A MODEL APPLICATION IN INCLUSIVE POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION: THE "JOURNEY TO SELF" PROGRAM

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Abstract

This study aimed to introduce the Journey to Self Program, a concrete example of university-based inclusive postsecondary education in Turkey. The program was implemented at a foundation university in Istanbul and targeted young adults aged 16–26 with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and intellectual disabilities, providing an institutional response to the critical "service cliff" experienced at the end of compulsory education. Designed as a descriptive case study, the study systematically documented the program's philosophical foundations, institutional structure, interdisciplinary curriculum, and learning environments. Program outcomes related to independent living skills, social identity development, and family wellbeing were supported by findings from a complementary study based on parent perspectives and by international literature on postsecondary inclusive education. The findings were interpreted through the neurodiversity paradigm and the social model of disability.

Keywords: Inclusive university environment, individuals with special needs, intellectual disability, autism, neurodiversity, independent living skills.

1. Introduction

The transition of individuals with special needs from compulsory education to adulthood encompasses a critical and largely underserved process in terms of independent living skills, social participation, and vocational orientation (Erkek & Özer Gündoğdu, 2026). In many educational systems, including Turkey, structured support services are discontinued at the end of secondary education, leaving young adults and their families without institutional guidance during one of the most complex periods of adult life (MEB, 2026). In the international literature, this abrupt discontinuity is defined as the "service cliff," with emphasis on its potential to lead to social withdrawal, increased family burden, and regression in previously acquired skills (Roux et al., 2015; Shattuck et al., 2012; Shiltz et al., 2023).

University campuses, with their naturally inclusive social environment, structured routines, and diverse academic communities, offer a unique setting for bridging this gap (Grigal & Hart, 2010). The Journey to Self Program, operating within Fatih Sultan Mehmet Foundation University (FSMVU), may be regarded as a pioneering initiative aimed at transferring internationally recognized inclusive postsecondary education models to Turkey's institutional context (FSMVU, 2026). Drawing on the neurodiversity paradigm (Armstrong, 2012), the social model of disability (Oliver, 2013), and evidence-based international programs such as the University of Iowa REACH model, the Journey to Self Program operationalizes inclusion not as a bureaucratic requirement to be met on paper, but as a genuinely lived and felt experience across every corner of the campus (University of Iowa, 2026). A prior qualitative study on the same program identified six thematic dimensions and determined the program's strengths and limitations (Erkek & Özer Gündoğdu, 2026). The present study complements that work by providing a detailed account of the program's implementation, philosophical foundation, structural design, curriculum components, and observable outcomes.

The primary research question of this study is:

> *How is the Journey to Self Program structured and implemented as an inclusive postsecondary education model?*

The following sub-questions are also addressed:

– What are the philosophical and theoretical foundations of the program?
– How are the curriculum structure and learning environments designed?
– What relationship is established with international evidence-based models?

2. Theoretical Framework

The neurodiversity paradigm reconceptualizes neurological differences such as autism, ADHD, and intellectual disability not as disorders to be remedied, but as a part of natural human diversity (Armstrong, 2012). This framework shifts the program's focus from symptom reduction to strengths-based skill development and social participation.

The social model of disability (Oliver, 2013; Woods, 2017) addresses the barriers experienced by individuals with intellectual disabilities or neurodivergent conditions as problems arising not from the individuals themselves, but from the structural, attitudinal, and environmental arrangements of society. Both frameworks form the foundational belief of this program: disability is a social construction; inclusive educational environments can transform this construction (Ainscow, 2005).

Examining the literature, university-based programs serving individuals with intellectual disabilities constitute a growing field. Grigal and Hart (2010) identify three primary models: individualized support mixed/hybrid programs, largely segregated programs, and inclusive individual support programs. The University of Iowa REACH (Realizing Educational and Career Hopes) Program directly inspired the Journey to Self Program, including participants in the same university courses and social environments as typically developing peers with targeted coaching support (Plotner & Marshall, 2015; Thoma et al., 2011).

Longitudinal research consistently demonstrates that participation in postsecondary education is associated with higher employment rates, greater social integration, and improved quality of life for individuals with ASD and intellectual disabilities (Shattuck et al., 2012; Taylor & Seltzer, 2011). The UNESCO (2017) inclusion framework emphasizes that equitable access to higher education is not merely a goal but a rights-based obligation under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006).

In the Turkish context, while the legal and policy framework regarding special education has expanded considerably, post-secondary services remain quite limited. The Ministry of National Education's (2026) general evaluation report highlights the risk of individuals with special needs becoming confined to the home environment after secondary education. Eker (2024) also identifies a critical gap in neurodiversity-focused higher education policy and inclusive practice settings. In this context, the Journey to Self Program occupies an original and strategic position as Turkey's first university-based inclusive postsecondary education initiative at this scale (FSMVU, 2026).

3. Method

3.1. Research design

This study was designed using a descriptive case study approach (Yin, 2018) to document the Journey to Self Program as a context-specific and bounded unit of analysis. Descriptive case study is a qualitative research approach preferred when the aim is to thoroughly reveal "what" a phenomenon is and "how" it operates in a real-life context, rather than through experimental intervention or comparative analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021). Within this framework, the study assumed a descriptive function to systematically document the philosophical foundations, structural design, and functioning of an existing program. No

intervention was conducted; no primary data were collected from participants through interviews, questionnaires, or scales.

3.2. Data sources

Data were systematically compiled from three primary sources: (1) written program documents, including program introductory documents, curriculum plans, weekly schedules, and institutional reports; (2) structured field observations conducted during program sessions; and (3) participant profile data obtained from the institution's archival records of participant admission and follow-up processes. The consistency and reliability of descriptions were strengthened through cross-verification (data triangulation) among data sources. The collected data were examined using descriptive content analysis; patterns related to the program's structural characteristics, philosophical foundations, and implementation processes were systematically coded and categorized.

3.3. Context

Fatih Sultan Mehmet Foundation University (FSMVU) houses the Center for Excellence in Education Research and Application (CEERA) in Istanbul. CEERA is responsible for the development and implementation of the Journey to Self Program, with an institutional governance structure that coordinates academic oversight, operational management, and intra-faculty collaboration (FSMVU, 2026). The university campus, with its workshop areas, sports, drama and dance rooms, culinary training area, music room, and creative studios, functions as the primary learning and socialization environment integrated into participants' daily schedule.

3.4. Participant profile

The program targets young adults aged 16–26 with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), mild-to-moderate intellectual disability, Down syndrome, and related neurodevelopmental diagnoses (FSMVU, 2026). Functional communication skills and the family's capacity for participation serve as the primary criteria in the admission process. The program's core staff includes four permanent personnel — a program director, deputy director, special education coordinator, and program coordinator — along with three special education faculty members, a legal advisor, and part-time specialist instructors. The peer mentor system, inspired by the Iowa REACH peer guide model, includes typically developing university students who participate on a voluntary basis or within structured internship requirements from the faculty of education and the social services vocational school (Grigal et al., 2017; Sperry et al., 2010).

3.5. Validity and reliability

In qualitative research, validity and reliability are evaluated through the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, these criteria were addressed through two interrelated strategies.

First, peer debriefing was applied. Descriptions derived from program documents and field observation records were independently reviewed by a program staff member who was familiar with the functioning of the program but was not involved in the research process. This process allowed for questioning the extent to which the researchers' interpretations reflected the program's actual structure and implementation, and for identifying potential oversights. Although the researchers' direct involvement in the program provided strong contextual knowledge, the peer debriefing strategy was applied to limit researcher bias.

Second, cross-findings consistency was ensured. Program descriptions and observation findings from this study were comparatively evaluated against the findings of a previously conducted qualitative study on the same program based on parent perspectives (Erkek & Özer Gündoğdu, 2026). The convergence of findings from the two studies indicates a holistic and consistent understanding of the program, reducing limitations arising from dependence on a single data source.

4. Program Implementation

4.1. Mission, vision, and core values

The program's mission statement defines it as "an innovative educational model aimed at integrating all layers of society toward building an inclusive society by developing the independent living skills of individuals with special needs." The vision is expressed as "being an innovative and sustainable education center that increases global awareness and contributes to the formation of a more inclusive social consciousness by supporting professional, life, and vocational competencies through an interdisciplinary approach" (FSMVU, 2026). The program operates within a framework of seven core values: inclusiveness, innovation, equity, integration, sustainability, scientificity, and universalism.

4.2. Curriculum structure and duration

The program follows a four-year education process that allows for early graduation flexibility based on individual developmental pace and performance criteria (FSMVU, 2026). The curriculum is structured around three interrelated competency areas: (1) independent living and daily living skills, (2) social communication and identity development, and (3) vocational and pre-employment skills. Curriculum content is informed by current international literature, primarily the Iowa REACH Program framework, and is adapted to the Turkish education system and regulatory context.

4.3. Course modules and learning activities

The Journey to Self Program consists of seven courses and two workshops that address participants' cognitive, affective, and psychomotor developmental needs within an integrated learning experience (Table 1). All modules are collaboratively delivered by qualified special education specialists, expert instructors, and interns.

Table 1. Journey to Self Program Modules and Targeted Outcomes

Module	Type	Targeted Outcomes
Sports and Drama	Course	Body awareness, self-regulation, expressive language and emotional awareness
Culinary Arts	Course	Independent living competencies; meal preparation, food safety
Rhythm and Dance	Course	Bodily coordination, group consciousness, social-emotional harmony
Information Technologies	Course	Digital life skills; screen literacy, file management

Module	Type	Targeted Outcomes
Art Therapy	Course	Emotional regulation, non-verbal expression, social bonding
Social Communication Sessions	Course	Pragmatic language, self-advocacy, peer interaction
Vocational Exploration	Course	Campus observation, supervised vocational practicum
Digital Printing	Workshop	Fine motor skills, creative expression, craft-based vocational exploration
Arts and Crafts	Workshop	Hand-eye coordination, fine motor skills, sensory awareness

4.4. Campus integration and "university student" identity

One of the most distinctive features of the program is the deliberate construction of a "university student" identity for participants. Unlike segregated day programs or home-based support services, the Journey to Self Program positions participants as active members of the university community who share the same campus spaces, cafeterias, libraries, and hallways as typically developing students. This social inclusion functions as a natural integration mechanism that creates spontaneous learning opportunities, peer modeling effects, and mutual awareness among the broader student population (Grigal & Hart, 2010; Tajfel & Turner, 2004).

5. Program Outcomes

5.1. Independent living and daily living competencies

In the previous study examining parent perspectives on the program (Erkek & Özer Gündoğdu, 2026), parents reported that the program's practical structure within campus life was reflected as concrete progress in participants' daily lives. Parents conveyed observable gains in various daily living competencies, including self-care routines, clothing choices, and independent movement within the campus. Kitchen and self-care skills yielded particularly noteworthy results: parents expressed that their children were transitioning from dependency to increasing autonomy — "In terms of self-care, she started taking care of herself, there have been some changes in cooking, etc." (P2; Erkek & Özer Gündoğdu, 2026, p. 267). Functional independence within the campus was also assessed as a meaningful gain: "I just saw him buying tea on his own from the cafeteria... This is a very big thing" (P1; Erkek & Özer Gündoğdu, 2026, p. 267). These parent-reported findings are consistent with international program research finding structured campus-based education more effective than home-based instruction in generalizing skills to community settings (Shattuck et al., 2012; Thoma et al., 2011).

5.2. Social participation and identity development

In the study examining parent perspectives on the program (Erkek & Özer Gündoğdu, 2026), parents reported that the university campus environment directly accelerated participants' social learning. Parents stated that individuals' interactions with typically developing peers of their own age group expanded their social repertoires through observational learning: "Being

with her peers is very good, because they learn by observing, she observes them... There have been positive changes because she learns by observing" (P5; Erkek & Özer Gündoğdu, 2026, p. 266). Parallel to increased social initiative, self-confidence development and decreased anxiety were also conveyed as concrete gains: "He likes to chat with his peers, with different people... His self-confidence developed, his anxiety decreased" (P2; Erkek & Özer Gündoğdu, 2026, p. 266). In terms of identity development, parents emphasized that the program provided ground for the individual to define themselves as a "university student" rather than "a person with special needs": "I'm going to university, I've grown up — that's how she expresses herself" (P1; Erkek & Özer Gündoğdu, 2026, p. 265). These findings are consistent with studies documenting the positive effects of peer-based interventions on social communication and sense of belonging (Orsmond et al., 2013; Sperry et al., 2010).

5.3. Impact on the family system

The program's impact on family systems constitutes a frequently overlooked dimension of inclusive postsecondary program evaluation. The transition of neurodivergent individuals to adulthood is associated with high parental stress, chronic grief, and burnout (Ardıç & Olcay, 2021; Karst & Van Hecke, 2012; Kütük et al., 2021). The program's structured and predictable nature, combined with the security created by the university's institutional framework, provides families with a "psychological respite": regular periods of relief during which parents are able to maintain employment, self-care, and family life beyond their caregiving role (Erkek & Özer Gündoğdu, 2026). This systemic relief function demonstrates that family wellbeing outcomes must be incorporated among the primary evaluation criteria of inclusive postsecondary education programs.

5.4. Challenges and areas for development

Various structural challenges were identified during the implementation period. Regulatory ambiguity regarding the program's lack of formal recognition within national special education policy creates sustainability risks. The fact that the program is offered at a foundation university on a fee-paying and limited-enrollment basis restricts access for socioeconomically disadvantaged families, transforming this into a social justice issue directly linked to policy. Furthermore, participants and families expressed the need for sustainability in shadow teacher support (Bağcı et al., 2025; Kądziołka, 2024; Manansala & Dizon, 2008) and for structured internship processes targeting sheltered or open employment (Erkek & Özer Gündoğdu, 2026). Curriculum enrichment toward vocational certification and partnerships with local employers were identified as priority development areas.

6. Discussion

The Journey to Self Program constitutes a significant example demonstrating that university campuses in Turkey can function as valid and high-quality environments for inclusive postsecondary education, supported by determined institutional leadership, an interdisciplinary team, and a consistent theoretical framework. Program outcomes in independent living, social participation, and family wellbeing parallel the findings of well-established international programs (Grigal & Hart, 2010; Shattuck et al., 2012; Thoma et al., 2011), indicating that the core characteristics of campus-embedded learning environments can be transferred to national contexts.

The "service cliff" phenomenon (Roux et al., 2015; Shiltz et al., 2023) is addressed not through a deficit-remediation approach but through environmental reframing: the program positions the

campus as a living system that naturally supports development when purposefully designed. This approach aligns with Ainscow's (2005) findings, which argue that sustainable inclusion requires systemic rather than individual levers of change.

The formation of a "university student" identity observed in participants represents a particularly powerful mechanism of social inclusion. By moving beyond the "person with special needs" label and identifying with a normative social role, participants not only acquire skills but also gain access to the networks, norms, and self-perceptions that make broader social participation possible (Erkek & Özer Gündoğdu, 2026; Stewart et al., 2024).

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

The Journey to Self Program constitutes a replicable and evidence-based application example for inclusive postsecondary education in the Turkish context. Key design principles such as campus-based feasibility, interdisciplinary curriculum, peer mentorship, and family involvement are transferable to different institutional contexts. However, transforming this single initiative into a systemic national application requires a multi-stakeholder action plan to be implemented in parallel.

University administrations can transform campus-based inclusive learning environments from temporary projects into institutional policies under the umbrella of research and application centers. Field-based and naturalistic observation internship adaptations could be developed for Guidance and Psychological Counseling, Special Education Teaching, and Shadow Teaching programs, with regular budget allocations for academic staff development. Peer mentor roles could be integrated into undergraduate programs as internship credits or professional practice requirements.

Vocational certification processes linking program participants to the real labor market could be developed. Considering that the program operates only at a foundation university as a fee-paying program, policy makers (Council of Higher Education, Ministry of National Education, Ministry of Family and Social Services, etc.) could establish publicly accessible scholarships, grants, and inter-ministerial incentive mechanisms to enable university-based inclusive programs at public universities. Institutional continuity could be secured by establishing a legal framework that recognizes postsecondary inclusive education programs within national special education legislation.

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