The Effects of COVID-19 lockdown on Students with Disabilities' Academic Performance: A Case study in a Fully Online University

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European Conference on Educational Research (ECER) 2021
September 6th-10th, 2021

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Research problem

The COVID-19 lockdown
- In most European countries, the lockdown period started in March and finished in June 2020
- The COVID-19 lockdown caused an abrupt **change from face-to-face to online emergency education** in most universities around the world

The Experiences of SWDs in online emergency education
- SWDs previously attending face-to-face higher education experienced **accessibility problems and psycho-emotional issues** during the lockdown

Why to investigate SWDs' experience in online universities during the lockdown?
- No research has analysed (yet) their experience in OHE during the COVID-19 lockdown
- Results may offer insights that could help **to improve OHE for SWDs**

About the UOC: The first fully online university in the world

Created in Barcelona in 1994, the UOC is based on a 100% online educational model

Among its foundational goals:

- Facilitating **universal access to higher education**
- Commitment to the **inclusion of students with diverse profiles**

The UOC in figures:

- 25 bachelor's degrees, 55 master's degrees, and 8 doctoral degrees
- 494 faculty members and research staff, and 5300 affiliated teaching staff and counsellors
- 77,549 students, **of which 1,722 are SWDs**. They represent the **46% of Catalan SWDs** in the year 2019-2020, and make the UOC the **2nd university in Spain** in terms of SWDs' enrolment

Methodology

- Approach: Qualitative
    - Aim: Exploring SWDs' experiences in OHE during COVID-19 lockdown taking into account its effects on their academic performance
    - Research Design: **Exploratory case study**
    - Data collection: In depth semi-structured interviews carried out at the end of 2020
    - Data analysis: Thematic analysis

- How did the COVID-19 lockdown influence online SWDs' academic performance?
    - Experiences of **24 students** with physical (6), sensory (6), mental (6), and learning disabilities (6) interviewed through videoconferencing or email
        - Effects of the lockdown on online SWDs' performance
        - SWDs' coping strategies
        - Diverse experiences among the SWDs depending on their profiles

The effects of the lockdown on online SWDs' performance

- Most participants experienced an i**ncrease in available time, flexibility, and academic support** as well as new ways of communication and collaboration

- Those changes promoted an increase in **SWDs' engagement and motivation** as well as a **reduction of psychological issues and physical barriers**

- Some SWDs took advantage of their online studies **to evade the lockdown psycho-emotional issues**

- **Most students with learning disabilities** as well as a few students with physical and sensory disabilities **experienced adverse effects on their academic performance**

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Online SWDs' coping strategies during the lockdown

- Some SWDs developed **new study techniques** such as the creation of new daily routines and using computer applications to keep concentrate

- Participants looked for **support from the University**, which consisted on flexibility in time and reduction of the course workload

- Some students also looked for **support from experts** who assisted them with medications and psycho-emotional therapies

- These coping strategies allowed SWDs to successfully finish their courses during the lockdown

Diverse experiences depending on the type of disability

Disability type
- Students with **physical, sensory, and mental** disabilities perceived an **increase of dedication, engagement, motivation, and concentration**
- Students with **learning disabilities** experienced **trouble in management and concentration issues** which increased **stressors, anxiety, and emotional issues** as well as a reduction on their **cognitive functions**
- A few students faced **difficulties for balancing studies and extra responsibilities** emerged during lockdown

Academic trajectory
- No significant differences were observed according to their academic trajectory and their type disability

Conclusions

- **Flexibility was a critical issue** to promote SWDs' inclusion in OHE during the lockdown

- **Well-organized online education help SWDs** to overcome accessibility barriers

- Online universities should **design new support strategies and policies** for SWDs that take into account the importance of pedagogical and psycho-emotional support

- Promoting **online communication** among all stakeholders is essential for improving support to SWDs

- Adopting **online assessment** reduces psycho-emotional issues and physical barriers for most SWDs

Reflections

- How some variables such as gender, economic background, age, and severity of disability influence the learning experiences of SWDs during emergencies like the COVID-19 lockdown?

- How did the COVID-19 lockdown change the perception of OHE's suitability in the particular case of SWDs?

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Thank you!

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