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

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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 increase 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.
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?
Thank you!

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