

***Challenges and prospects of hippotherapist training  
within the university context***

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**Fernando Israel Ponce-Ramírez**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3689-9893>

[fponce@upnech.edu.mx](mailto:fponce@upnech.edu.mx)

Universidad Pedagógica Nacional del Estado de Chihuahua.

**Michelle Anahí Canales-Acosta**

<https://orcid.org/0009-0001-7890-8559>

[mcanales@uach.mx](mailto:mcanales@uach.mx)

Universidad Autónoma de Chihuahua

**Cesar Delgado-Valles**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7405-291X>

[c.delgado@ibycenech.edu.mx](mailto:c.delgado@ibycenech.edu.mx)

“Institución Benemérita y Centenaria” Escuela Normal del Estado de Chihuahua

**Pamela Franco-Díaz**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7148-8715>

[pfranco@uach.mx](mailto:pfranco@uach.mx)

Universidad Autónoma de Chihuahua

**Carlos Javier Ortiz-Rodríguez**

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-5474-7744>

[cortiz@uach.mx](mailto:cortiz@uach.mx)

Universidad Autónoma de Chihuahua

**Abstract**

**Keywords:** Equine Therapy, Professional Training, Disability, University Student, Therapeutic Intervention

Equine-assisted therapy has developed through practice and is grounded in the experience of a therapeutic disciplinary field already recognized with scientific rigor for its effectiveness in people with disabilities. This study reflects on the challenges of university-level training for equine therapists in Mexico, based on the experiences of students in the Bachelor’s Degree in Human Motricity at the Autonomous University of Chihuahua. A qualitative, exploratory–descriptive approach was adopted, applying six focus groups with 7th- and 8th-semester students of the Bachelor’s program in Human Motricity at the Faculty of Physical Culture of the Autonomous University of Chihuahua (cohorts 2021–2025 and 2022–2026), enrolled in the courses Equine Therapy I and II. The discussion guide was validated through expert judgment, and the sessions were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using Atlas.ti based on predefined categories: training expectations, perceived impact of equine therapy on people with disabilities, professional projection, and disciplinary experiences. Thematic coding and

theoretical–discursive triangulation were employed to ensure validity. Findings highlight challenges such as the lack of curricular standardization, the need for greater supervised practice, and limited interdisciplinary integration. Significant benefits in patients’ motor and psychosocial development were recognized, yet gaps remain in the professionalization and formal regulation of the discipline. It is concluded that equine-assisted therapy requires the consolidation of rigorous training frameworks that integrate theory, practice, and professional ethics.

## INTRODUCTION

In the field of Animal-Assisted Interventions (AAI), equine-assisted therapy, alternatively referred to as equestrian therapy, hippotherapy, or horse-mediated therapy, among other contextual terms, has established a robust scientific foundation in recent years. It is defined as a multidisciplinary practice integrating therapeutic, psychological, educational, and physical culture components. Research indicates that interaction with the horse, specifically through the utilization of its rhythmic gait, significantly enhances the physical, cognitive, emotional, and social functioning of individuals with clinical conditions or disabilities (Stergiou et al., 2017). Consequently, the training of equine therapists within the realm of human kinetics is intrinsically linked to an identity construction rooted in lived experiences, reflection, and meaning-making. Analyzing this professional development provides a fundamental framework for understanding the nexus between technical knowledge, relational sensitivity between therapist and horse, and the establishment of the therapeutic role.

The consolidation of a professional profile in equine therapy is the cornerstone of intervention efficacy. Activities such as the therapeutic direction of the horse necessitate a profound mastery of the animal's body mechanics, complemented by an understanding of human physiology in a rehabilitative context. Furthermore, the application of technical elements relies on the expertise required to synchronize the horse’s movement with the patient’s adaptation. During a session, the equine’s movement patterns mimic the human gait; this association stimulates the vestibular, proprioceptive, and tactile systems, thereby activating the central nervous system. When a patient undergoes a structured treatment plan, significant improvements are observed in balance, motor coordination, and muscle tone. Additionally, the horse’s body temperature aids in reducing spasticity and increasing joint flexibility (Angoules et al., 2015). Thus, the equine therapist must serve as a mediator between the horse and the patient, requiring disciplinary, observational, and communicative skills to maximize therapeutic outcomes.

Equestrian therapy has been consolidated as a targeted intervention for diverse conditions, transcending mere interaction to improve human well-being. Although the historical roots of equine therapy date back to Ancient Greece, Riede (1988) notes that "the first recorded treatment with horses dates back to 430 B.C." Hippocrates, regarded as the first physician with equestrian knowledge, addressed the therapeutic benefits of riding around 460 B.C., arguing that these benefits extended to both the physical and emotional dimensions of the rider (Wood et al., 2014).

In the 1950s, rehabilitation for polio was largely restricted to conventional clinical approaches. However, Lis Hartel independently incorporated riding into her recovery, mitigating the visible effects of her disability. Her progress enabled her to compete in the Helsinki (1952) and Melbourne (1956) Olympic Games, earning silver medals in Dressage (Heipertz, 1977). This recurrent interaction with the equine facilitated her

adaptation to daily life and partially restored muscular mobility in her arms and hands through neuromotor stimulation. This case is a pioneering milestone that spurred the formalization of equine therapy in Europe and the United States, evolving from intuitive practices into interdisciplinary interventions. This evolution underscored the necessity of professionalizing equine therapists to ensure maximum clinical benefits.

The trajectory of equine therapy was further shaped by the rehabilitation of World War veterans, where elements of psychology, pedagogy, animal ethology, and movement sciences began to converge (Li et al., 2023). These fields contributed to the contemporary professional profile. While no single national or international governing body mandates global ethical standards, it is widely recognized that comprehensive training requires the consolidation of technical competencies, equestrian skills, and cognitive, emotional, and behavioral proficiencies, as outlined by the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Intl, 2018). Ultimately, this therapeutic practice demands an ethical sensitivity that recognizes the horse as a co-therapist; the animal's presence provides a living, dynamic, and relational component that is central to the therapeutic process.

The profile of any practitioner involved in equine-assisted therapies implies a complete mastery of equitation, characterized by correct postural management, technical proficiency, and horse control within a safety-oriented framework during the session. Mastering equitation allows the practitioner to identify the vast majority of equine behavioral reactions, correct patient posture, and anticipate responses to potential issues, thereby ensuring the fulfillment of therapeutic objectives. The professionalization of equine therapy entails an ethical and epistemological duty toward scientific rigor; the ideal curriculum for an equine therapist must encompass expertise in medical care, pedagogy, horsemanship, and the core principles of practice (Shkedi, 2019).

Since the 1970s, formal expansion of this field has been driven by organizations such as the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Intl.), founded in 1969. As the largest non-profit organization in the United States, PATH Intl. boasts over 8,000 member centers and more than 6,300 individual members globally, serving over 50,000 patients with functional diversity through its programs (PATH Intl., 2023). Without such consolidated professionalization, the efficacy of interventions is compromised, leading to improvised approaches that neglect validated therapeutic criteria and the design of an ethical practice essential for patient progress.

The scientific literature regarding the professionalization of the equine therapist is still an evolving field. Refining studies that promote deep reflection on the professional components of the practitioner elevates the status of equine therapy, transitioning it from an emerging practice to a consolidated disciplinary field. This transition requires its own theoretical frameworks, better-defined ethical standards, and a systematized state of the art that sustains and legitimizes the scientific rigor of this therapeutic modality. Thus, the consolidation of a professional profile in equine therapy legitimizes the discipline and promotes its integration into clinical, educational, and social spheres.

Globally, with the notable exception of Germany, where scientific rigor in therapist training is a requirement, most established countries implementing equine therapies have not mandated compulsory certifications. These certifications are generally related to horsemanship and human-equine bonding techniques (Shkedi, 2019). For instance, in the United Kingdom, the evolution of equine therapy was based on adaptive sports models, promoting mental and physical well-being through recreational sport frameworks. Initially, instructors were not required to possess formal equitation skills as part of their training or qualification; its inception and transition were largely defined by volunteerism and perceived as a charitable cause (RDA, 1990).

The UK also features training through the Riding for the Disabled Association (RDA), whose graduates serve 25,000 beneficiaries annually (RDA, n.d.). The model provides a

basic training certificate for group instructors. However, critics argue that the core curriculum has maintained a rigid methodology for the past 40 years, leading to a disconnect from current updates and modern challenges due to traditionalist roots (Gannod et al., 2005). While the British Equestrian Federation (BEF) has incorporated instructor training into the UK Coaching Certificate (UKCC) for equine therapists, Shkedi (2019) maintains that "deficiencies in training persist."

In the United States, the training of equine therapists is developed across three areas: National Therapeutic Riding Organizations, Academia, and Hippotherapy Organizations, which promote learning through online, in-person, and distance programs. Regarding the academic sphere, as of 2012, 39 universities in the US offered training in equine therapy, seven of which featured four-year degree programs within a higher education model. Simultaneously, a growing sector involves small operational entities with specific specializations, such as the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (Eagala) and Epona Quest. These are characterized by a highly targeted focus on specialized interventions (Ekholm et al., 2018).

For its part, the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Intl.) mandates that experts be either licensed therapists or riding instructors. Accreditation is obtained through theoretical and practical examinations across three certification levels, Instructor, Advanced, and Master, administered via licensed programs throughout the United States (PATH Intl. Curriculum, 2023). This association promotes instructor certification, center accreditation, and professional advancement; it requires students to complete twenty-five hours of practical volunteering and continuous training by attending two annual workshops. However, the PATH International curriculum offers limited thematic scope and only twenty-five hours of practical experience, appearing to omit the contributions of educational and health experts (Shkedi, 2019).

In Germany, a specialization in health or educational sciences is required, alongside training as a riding instructor, to receive remuneration for delivering therapeutic interventions (Riede, 1988). This model also emerged in the 1960s, strengthening the professional role of physiotherapists by utilizing hippotherapy as a treatment modality. In 1968, the Kuratorium, a recognized institution addressing medical, pedagogical, and equestrian issues, established protocols and regulations for the training of equine therapy specialists within the German Republic. The central premise dictates that while experience in riding and hippotherapy may have certain deficiencies, the intervention is strengthened when combined with physiotherapy (Shkedi, 2019). This protocolization resulted in the classification of interventions by field: within clinical sciences, it was identified as equine therapy/hippotherapy; in the branches of psychology and education, terminology defined it as therapeutic-educational riding/vaulting; and equestrian specialists referred to it as riding therapy for people with disabilities (Shkedi, 2019).

When analyzing the three models of equine therapy, German, American, and British, it is observed that each possesses characteristics responding to its specific social and professional context. The German model stands out as the most structured, with rigorous certification processes that guarantee quality and professionalization. Its primary limitation, however, is its restrictive nature; only health professionals with extensive equestrian knowledge and specific skills can become equine therapy instructors, and they may only intervene within their specific area of expertise.

The British model, in contrast, arises from a community and equestrian approach, characterized by strong participation from volunteers and horse owners. While this makes it more accessible and inclusive, it also renders it less stringent, with gaps in its formality as a clinical therapy. Meanwhile, the American model occupies a middle ground: it possesses a certain degree of structure and training modules but retains a holistic and equestrian focus that does not reach the clinical rigor of the German system. These models

have matured the notion of professional competency required to maintain quality control and accountability in meeting the therapeutic needs of patients (Morley, 2010). Although all three models provide valuable elements, the German model offers the highest degree of professionalization. It is highly pertinent that Mexico is adopting this as a foundation, as it ensures well-founded and reliable therapeutic processes, despite the limitation of being less flexible in addressing diverse conditions.

Regarding the status of equine therapy in Mexico, it has gradually consolidated as a recognized alternative therapy in the fields of physical, emotional, and social rehabilitation. Various civil associations, specialized centers, and foundations have driven the practice, primarily through the lens of disability inclusion. The country still lacks unified federal regulations; the momentum provided by the Mexican Federation of Equestrian Therapies is currently focused on developing guidelines, training, and certifications to standardize therapeutic intervention.

Generally, the work is conducted under interdisciplinary schemes, integrating professionals from health, education, psychology, and physical culture sciences, which has allowed the practice to acquire a more structured character. These organizations not only provide therapy but also promote the training of specialized therapists and the dissemination of the benefits of equine therapy. Consequently, the country is showing increased interest in forming a growing network to professionalize the service, provide quality care, and position equine therapy as an integral tool within physical rehabilitation programs.

In the Mexican academic sphere, the training process for equine therapists is rarely integrated formally into undergraduate university programs. Instead, this training is found in diplomas, certifications, and specialized courses offered by civil society organizations and equestrian centers. Furthermore, equine therapy is seldom analyzed in university research, resulting in limited scientific evidence and academic standardization. To practice as an equine therapist in Mexico, options include three-day introductory courses, six-month diplomas, or accreditation by the Secretariat of Public Education (SEP) and the National Council for Standardization and Certification of Labor Competencies (CONOCER). While this is a common standard for validating professional training, it does not constitute a systematic curricular follow-up.

In turn, also in Mexico, few universities participate in the training of equine therapists through curricular programs that consolidate a theoretical and practical profile. For instance, the Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León (UANL), through its Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Zootechnics, has established alliances with organizations such as the International Foundation of Horse Riders and Equestrian Activities (FICAE). This collaboration aims to train students and professors in equine therapy through workshops, lectures, and events centered on animal behavior and equine welfare for treating disabilities (Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, 2017).

Another prominent institution is the Centro Cultural Ecuestre Domecq, which offers a Diploma in Equine Therapy. This program is aimed at professionals in clinical, health, and educational fields, utilizing a hybrid modality that balances practical hours with the management of therapeutic centers (Alta Escuela Domecq, n.d.). The objective of this program is to consolidate the equine therapist's profile, focusing their intervention on improving the quality of life for patients with physical and psychological conditions.

Similarly, the Universidad Autónoma de Chihuahua (UACH) involves its students and faculty through the courses Equestrian Therapies I and Equestrian Therapies II, which are part of the curriculum for the Bachelor's degree in Human Motricity. This degree aims to train competent professionals to address, with social relevance and an ethical, collaborative attitude, the diagnosis, design, and application of physical activity and recreation programs through interdisciplinary work across different levels of care for at-risk groups (Universidad Autónoma de Chihuahua, n.d.). These two subjects were

introduced in the Faculty of Physical Culture Sciences at UACH in 2015, making it one of the pioneer universities in integrating professional equine therapy training. Over ten graduating classes, this curriculum has strengthened the professional profile of health science students, allowing them to develop the professional ability to evaluate, plan, and intervene systematically, transforming these alternative therapies into a structured experience.

In the eighth semester, the coursework is oriented toward specific interventions for various types of disabilities, including motor, auditory, visual, intellectual, and psychosocial impairments. Students work on strategies and riding adaptations, communication dynamics, therapeutic games, and stimulation activities tailored to specific needs. Additionally, students analyze clinical cases, design inclusive programs, and apply progress evaluations across different profiles, thereby strengthening their competencies for practical work with diverse users.

The importance of this training lies in allowing the student to transition from theoretical and technical learning in the seventh semester to a specialized practical application in the eighth semester, ensuring a comprehensive teaching process. In this way, future professionals develop the sensitivity, tools, and knowledge necessary to implement evidence-based equestrian therapy programs, promoting inclusion, autonomy, and well-being for individuals with diverse conditions.

Over time, this process has validated and refined this formative approach, demonstrating that the professional responsibility of working with vulnerable populations requires training that goes beyond animal handling. The innovation of the equestrian therapy program, with ten generations of continuous experience, has confirmed the need for a deep understanding of neurobiological processes, clinical evaluation skills, the ability to design specific interventions, and the competence to work in multidisciplinary teams. Without this academic foundation, there is a risk of offering services that, while well-intentioned, lack the effectiveness and safety that users with disabilities deserve.

The difference does not lie in whether one knows how to ride, but in the ability to transform that skill into a precise, ethical, and effective therapeutic tool. It is about converting a passion for horses into a profession that changes lives in a documented, systematic, and professional manner within the field of rehabilitation.

Consequently, the present study poses the following research question: What are the challenges and hurdles of university training for equine therapists in contexts of disability? Under this main premise, the study is developed to delve deeply into their university education.

## OBJECTIVE

To analyze the challenges and demands within the university-level training of human kinesiologists as equine-assisted therapists in the context of disability. The study identifies the academic, ethical, and professional limitations that influence the consolidation of this discipline as both a scientific and an applied field.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodological approach was based on a qualitative, exploratory-descriptive design aimed at understanding the hurdles and requirements in the education of human kinesiologists as equine-assisted therapists within a university setting.

The primary data collection technique consisted of four focus groups (FG) comprised of 7th and 8th-semester students from the Faculty of Physical Culture Sciences (FCCF) at the Autonomous University of Chihuahua. Participants were enrolled in the *Equine Therapy I and II* courses within the Bachelor of Human Kinesiology program (2021-2025 and 2022-2026 cycles). This population was selected because the subject is integrated

into their core curriculum and the students possess both theoretical and practical experience in equine-assisted interventions.

The focus group interview guide was designed and validated through expert judgment methodology (Ponce et al., 2025) to ensure relevance and conceptual clarity regarding the research objectives. Sessions were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis was conducted using Atlas.ti software, into which the interviews were imported and organized according to four predefined categories: 1) educational expectations; 2) vision regarding the impact of equine therapy on people with disabilities; 3) professional projection; and 4) experience from the perspective of motor intervention.

Information analysis followed a predefined thematic coding process to identify emerging patterns and significant meanings within the students' discourse. Through this methodological strategy, the participants' interpretations were triangulated with existing literature to determine the prevailing challenges in the equine therapy training process.

## RESULTS

The following results present the narratives extracted from the focus groups and their subsequent interpretation.

**Challenges of Equine Therapy from Educational Experiences** One of the primary challenges facing equine therapy pertains to the lack of knowledge and initial credibility within various therapeutic intervention sectors, as well as among professionals in training. This is reflected in the participants' testimonies: "At first, I didn't see much value in equine therapy. I was also very unfamiliar with the topic" (E1); and "When I started, I didn't have much perspective on equine therapy or horses in general. I hadn't had a direct approach until now" (E2). These voices highlight the need to strengthen education surrounding equine-assisted therapy to ensure its recognition as a valid intervention within the health sciences.

During the transition from the 7th to the 8th semester of the Kinesiology program, the narratives reveal a shift in the perceived significance of equine therapy. Initially, participants admitted to a limited conception of the therapy, focusing primarily on the motor domain. One participant noted: "At first, I thought it was a therapy focused more on severe physical disabilities... but now that I've had experience at the center, I see that it helps with attitudes, it helps psychologically; it's not just focused on a specific syndrome, but rather assists in many areas" (E1). This perception is consolidated through direct involvement in therapeutic intervention, where the benefits become observable. Another student remarked: "I thought it was strictly focused on physical disabilities... back then, I didn't have the foundations of the therapeutic principles. Now I understand that it goes far beyond just putting the child on the horse and walking in circles" (E2).

As practical experience is consolidated within the university curriculum, student-therapists report a shift in their perspective and vision of equine-assisted therapy, driven by direct observation of interventions and concrete outcomes in individuals with disabilities. As one participant described: "As I watched the therapies and they explained the changes each user was experiencing and how this benefited their lives, I began to see it differently, in a more positive light" (E1). This process of formative knowledge is further confirmed in another testimony: "We started almost without knowing what [the therapies] were or how they related to the patients... and realizing that [horses] are not just animals... but that people hold great importance in the health sector" (E3). A key finding highlights that the legitimization of equine therapy is established through the mediation of empirical evidence, a process that would be strengthened by the emergence of systematic studies supporting the benefits of this therapeutic intervention.

Another perception detailing the significance of this intervention pertains to the benefits

of equine therapy, which are not limited to a single specific group or clinical condition. In the words of an interviewee: "The high impact it could have on the quality of life of different at-risk groups, not only children but also older adults" (E2). Similarly, the diversity of therapeutic areas involved is emphasized: "I realized that it doesn't only target the motor area... but that self-perception, self-esteem, and other factors can also benefit" (E4). Based on this, there is a clear need to diversify intervention protocols and adapt equine therapy to the various dimensions of physical, emotional, and social health.

Beyond its relationship with physical activity and rehabilitation, the richness of therapeutic accompaniment is fundamental to equine therapy. As expressed by another voice: "Working with disability through the foundations of equine therapy is not the same as when it is a competition. I feel that is a 'plus' that equine therapy has, which perhaps other disciplines lack" (E2). Thus, value is ascribed to equine therapy as the foundation for constructing a therapeutic space where the bond with the horse enhances emotional, cognitive, and social skills.

Regarding the human-horse relationship, it is conceived as a central element of the therapeutic process. This bond is described as relevant and significant: "The principles presented by the horse have a high impact on a person's development... [The students] know how significant it can become in their lives" (E2). Translating these subjective and symbolic experiences into measurable indicators remains a challenge for scientific research processes aimed at contributing to clinical evidence. Consequently, equine therapy is perceived as an intervention discipline with enormous potential, though the challenges lie in the methodology that continues to be scientifically constructed and consolidated.

University education is based on the development of both professional and personal skills; within the framework of equine therapy, these skills are highlighted by the voices in this research. Emotional self-regulation is a necessary skill for the equine therapist, involving the management of both one's own emotions and those of the user: "More than anything, I think self-confidence was developed, because knowing that we can transmit fear to the child or the horse, we also learn to control ourselves" (E1). Likewise, the capacity for improvisation regarding activity planning is emphasized, adapting to the reactions that different disabilities present during the therapeutic process: "We must know which activities to implement, aligning them with the disabilities we encounter" (E1). This testimony suggests a broader understanding of the need to individualize intervention strategies according to each case.

Another finding related to the therapist's skills concerns the transition from the initial contact, based on empirical notions, to an understanding of the discipline through theoretical foundations, highlighting the role of academic literature in the training process: "Based on my experience, my perception changed quite a bit, moving away from seeing it as purely empirical and embracing the literature and all the theoretical aspects the subject offers" (E2).

### **Significance and Impact of Equine Therapy on Individuals with Disabilities**

Another analysis focuses on the impact and significance of equine therapy for individuals with disabilities who undergo this therapeutic model. Participant accounts highlight the noticeable benefits regarding the independence, socialization, and self-confidence of the users.

"They become more independent due to the nature of their evolution throughout the therapies," one participant noted, illustrating this effect with the experience of a child with autism: "It was as if he didn't socialize much with others. But after some time [...] being at the center, he began to socialize more with his therapists" (E1).

Beyond physical progress, equine therapy can influence social and emotional dimensions,

fostering integration and participation within educational and community contexts. The observation of significant patient progress is a recurring theme in the testimonies: "In a short time, we managed to build their self-confidence and achieve very positive motor advancement" (E1). This reflects a perception of progress that encompasses both the physical and emotional dimensions. Furthermore, another participant stated: "We realized that it does not only impact the user; it also has an impact on the surroundings. For example, the primary caregiver [...] it also served as a form of support for them." This testimony underscores the presence of ancillary benefits that extend to the user's support network.

Participants emphasized the role of equine therapy in environmental adaptation and the strengthening of self-confidence. One student expressed that the process allows users "to adapt to an environment for which they were not previously prepared (...) and it helps them greatly with self-confidence" (E3). Thus, this dimension of equine therapy transcends the physical, establishing itself as a tool for inclusion, autonomy, and socio-emotional development, although challenges remain regarding the systematization and scientific validation of these experiences.

Another student recounted: "Working with a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) helped me understand how equine therapy contributes to improving muscle tone and body awareness. Initially, he had difficulty maintaining an upright trunk, but as the sessions progressed, he was able to support himself and respond to the exercises on the horse" (E1). The progress reflected by users is linked to the horse's movement and the users' neuromotor systems. Throughout their practical training, students learn to apply clinical criteria such as core stability, cephalic control, and intersegmental coordination.

One account notes: "Seeing people with motor disabilities begin to activate muscles they rarely used, simply by adapting to the horse's gait, was a powerful lesson" (E1). Identifying specific elements such as rhythm, direction, and posture during the ride are factors not typically present in conventional therapies. Equine therapy is not merely a complement to physical rehabilitation; it is a foundational therapy that generates its own theoretical framework and scientific reference.

### **Experience with Motor Intervention**

The experiential scope of the subject is characterized by a landscape of academic and practical challenges. One participant mentioned that "it was quite a process, from struggling to get the course opened [...] to interacting with my classmates, attending the center, and how each of us gained a different experience." Professional growth was strengthened by approaching the discipline's knowledge base and through peer interaction: "In my case, since I already knew how to ride, [a classmate] said: 'Hey, at least teach me how to get on a horse.'" This reflects collaborative learning that transcends the formal classroom and is enriched through practice.

Findings also relate to the criteria involved in motor intervention, as referenced by the participants: "Seeing how users improve their posture while riding made me truly understand the impact of this therapy beyond the theoretical" (E3). The practical component of the course, synthesizing foundational concepts learned in class, allowed therapists-in-training to observe how the horse's three-dimensional movement promotes muscle activation, postural control, and corporal symmetry. "It isn't just riding for the sake of riding; it's understanding how every movement influences the user's body" (E2), demonstrating the construction of a deep understanding of motor approaches through practice.

This reflective process emerges from the intersection of theory and experience: "When we covered balance and coordination in class, and then worked with a child with cerebral palsy who improved his balance in just two sessions, it was impressive" (E3). Such

expressions detail how key motor intervention criteria, such as muscle tone, body alignment, and the sensory feedback provided by the horse's body heat, are acquired. Consequently, the course serves as a space where clinical observation is transformed into meaningful knowledge.

By enrolling in the equine therapy course, students bridged the gap between abstract disciplinary knowledge and a practical understanding of the body in motion. "At first, I thought equine therapy was merely a recreational activity, but now I can explain why it generates changes in gait, posture, and even the users' self-esteem" (E4). Another participant noted: "I remember a user arriving very rigid and anxious, but after a few minutes on the horse, his expression changed completely; his body began to relax" (E3). In this sense, the coursework articulates biomechanical analysis, physical rehabilitation, and the human-animal bond, elements that are transformative for the professional's therapeutic role.

### **Vocational Projection of the Equine Therapist**

Furthermore, there is an increasing awareness of the role this discipline plays in the labor market. One participant expressed that "we have much greater possibilities for professional success; these types of specialized activities make us appear more qualified, and we have many areas where we can work—not just one-on-one, but utilizing a co-therapist, which in this case was the horse." Another voice highlighted how this training fosters personal initiative and professional projection: "When the course began, I saw it as an opportunity to look into my future; it caught my attention and was one of the main drivers that pushed me to challenge the professors, as I am very interested in learning about the subject" (E2). Another testimony noted: "This subject will lead to the opening of more job fields, as you can work there with the horses or even open your own centers." At the beginning of the course, most human motricity students likely held only a general notion of equine therapy, perceiving it more as a curious, distinct experience in their training rather than a professional tool. One student stated: "Initially, I thought it was something more recreational; I didn't imagine such a significant therapeutic weight. I've liked horses since I was a girl, but I didn't see it as a viable career path" (E4). It is evident that a concrete understanding of equine therapy was initially lacking, characterized by an unfamiliarity with the interdisciplinary therapeutic approach and its actual impact on individuals with disabilities.

As the syllabus progressed, students began to identify essential elements contributing to their future vocational projection. One student shared: "Upon visiting the Municipal Equine Therapy Center, I realized it isn't just about riding a horse and relaxing; you are working with two living beings. The horse is a transcendental part of the therapeutic process. I would like to learn how to develop a project to open a center" (E2). This shift in perspective occurs when equine therapy is no longer viewed as a distant possibility but as a tangible professional field. The discipline ceases to be an unfamiliar activity and evolves into a field of specialization.

Progressing through the curriculum not only reveals new professional horizons but also sparks an interest in entrepreneurship within this physical rehabilitation modality. More participants are now projecting the design of their own spaces or multidisciplinary centers: "I would love to be part of a center where I can apply what I'm learning; I've already researched how to work at the equine therapy center and the necessary certifications" (E1). The trajectory of professional identity is shaped from this formative point, allowing students to visualize their professional profiles with greater clarity. One student remarked: "As my degree progressed, I didn't know where I could work upon finishing, but now I see I can dedicate myself to these types of complementary therapies" (E2). Equine therapy thus emerges as a projected professional niche, with the course

acting as a bridge between academic formation and future clinical intervention.

## DISCUSSION

Equine-assisted therapy has faced various challenges regarding its recognition as an "alternative" therapy within both academic spheres and professional training. In common parlance, it is often perceived as a discipline lacking scientific studies to legitimize its impact and significance as a form of intervention; this perception is a determining factor in its limited presence within university curricula. While public consensus regarding the potential benefits of equine interventions continues to grow, evidence characterized by scientific rigor remains largely anecdotal and suffers from limited dissemination (Kendall et al., 2015). This aligns with the qualitative findings from the participants' voices, who expressed having initiated their training with a lack of prior knowledge, noting that their initial engagement fostered a new perspective on equestrian therapy. Consequently, it can be inferred that increased scientific production and, crucially, its integration into university programs will grant this therapeutic intervention a different status and level of recognition.

The equine therapist must possess a clear understanding of the elements that transcend traditional rehabilitation within equestrian therapy: "It not only improves postural control and balance but also generates benefits in cognitive, emotional, and social areas" (Stergiou et al., 2017). This assertion is consistent with the sentiments expressed by the sample group in the focus group, who described shifts in the self-perception and self-esteem of users, thereby positioning equine therapy within a holistic intervention framework in the health sciences.

Regarding the training of equine therapists and the application of intervention techniques, the essential profile of a university graduate hinges on understanding the connection the therapist must establish with the horse. This bond constitutes a unique therapeutic medium that fosters self-regulation and intrinsic motivation in patients (McGibbon et al., 1998). The participants identified the value of self-confidence, improvisation, and the adaptation of individualized therapeutic strategies; however, addressing these elements requires training underpinned by clear and concise methodological rigor. The desired profile, based on the German model, demands a highly consolidated academic foundation in the intervention and application of equestrian therapy (DKThR, 2024). This model is strictly defined for equine therapists who hold equestrian certifications alongside licenses in health sciences, psychology, and/or education, in addition to specific certifications recognized by civil organizations and experts (Heine, 1997).

Other findings describe the intervention as having a significant impact on individuals with disabilities, distinguishing it markedly from conventional physical therapy. The experience provided by equestrian therapy influences human motor skills and the emotional dimension, which eventually transcends into social and educational spheres. The sample indicated that during sessions, some users exhibiting resistance or avoidance began to establish bonds with their therapists and showed greater interest in interacting with others. The efficacy of equestrian therapy not only promotes visible and relevant progress but also holds the potential to consolidate sustainable processes of active inclusion and self-confidence between the user, the therapist, and the horse (Gabriels et al., 2018).

Concerning advancements in the physical-corporeal dimension, the strengthening of muscle tone, posture, balance, and coordination is positively impacted by equine movement as a specific therapeutic resource. The participants highlighted the immediacy of these improvements, which are linked to the horse's three-dimensional movement pattern that facilitates the activation of underutilized muscles, core stability, and cephalic control— aspects that differ from intervention techniques in conventional therapies. This

is consistent with existing literature analyzing these factors, where equestrian interventions lead to significant improvements in balance, postural control, and gross motor function due to the horse's rhythmic, three-dimensional gait (Stergiou et al., 2017, 2025). These advancements have transitioned equine therapy from a complementary intervention to a disciplinary field with its own theoretical foundation. The challenge arising from this finding is the urgent need to systematize experiences and design standardized protocols with methodological rigor to conclusively support this clinical practice.

Other findings indicate that the equestrian therapy course trains professionals within a highly targeted and specialized profile. This gradual immersion resulted in the mastery and comprehension of the motor criteria involved in the intervention. Profiling the equine therapist implies professionalizing the act of riding; intervention in equine-assisted therapy does not consist of "riding for the sake of riding," but rather of developing an intervention that leverages every equine movement and its impact on the user's physiological elements. An equine therapist equipped with theoretical foundations will develop an intervention applied to the horse's three-dimensional movement to strengthen the user's coordination, muscular activation, and postural control (Bartlett et al., 2020). The participants recognize this fact and the significance of biomechanics based on principles that are distinct and differentiated from other conventional therapies. The course serves as a space where abstract knowledge is converted into meaningful experiences, favoring the construction of clinical criteria and developing the students' analytical capacity from a broad disciplinary perspective, thereby consolidating their professional training.

Another aspect highlighted by the participants pertains to the process of sensory feedback derived from the horse's body heat; the sample identifies this as a substantial and critical element transmitted to the user's musculature and nervous system. This element promotes relaxation and the reduction of spasticity, which significantly impacts posture and movement. Existing scientific literature analyzes this therapeutic phenomenon in cases of cerebral palsy and its reaction to body heat, which favors the regulation of muscle tone and contributes to functional progress in gait and posture (Benda et al., 2003). This finding establishes what the participants identify in practice as a significant sensory tool. The educational experience also demonstrated that the horse's heat constitutes a differentiating factor compared to other conventional therapies.

A further critical motor intervention element is the transmission of rhythmic impulses through contact during riding in a correct posture. Studies have indicated that the combination of body heat and rhythmic movement activates significant muscular responses (McGibbon et al., 2009). This reference provides a framework for the participants' observations: users who arrive rigid and anxious manage to relax and adapt to the equestrian therapy process.

The training of equine therapists within a university context develops specialized technical learning in the area of rehabilitation, opening new possibilities in the labor market. Equine-assisted therapy at the Faculty of Physical Culture Sciences (UACH) is not merely an extracurricular experience; rather, it develops health science and physical education professionals with the aim of providing differentiated competencies that enhance employability and diversify professional fields of action (Silkwood-Sherer et al., 2012). This training develops both therapeutic and professional value in equine therapy. It transcends a personal affinity for horses and becomes a formal intervention; this process of awareness-building in the student is key to legitimizing equine therapy as a clinical practice and ensuring its integration into the workforce through an interdisciplinary approach with competencies in physical, psychological, and social rehabilitation (Zadnikar & Kastrin, 2011).

## CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this research establish the significance of equine-assisted therapy as a therapeutic intervention with multidimensional effects that extend far beyond physical reinforcement. The experiences voiced during the training process confirm that interaction with the horse transcends physiological benefits, such as balance, posture, muscle tone, and coordination, to also drive advancements in emotional identity, socialization, and the active inclusion of individuals with disabilities. University education establishes a vital bridge between theory and practice, serving as an ideal formative space that shapes meaningful expertise in professionals endowed with professional autonomy.

The professionalization of this disciplinary field is rooted in foundational principles applied directly during intervention, such as the horse's three-dimensional movement, the sensory feedback derived from its body heat, and the impact of applied biomechanics. These aspects grant equine therapy a unique standing compared to other rehabilitation disciplines. Training as an equine therapist opens diverse labor market opportunities and projects students toward a specialized profile capable of responding to the demands of clinical, educational, and social sectors.

Nonetheless, the challenges identified in this research point to the necessity of advancing toward more systematic, protocolized studies and rigorous methodological analyses to conclusively legitimize the therapeutic effects observed in practice. The findings of the present study highlight the need for future research that delves deeper into the measurement of longitudinal outcomes and the scientific validation of the horse's role as a therapeutic agent. The students' perspectives enrich the disciplinary scope of equine therapy as an emerging field whose theoretical, methodological, and formative foundations warrant consolidation within both academia and professional practice.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the development or disclosure of the research results.

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