

# Synchrony and diachrony of the postgraduate program in special education at the Faculty of Higher Studies Zaragoza (fesz): balance and perspectives

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** To design a postgraduate study plan is an relevant task for what is expected in the future about the training of its students. To implement it and to adapt it to the different demands that are manifested over time are major words. **Objective:** is to describe the synchronic and diachronic elements underlying the postgraduate program in Special Education at the FESZ since 1987 to date. It shows the evolution of the postgraduate course over time, the theoretical bases that support it, the situation teachers and students regarding graduation, no graduation and occupational level. **Discussion:** The dynamism from its implementation is recognized, the relationship that it has kept with various factors in which it has been immersed, both the administrative and academic of the institution as well as other external ones: political, economic, and scientific. It concludes with the contributions made to the field of special education and the areas of opportunity, both disciplinary and formative, in face of future changes.

**Keywords:** postgraduate; synchrony; diachrony; special education; curriculum

## Sincronía y diacronía del posgrado en educación especial de la Facultad de Estudios Superiores Zaragoza (FESZ): balance y perspectivas

### Resumen

**Introducción:** Diseñar un plan de estudios de posgrado es una tarea relevante en las facultades de estudios superiores debido a lo que en el futuro se espera en la formación de sus estudiantes. Instrumentarlo e irlo adecuando a las exigencias que en el tiempo se manifiestan es muy importante. **Objetivo:** del presente artículo de reflexión es describir los aspectos sincrónicos y diacrónicos subyacentes al desarrollo del posgrado en Educación Especial de FESZ desde 1987 a la fecha. Se muestra la evolución del posgrado en el tiempo, las bases teóricas que lo sustentan, el análisis de la situación de

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maestros y de alumnos respecto del egreso, no egreso y nivel ocupacional. **Discusión:** Se reconoce el dinamismo desde su instrumentación, la relación que ha guardado con diversos factores en los que ha estado inmerso, tanto los administrativos y académicos propios de la institución como de otros externos: políticos, económicos y científicos. Se concluye con las aportaciones al campo de la educación especial logradas y las áreas de oportunidad tanto disciplinares como formativas ante los retos futuros.

**Palabras clave:** posgrado; sincronía; diacronía; educación especial; currículo.

## Introduction

One of the relevant aspects when implementing a curriculum in the education sector is to recognize, both synchronically and diachronically, the dynamic character that identifies the elaboration process. This dynamism will be present not only in the instrumentation of the program itself, but also in the relationship it will have with various factors in which it will be immersed, such as the administrative and academic factors of the institution that proposes it, as well as other external factors: political, economic, and scientific. This is the case of the teaching experience to which this text will refer, focused on the review of the Graduate Program in Special Education at the Zaragoza School of Higher Studies, a pioneering graduate program in this disciplinary field at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM).

### *Synchronic and Diachronic Aspects of the Graduate Program in Special Education*

The Master's Program in Psychology with a major in Special Education was designed and implemented in 1984; it was based on the special education courses that had been taught since 1978 in the Psychology Program at the FESZ, which promoted the training of students in the professional functions of analysis, design, evaluation, and intervention, which they performed under supervision when providing special educational services in the

Multidisciplinary Clinics for Comprehensive Care, located in socially vulnerable metropolitan areas.

In addition to the above, the situation of special education in Mexico was analyzed, both in terms of the rates of demand and supply provided at that time by the General Directorate of Special Education of the Ministry of Public Education (DGEE, SEP), as well as the programs similar to the one proposed (Acle-Tomasini, 1986).

The DGEE was responsible for organizing, directing, developing, managing, and monitoring the federal system for the education of children with disabilities with or without special educational needs, and for the training of specialized teachers. Since its creation in 1976, Mexico joined the group of countries that, according to the recommendations of the United Nations Educational Organization (UNESCO), recognized special education as a distinctive and indispensable area in the overall basic general education. Therefore, it integrated the policies designed and approved at the meetings of that international organization in its work. At that time, such policies oriented services towards standardization and integration (DGEE, 1981).

Upon analyzing the data on the total population of the country, the potential demand for special education services, and the population actually provided these services, it was found that although there was an increase in the levels of attention from the period 1970-1971, which was 0.19% to 1.8% in 1982-1983, reaching the 10% of the population requiring special education services was still far, as indicated by the World Health Organization at that time (Acle-Tomasini, 1986). The services were provided in special education schools, psycho-pedagogical centers, job training centers, and integrated group units that served children in small groups within schools. Likewise, in 1980, in the graduate area, there were only two master's programs offered in private universities, both focused on the category of learning disabilities. On the other hand, research on special education in relation to other educational areas was only 0.09% (Galindo, 1987).

Based on the above, this graduate program sought to make a difference between the training offered in the undergraduate program, where the psychologist's professional practice in special

education was the axis, while the master's program sought to promote research training to provide answers to the multiple problems in the field of special education. In short, it was proposed that research should be the main axis of the curriculum to guide the student to the generation of new analytical frameworks of the problems and the production of theoretical and practical knowledge in accordance with the reality of the country. This program was approved by the University Council of UNAM in 1986 and formally began in 1987. Synchronously to the instrumentation of the curriculum, international policies dictated in meetings such as the World Declaration on Education for All held in Jomtien in 1990 and the Salamanca Statement in 1994, among others, set the tone for the modifications to be implemented for the establishment of national policies, standards, and actions of the participating countries. The primary objective was to provide an education with quality and equity to all those students with special education requirements. In Mexico, Article 41 of the Special Education Law was modified for special education, establishing, among other aspects, that teachers and staff of basic education schools should be trained to integrate students with special educational needs into regular classrooms.

To this end, public special education services were reorganized to establish a) the Regular School Service and Support Units; b) the Preschool Psychopedagogical Centers; c) the Multiple Attention Centers; d) the Regional Educational Integration Centers; and e) the Public Orientation Units. The main postulate was to integrate basic education students under a common curriculum to avoid a parallel one (SEP, 2011). In 2002, the National Program for Strengthening Special Education and Educational Integration ([PNFEEIE], SEP, 2002) was established as the body that would evaluate the achievements of the implementation of the policy then called educational integration. This continued to operate until 2018.

The aforementioned was implemented in the training of our master's degree students, considering the possible labor market in which

they could be inserted at the end of their studies. Likewise, we sought to deepen in the scientific advances of the discipline, both nationally and internationally, in order to support their projects to obtain the degree.

Similarly, in 1995, as part of the university's graduate policy, the creation of single master's and doctoral programs was proposed in order to optimize UNAM's graduate resources. In order to achieve this adaptation, it should be noted that, in the design, review, and evaluation of the new proposal, the collegiate participation of graduate professors from the different schools where there were master's and doctoral programs in psychology was indispensable. In the case of the master's program, a professional residency program was proposed that would combine both the experience generated by the development of applied research skills and the acquisition of high quality competencies in the professional knowledge of the discipline, depending on the area of application of psychology (Master's and Doctoral Program in Psychology, 1999). Thus, the master's program, active since 1987, was adapted and transformed into the Residency in Special Education (Roque et al., 2001), a program approved by the Academic Committee of the master's and doctoral program in 2001, the year in which its instrumentation began. Subsequently, this same committee set itself the task of reviewing, adapting, and modifying the program in 2015.

Since then, and as noted in Figure 1, the program continues to consider international policies in which Mexico participates as a member of UNESCO, such as the Incheon Declaration, in 2015, in the World Education Forum 2015, and the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 proposed by the UN in 2015, among others. Likewise, it takes into account the administrative and political changes that operate in the official subsystem of special education and the scientific advances regarding fundamental topics in the field: a) the theoretical concept of this discipline and

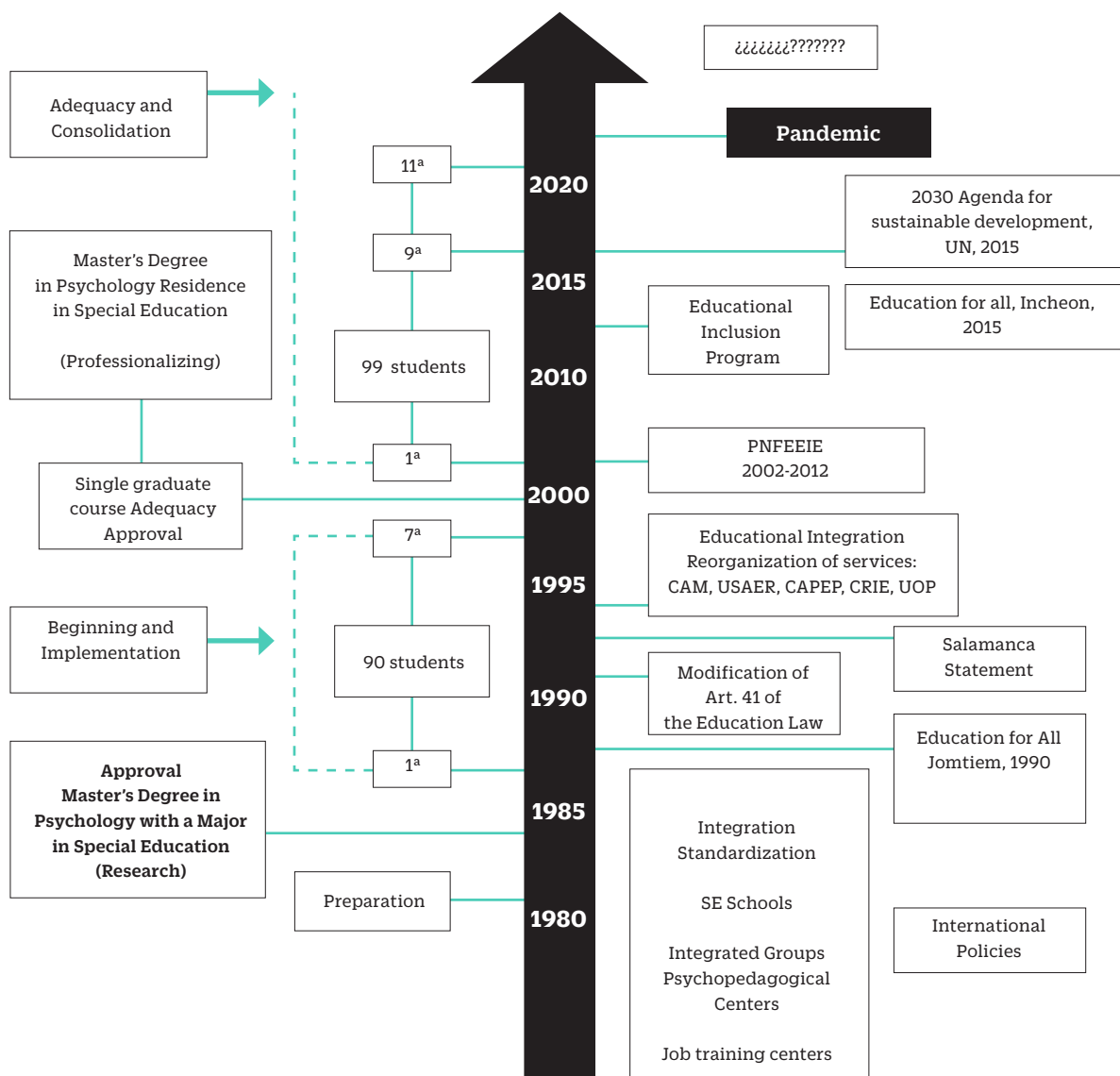
the categories that comprise it; b) the theoretical and practical foundations for the evaluation of special educational needs and disability; c) the theoretical and practical foundations for the design, instrumentation,

and evaluation of intervention and prevention programs; d) the elements for the development of applied research; and e) the knowledge of national and international policies governing the field (Acle-Tomasini, 1996). In addition to the above, in 2015, the Academic Committee of the Master's and Doctoral Programs in Psychology started a review of the experience gained in the development of the programs over the past 16 years. As a result, a series of adjustments were proposed, including increasing the flexibility of

the curriculum, incorporating new graduation modalities, increasing the number of residency hours, among others. The objective continues to be to promote high-level disciplinary training, both in research and in the professional practice of psychology.

As noted at the beginning, the dynamism in the evolution of a curriculum is influenced synchronically and diachronically by factors both internal and external to the program (Figure 1). In addition to the aforementioned, we found

**Figure 1**  
Evolution of the Master's Program in Special Education at the FESZ and Intervening Elements over Time.



Note: Own elaboration.

how unforeseen the pandemic and the resulting confinement has been for everyone. The closure of school activities posed new challenges to the professional and research training being conducted. Considering the possibilities of online education was the option and the challenge lied on how to instrument the intervention programs that had been initiated in basic schools, while considering the material conditions and the resources of the target population, i.e., students coming from contexts of social vulnerability.

To summarize, this graduate program in special education has evolved both synchronically and diachronically. It can be stated that, over time, it has been carried out in two phases: a) beginning and instrumentation (1987-2000) and b) adaptation and consolidation (2001 to date).

## Theoretical Basis of the Curriculum

First of all, it is important to point out that special education is a multidimensional, multiparadigmatic, and multidisciplinary discipline; the fundamentals of the modular teaching system provide the theoretical and methodological support to the graduate program in both phases. This system is characterized by four main aspects:

1. **Theory-practice linkage:** A fundamental element for the construction and application of knowledge. This allows students to develop the professional functions and competencies that they will be able to incorporate in their future professional practice in the special education fields.
2. **Interdisciplinarity:** The field of special education is not exclusive to a single discipline, which both at the theoretical and practical level poses a series of challenges in the search for effective and efficient solutions to the problems faced by this field.
3. **Satisfaction of social needs:** Several research results (Acle-Tomasini, 2013; Sánchez et al., 2003) have shown that, in the official statistics regarding special education services, not all those who

should be there are present. Due to the lack of clarification of the concept of special educational needs, among other aspects, students with disabilities with or without special education requirements are at risk of dropping out of school or significantly falling behind. Consequently, although services have been reorganized in the light of national and international policies, there are still problems that need to be addressed both in the population of children and adolescents with disabilities with or without special education needs and in the actors with whom they interact in their family, school, and social contexts.

4. **Research-teaching-service integration:** A core aspect in the realization of graduate activities. Integration is the process from which research, teaching, and service come together, sharing a common goal and interweaving their own particular objectives. Service is the process in which the aspects of diagnosis, evaluation, prevention, and intervention are fundamental in the service provided to the target population in real scenarios. Teaching is the process of transmission of information in which both the student and the teacher participate and in which both build knowledge. Finally, research will be the process in which theory, technique, and method will be articulated in a unit to build knowledge, search for the determinants of a phenomenon, and generate technologies (Acle-Tomasini & González, 1988).

These characteristics have been reflected in a differentiated manner in the curricular organization of the graduate program in special education in both phases.

In the initiation and instrumentation phase of the program, as previously mentioned, research constituted the main axis of the curriculum in order to orient the student towards the production of both theoretical and practical knowledge in order to contribute to the solution of problems detected at the national level. In addition to putting into practice the professional functions of the psychologist—analysis, design, evaluation,

**Table 1**

*Curricular Organization of the Master's Degree in Psychology with a Major in Special Education (1987-2000)*

Semester	Modules				
1°	Normal and abnormal development	Educational Systems Analysis	Rehabilitation		
2°				Methodology for	
3°				Design and	Methodology for research and
4°				Evaluation	theory

*Note: Own elaboration.*

**Table 2**

*Curricular Organization of the Master's Program in Psychology. Residency in Special Education (2002 to Date)*

Semester	Subjects		
1°		Methods of Applied Research	Measurement and Evaluation
2°	Theories and models of		
3°	Intervention		
4°	PRACTICES	SUPERVISED	

*Note: Retrieved from the Master's and Doctoral Program in Psychology, 1999.*

intervention, and research, aspects that can be observed in the modules presented in Table 1, the one corresponding to methodology and research theory was the only one in this plan that was taken from the first through the fourth semester and whose products presented by the students should integrate the learning outcomes achieved in the other modules (Acle-Tomasini, 1986). The terminology used to name the modules also corresponded to that used in the 1980s, which was also integrated into the programs of the proposed modules.

Table 2 shows the structure of the residency programs that are part of the master's degree in psychology at UNAM, oriented toward various applied areas of psychology. It proposes the training of highly qualified professionals to perform the professional functions of analysis, evaluation, intervention, prevention, and research. Therefore, emphasis is placed on the supervised internships from the first to the fourth semester, in which practical and theoretical

teaching is integrated in real scenarios. For the Special Education Residency, these are carried out particularly in public schools.

Professional learning outcomes are specified:

a) knowledge of the theories underpinning the discipline; b) development and application of techniques for early detection and differential and comprehensive assessment; c) development of assessment, intervention, and prevention programs; d) generation of knowledge and development of innovative practices through applied research; and e) critical and ethical practice of the profession, always maintaining a social commitment (Roque et al., 2001). The general objective is to train highly qualified professionals who, through supervised practice in different scenarios, acquire the methodological, theoretical, and practical knowledge that will allow them to carry out teaching, service, and research activities and, thus, have an impact on the solution of the multiple problems present in the field of special education.

## Situation of Students and Professors

Instrumenting a curriculum is a challenge because, as has been pointed out, there are both internal and external factors that are present in a synchronic and diachronic manner. As far as the internal factors are concerned, the actors involved are fundamental in the development of any curriculum. The Master's Program in Psychology with a major in special education was attended by 90 students in seven generations from 1987 to 1999. At the beginning, only three professors participated, so it was decided to open the program generationally. Later, with the administrative support of the directors, it was possible to incorporate four students that had completed the program as professors. Meanwhile, the Special Education Residency program has been taken generationally by 114 students from 2001 to date, where 99 of them are from the first to the ninth generation and have completed their studies; of the remaining 15, eight of them are in the process of graduation and seven are currently studying the program. The current faculty is comprised of six professors, all of whom have doctoral degrees.

With respect to completion and graduation rates (Figure 2), significant differences can be seen in both programs, especially in terms of graduation rates; of the 90 students who attended the program from 1987 to 1989, 77% completed it and of this percentage only 31% graduated, while of the 99 students who attended the program from

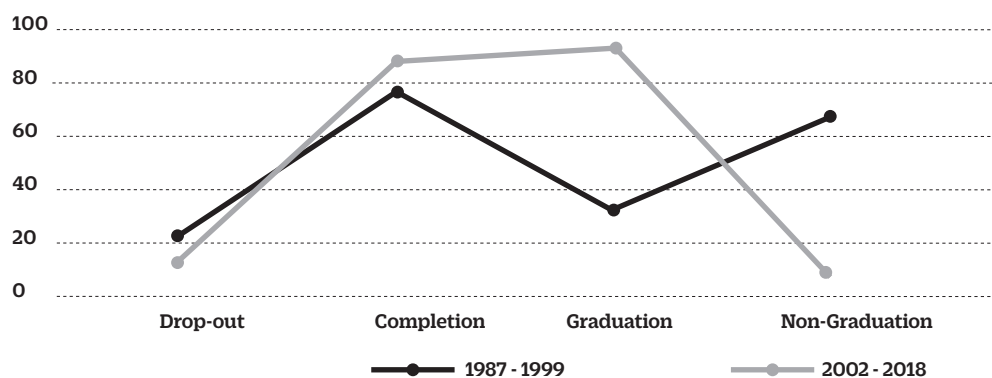
2001 to 2016, of the 87% who completed it, 92% managed to graduate.

This difference is mainly due to several factors, among them the lack of research training of the professors at the beginning of the graduate program, who were also few in relation to the increased number of students. Along this, there were socioeconomic factors that led some of them to immediately start working once they finished their training or others even to drop out. Moreover, at that time, it was not essential to have a degree in order to enter the labor market. In this sense, when Herrera-Fragoso (2011) found that 57% of the students of these generations that had completed the program worked in the public sector and 14% in the private sector, in both cases performing one or more of the activities related to teaching, research, and service—some held administrative positions in the Ministry of Public Education or in the public services of the special education subsystem (USAER or CAM). In general, the student that had completed this first phase of the graduate program indicated that there was recognition of the training obtained regardless of their employment situation.

It is also worth noting that according to Herrera-Fragoso (2011), 78% of the participants rated the theoretical content of the graduate program between good and excellent; some indicated that they had learned about research in educational contexts. They also pointed out the importance of the program having a greater relationship with public and private special education institutions,

**Figure 2**

*Status of Students in Terms of Drop-out, Completion, Graduation, and Non-Graduation from the Special Education Graduate Program in Both Phases of its Instrumentation*



in order to carry out their practices in real scenarios. Regarding applied research, only 47% indicated that they were able to carry it out in real contexts in which they developed evaluation and intervention skills, mainly due to their active participation in the tutor's line of research, in which they were writing their thesis to obtain their degree. Likewise, 75% indicated that it would be convenient to expand the research topics in special education in future projects.

With regard to the Special Education Residency, the completion and graduation percentages increased due to several factors, one of them being that since students completing this graduate program joined the faculty, their own training and experience favored the organization of the program, especially in relation to the structuring of practical activities, which facilitated the performance and development of the professional functions considered in the general objective. At the same time, since the program is registered as part of the National Council of Science and Technology's Excellence Graduate Program, students were able to receive a scholarship, which reduced the dropout rate due to economic problems. By consolidating the tutors' lines of research and having project financing, mainly from UNAM's Program to Support Research and Technological Innovation Projects, it has also been possible to financially support the students after completing the formal studies of the Residency in order to obtain the degree in due time and form in accordance with the rules established in the program. These elements have had a favorable impact on a higher graduation rate, which is why we have named this phase of adaptation and consolidation.

## Outcomes and Areas of Opportunity

It is important to point out the contributions that have been made in the field of special education, both in terms of training at the graduate level and in the discipline itself. Regarding the theory-practice linkage and the integration of research-

teaching-service, it should be noted that since the beginning of the master's program, three lines of research have been developed and have been consolidated to date:

a) ecological model of resilience risk in educational and social settings (Acle-Tomasini et al., 2016); b) promotion of pro-social behaviors and reduction of bullying in basic education schools (González-Granados et al. 2020); and identification and design of enrichment programs for outstanding students (Zacatelco-Ramírez, 2015).

By integrating students to these lines of research through practical and applied research activities carried out in public schools, the individual factors of basic education students with special education requirements and outstanding aptitude in areas of social vulnerability have been characterized (Hernández-Hernández, 2020; Martínez-Santos, 2020; Rivera-Ramírez, 2019; Martínez-Olivera, 1999), and the school, family, and social contextual elements that contribute to the eradication or permanence of special educational needs have been identified (López-Becerra, 2011; García Olguín, 2021; Martínez-Maldonado, 1999).

It has also contributed to the solution of some problems detected in children with various special education requirements within regular schools through evaluation, intervention, and applied research programs designed and instrumented by students of the residency. Among them, the following stand out: reducing the scholastic backwardness of first-term elementary school students with special educational needs (Barrera-Mares et al.; Rodea-Rodríguez, 2016; Romero-Muñoz, 2014); favoring the development of outstanding potential through different enrichment programs (Barrera-Mares et al.; Rodea-Rodríguez, 2016; Romero-Muñoz, 2014); favoring the development of outstanding potential through different enrichment programs (Galván-Ruiz, 2021; González-Soria, 2017; Tepetla Sánchez, 2015); and promoting prosocial behaviors in high school students in order to reduce bullying behaviors (Soriano-Porto, 2012; Núñez Hernández, 2018; Ortiz-Arroyo, 2016). Likewise, it has been possible to involve parents, teachers, and administrative staff to favor the relationship with their children and students, respectively



(Gutiérrez-Jiménez, 2004; Roque Hernández, 2001; Villafranca-Fanyten, 2001), being the aforementioned authors just some examples.

Since the beginning of this graduate program in special education in 1987 to date, the theoretical and practical programs have been updated to consider national and international policies governing the field, the possible labor market, and scientific advances at each stage of the program, all of which has favored our participation in achieving educational inclusion so that these students are not excluded in the schools.

With respect to the student graduation level, a substantial increase has been achieved, which in turn has made it easier for the graduates to enter the labor market. It should be noted that some of them have returned to work in the official special education subsystem, even holding management positions. Recently, eight graduates participated in the competitive examinations to work in basic education by the Registry System of the Professional Teaching Service of the Ministry of Public Education, through which they won their positions to now work in the official special education subsystem. Other graduates continued their studies at the doctorate level. A beneficial aspect for this graduate program has been the hiring of graduates to join the faculty of the graduate program, five in the first phase of the graduate program and four in the second

## Discussion

In considering the multidisciplinary, multiparadigmatic, and multidimensional nature of special education, the development and enhancement of a graduate curriculum for this scientific discipline must consider, both synchronically and diachronically, the internal factors related to human and material resources for its development and instrumentation, as well as external factors related to national and international policies governing the field and scientific advances, which will inevitably be immersed in its evolution. All this will undoubtedly have an impact on the

curricular contents and activities proposed, the professional practice promoted, and the research projects developed.

In this sense, the challenges we face at a prospective level, considering the pandemic context we have to live through, imply taking into account what UNESCO (2020) established regarding the importance of guaranteeing access to learning for students in confinement, particularly those with disabilities and special educational needs. A crucial aspect is the need to facilitate the return of students to the classroom when possible and to avoid school dropout, in addition to continuing to provide quality education. In this sense, the participation of our students has been decisive, since those minors who had been detected with special educational needs before the situation of confinement were attended through virtual means. All this guides us to generate new spaces to delve into and research what Gargiulo & Bouck (2021) call Assisted Technology in Special Education.

The lessons derived from this unforeseen experience reveal several areas of opportunity in the training of our graduate students in both their practical and applied research activities. Regarding the former, it was necessary to design and instrument hybrid attention programs for students with special education needs as well as for their teachers and parents, who stated that the pandemic situation had overwhelmed them due to the amount of work and the reorganization of teaching and daily life that had to be done. Above all, because in the case of socially vulnerable students, access to virtual media was neither easy nor possible (MEJOREDU, 2020). Other areas of opportunity are marked by the objectives of Quality Education, Reduction of Inequalities, Health and Well-being established in the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015; UNESCO, 2020), which include, among other aspects, facilitating the return of students to face-to-face classes after forced confinement to avoid dropout and backwardness rates and seeking equitable actions and universal access, as well as caring not only for the physical well-being of the population but also for their mental

health. To that end, it will be relevant to promote interdisciplinary attention to the physical and emotional health, educational, economic, and social difficulties faced by managers, teachers, students with disabilities with or without special educational needs, and their parents.

Special education as a scientific discipline has much to offer to the population that requires it, hence, in this master's degree focused on the Special Education Residency of the Zaragoza School of Higher Studies, it will be relevant to continue promoting a solid training in which permanent updating of contents and applied research coupled with an ethical, critical, and committed professional practice will be considered. This will imply fostering in our students critical and creative thinking skills that, in the future, will enable them to face diverse situations in their professional and research activities, whether they are unpredictable or not. In this sense, the bases of the modular teaching system, focused on the theory-practice linkage, the solution of social problems, interdiscipline, and, above all, the integration of research with teaching and service will be essential to generate new analytical frameworks and produce theoretical and practical knowledge in line with the reality of the country to achieve what Kauffman et al. (2018) point out, that is, not to forget that special education is fundamental in a democratic society that seeks to achieve the welfare of all its citizens.

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