciplinary collaboration enriches learning. Collaboration between participants from OT, Computer Engineering, and other disciplines was

encouraged to design solutions that respected each person's individuality. The importance of inclusion and accessibility across all areas was consistently emphasized.

Involvement from other academic disciplines was also promoted to gain a holistic understanding of each challenge. Each discipline contributed a different perspective, enabling a more comprehensive and creative approach to problem-solving.

Participatory methodologies strengthen professional identity. Early exposure to PCA, participatory methodologies, and UDL helped students internalise inclusive values as core to their future professional practice.

Overall, the UDC pilot demonstrated that embedding inclusive and participatory methodologies into higher education is not only feasible but also transformative. It contributes to preparing future professionals who understand and respect the dignity, autonomy, and rights of PwD.

3.4. Technická Univerzita v Košiciach pilot (Slovakia)

3.4.1 Context and objectives

The pilot implemented by TUKE took place between February and May 2025 within the framework of the D2F project. It was developed through the university's long-standing structures for inclusive education, in particular its services supporting students with disabilities. TUKE has been a reference institution in Slovakia since 2000 for promoting accessibility, inclusive teaching, and the integration of students with disabilities into higher education.

The pilot built upon this institutional experience, aiming to integrate the principles of the PCM and UDL into both teaching practices and student support. Its implementation sought to strengthen the inclusion of PwD and other disadvantaged groups in academic life, while also enhancing collaboration between the university and social organisations active in the field of accessibility and inclusion.

The pilot pursued two specific objectives: first, to test the application of PCM and UDL within university services and educational activities in order to promote individualised, inclusive, and participatory approaches; and second, to develop sustainable cooperation between TUKE and external partners working in social and educational inclusion.

3.4.2 Implementation and participants

The TUKE pilot involved 81 students in total, of whom 66 took part in the lectures, nine participated in the hackathon, and six were students supported directly through the university's disability services. The teaching and mentoring team consisted of 26 lecturers and five pedagogical and social advisors. Activities were conducted across three faculties: the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, the Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Informatics, and the Faculty of Arts.

Cooperation with the social sector was essential for its development. TUKE partnered with four external organisations: the Slovak Union of the Blind and Visually Impaired, the Košice Self-Governing Region, the Private Centre for Special Education Counselling, and the organisation We Are Equal. These entities contributed to mentoring, awareness-raising, and co-creation activities that directly linked the academic community with the social and professional environment of PwD.

Three main types of activities structured the implementation:

- The first consisted of a series of lectures integrated into existing courses at the three faculties. The sessions addressed topics such as disability, diversity, equal opportunities, accessibility, and inclusion, together with the concepts of Universal Design (UD), PCM, UDL, participatory methodologies, and Design Thinking. Students also explored the use of assistive technologies (AT) and reflected on mental health as an essential aspect of inclusion. Brainstorming sessions encouraged them to identify barriers within their own learning environments and propose solutions.

- The second activity was a one-day hackathon entitled "Assistive Technology for Improving Accessibility and Inclusion", held on 15 April 2025. This event brought together students from different disciplines,

PwD, teachers, and social professionals to design assistive and inclusive solutions. Three mixed teams collaborated for ten hours to address real accessibility challenges. PwD participated actively as mentors and authors of challenges, while social workers and educators provided guidance and evaluation. The event promoted empathy, creativity, and cross-disciplinary collaboration.

- The third activity was a seminar on "Applying UDL Methodology in Higher Education", organised on 20 May 2025. The seminar brought together representatives from all TUKE faculties, coordinators for students with disabilities from other Slovak universities, local government representatives, and social organisations. The session focused on sharing experiences and analysing the results of the pilot activities through anonymous feedback questionnaires.

3.4.3 Evaluation and results

The evaluation of the TUKE pilot followed the D2F common framework and combined quantitative data and qualitative feedback collected through tests and questionnaires.

Regarding participation and person-centered experiences, 40% of students had prior familiarity with inclusive methodologies, while about approximately 97 % considered that their individual needs and interests had been taken into account. Adaptation of activities to individual characteristics was rated 5 out of 5. Eighty percent of students felt they had the opportunity to express their views and participate in decision-making, and 90% stated that their voices and needs were valued.

In relation to accessibility, only 10% reported barriers in accessing content or activities, while 100% confirmed that adequate resources were available to support participation. The overall accessibility of learning environments was rated 5 out of 5, and all PwD participants indicated that their needs were addressed appropriately.

As for inclusive and participatory methodologies, 10% had previous experience with collaborative learning, 80% perceived themselves as active participants in the process, group diversity was rated 4 out of 5, and 90% of participants were introduced to Design Thinking and PCM. Overall

student satisfaction exceeded 80%, confirming the strong pedagogical and experiential impact of the pilot.

3.4.4 Good practices and lessons learned

The TUKE pilot generated several good practices consistent with the objectives of D2F. One of the most relevant was the co-design of learning experiences through the direct involvement of PwD, both in the hackathon and in classroom activities. Their participation as mentors and challenge authors ensured that learning was based on real needs and authentic interaction between students and end users.

Another significant good practice was the interdisciplinary application of Design Thinking, which enabled students from engineering, information technology, and arts to collaborate on inclusive solutions. The process promoted teamwork, creativity, and empathy, reinforcing the inclusive dimension of technical education.

The individual tutoring developed under the PCM also proved highly effective. By focusing on personal strengths, communication, and autonomy, it contributed to a more equitable learning experience for all students. In addition, flexible assessment methods allowed students to demonstrate their competences in ways adapted to their individual circumstances, without compromising academic quality.

Training activities addressed to teaching staff, such as the May 2025 seminar, contributed to expanding knowledge about UDL and accessibility and to reinforcing inclusive pedagogical practices. Collaboration with social entities, including the Slovak Union of the Blind and Visually Impaired, the Košice Self-Governing Region, the Private Centre for Special Education Counselling, and We Are Equal, also emerged as a key factor. These partnerships strengthened the link between the university and the social sector, enhancing the sustainability and social relevance of the pilot.

The experience demonstrated that PCM, UDL, and Design Thinking are fully applicable to higher education and can foster both individual and institutional change. The methodologies adopted during the pilot were later incorporated into TUKE's regular services for PwD and other students with

specific needs. Cooperation with social partners has continued, particularly through joint identification of accessibility challenges and co-creation of assistive tools.

Finally, the pilot also inspired the creation of a new mental health initiative at TUKE, reinforcing support services for students and promoting a more person-centred approach to well-being. The combination of PCM and UDL principles contributed to fostering a learning environment based on participation, equity, and respect for diversity. The experience demonstrated that inclusive education can evolve into a broader institutional process, encouraging reflection, collaboration, and the gradual integration of inclusive practices within the Slovak higher education context.

4. Conclusions

The D2F project has demonstrated that inclusion in higher education can be both transformative and scalable when guided by a coherent framework combining the PCM, UD, and UDL. Through the coordinated implementation of the pilots at VIKO (Lithuania), UdC (Spain), and TUKE (Slovakia), the consortium showed that inclusive education grounded in human rights can become a sustainable strategy for institutional innovation, social participation, and the development of a more equitable and cohesive Europe.

From the outset, D2F adopted a rights-based and participatory approach aligned with the CRPD, the EPSR, and the SDGs. These frameworks provided the foundation for transforming higher education into spaces where diversity, accessibility, and participation are integral to teaching and institutional culture. The pilots confirmed that these principles can be effectively applied within curricula, faculty training, and community engagement, bridging theory and practice.

Across the three contexts, the application of the PCM allowed universities to reframe inclusion as a process centred on autonomy, dialogue, and mutual respect. PwD were not treated as beneficiaries of support but as active participants, mentors, and co-designers of knowledge. Their involvement in the design, implementation, and evaluation of learning activities confirmed that genuine inclusion requires active participation, where every person's perspective is recognised and contributes to collective learning.

The combination of the PCM, UD, and UDL enabled each university to address inclusion across pedagogical, environmental, and social dimensions. PCM provided the ethical and humanistic basis; UD ensured accessibility in infrastructures, materials, and technologies; and UDL offered flexible pedagogical approaches that anticipate diversity. Together, they formed a transferable and evidence-based model that promotes structural change rather than isolated adaptations.

Scalability was one of the main results of D2F. The good practices identified—co-design with PwD, accessible multi-format materials, interdisciplinary collaboration, personalised tutoring, flexible assessment, and institutional cooperation—constitute a coherent framework applicable across disciplines and countries. Tested under real academic conditions and supported by evaluation data, these practices have proven both effective and adaptable, allowing universities to build on them according to their contexts and priorities.

Scalability also emerged through the creation of institutional and social networks that extend beyond the project. The collaboration among universities, civil society organisations such as COCEMFE and CreaD, and local partners in each country established long-term alliances that continue to promote inclusion, accessibility, and innovation. These partnerships strengthened the transfer of knowledge between academia and the social sector, laying the foundations for ongoing cooperation in training, research, and policy development.

The D2F approach also linked inclusion to sustainability, reinforcing the idea of a Europe where human rights, social cohesion, and environmental responsibility are interdependent. Inclusive higher education contributes directly to the SDGs, particularly SDG 4 (quality education), SDG 10 (reduced inequalities), and SDG 11 (sustainable communities). By embedding accessibility, participation, and universal design into their activities, the participating universities modelled how education can support a fair ecological and social transition in Europe. Inclusion thus becomes not only a matter of equity but also a condition for sustainable development and resilience.

Within this perspective, the project emphasised the close connection between the rights of PwD and older adults. Both groups share common

challenges regarding accessibility, autonomy, and participation and are supported by the same rights-based frameworks that underpin D2F. The methodologies applied—based on PCM, UD, and UDL—can be extended to promote social inclusion for people of all ages, contributing to age-friendly and accessible societies. This intergenerational approach resonates with the principles of PCIC, reinforcing the idea that inclusive environments and person-centred methodologies benefit not only students but entire communities.

The D2F pilots positioned higher education as a driver of systemic inclusion and innovation. VIKO integrated inclusive design into professional education and creative disciplines; UdC promoted interdisciplinary teamwork and social partnerships; and TUKE developed inclusive and participatory learning strategies that influenced institutional practice. These initiatives demonstrated that inclusive education enhances learning quality, strengthens civic engagement, and promotes a university culture based on participation and equality.

Evaluation results confirmed the positive impact of these methodologies. Across all pilots, more than 80% of participants reported high satisfaction levels and a sense that their needs and opinions were valued. Teachers and coordinators highlighted the usefulness of PCM, UD, and UDL for future teaching activities, while PwD participants recognised the importance of co-design and collaborative learning. Beyond numbers, the pilots encouraged empathy, creativity, and personal growth, reinforcing the view that inclusion contributes to both educational excellence and human development.

The D2F experience also demonstrated that inclusive practices can be embedded into institutional systems, ensuring their sustainability beyond the project's lifetime. The materials, training resources, evaluation instruments, and the present Good Practices Guide constitute a replicable model for universities and policymakers. They provide concrete tools to implement inclusive, person-centred, and participatory approaches systematically. Inclusion is thus confirmed as an ongoing process that can be institutionalised and scaled up rather than limited to pilot experiences.

At the policy level, D2F contributes to the implementation of the EPSR and advances the goals of the European Higher Education Area related to inclusion, digitalisation, and social responsibility. It also provides practical

evidence of how the CRPD can be realised within higher education, turning legal commitments into everyday action. By linking inclusive pedagogy with human rights and sustainability, D2F offers a realistic pathway for universities to align their educational missions with Europe's social and democratic values.

In the current demographic context, as Europe faces population ageing, the approaches validated through D2F are particularly relevant. Universities can play a central role in developing inclusive technologies, services, and knowledge that respond to the needs of both PwD and older adults. By applying PCM and UD principles, institutions can foster learning and participation throughout the life course, strengthening intergenerational solidarity and lifelong education.

In conclusion, D2F confirms that inclusion, accessibility, and sustainability are inseparable pillars of educational quality and social progress. The pilots implemented by VIKO, UdC, and TUKE have generated evidence, tools, and partnerships that demonstrate how universities can act as catalysts for an inclusive and sustainable Europe. The good practices identified in this guide are not only pedagogical innovations but also strategic contributions to a vision of higher education where diversity is valued, participation is guaranteed, and human rights are the foundation of every learning process.

By connecting inclusive design with human rights and sustainability, D2F contributes to building a Europe where universities, communities, and public institutions work together to ensure that every person—PwD, older adults, and future generations alike—can participate, learn, and thrive in equitable and accessible environments. This is the enduring legacy of D2F: proving that when education is person-centred, participatory, and universally designed, it becomes a force for empowerment and collective well-being across all stages of life.

Acronyms

COCEMFE: Spanish Confederation of People with Physical and Organic Disabilities

CreaD: Creative District (Belgium)

CRPD: Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

D2F: Design2Freedom project

EPSR: European Pillar of Social Rights

LTT: Learning, Teaching and Training Activities

MOOC: Massive Open Online Course

PCM: Person-Centered Model

PCIC: Person-Centered and Integrated Care

PwD: Persons with Disabilities

SDGs: Sustainable Development Goals

TUKE: Technical University of Košice (Slovakia)

UD: Universal Design

UDL: Universal Design for Learning

UdC: Universidade da Coruña (Spain)

VIKO: Vilniaus Kolegija University of Applied Sciences (Lithuania)

WP: Work Package

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