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

José Israel Reyes  
Julio Meneses

*Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences  
Universitat Oberta de Catalunya*

### **Introduction**

The Covid-19 crisis has affected Higher Education around the world in different ways. In most countries, face-to-face universities had to move immediately their academic activities to online because of the lockdown. On the one hand, this shift has influenced positively the students' academic performance (Gonzalez et al., 2020). Beyond some environmental factors such as noise and temperature (Realyvásquez-Vargas et al., 2020), lack of resources (Crawfort et al., 2020), and negative feelings (Kedra & Kaltsidis, 2020; Son et al., 2020), students have found their move to online learning quite convenient (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Kedra & Kaltsidis, 2020).

On the other hand, studies particularly focused on analysing the situation of students with disabilities during the lockdown have suggested an increase of accessibility problems (Meleo-Erwin, 2020; Wilson et al., 2020) and psycho-emotional issues (Soria, et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2020) after they were forced to move to online settings. In order to ensure that these students were able to progress and achieve their academic goals during the lockdown, most studies have suggested the need for developing multimedia and flexible learning resources to improve students' access (Zhang et al., 2020), as well as the promotion of inclusive teaching (Charmatz, 2020) and support services (Meleo-Erwin, 2020; Wilson, et al., 2020).

However, there is a lack of attention to the particular effects of the Covid-19 lockdown on the academic performance of students with disabilities undertaking fully online studies. This approach may offer some insights on the challenges and opportunities they had experienced, offering the opportunity to discuss the important role that Online Higher Education can play in a crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, this study may help to reflect on the new opportunities that have emerged for improving their education in fully online settings.

Hence, this research adopted a qualitative approach to raise the voice of undergraduate and graduate students with disabilities enrolled at the Open University of Catalonia (UOC), a fully online university in Spain, during the 2020-2021 academic course. Likewise, the study aimed to explore their own views about the influence of COVID-19 lockdown on their academic performance, particularly attending to their feelings, the challenges and the opportunities they faced, as well as the strategies and resources they used in order to cope with the difficulties.

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## **Methodology**

This qualitative study is based on a case study (Yin, 2009) involving semi-structured interviews with a sample of students with different types of disabilities. Once the Ethical Committee approved the investigation, the researchers recruited 24 students through the UOC's Office for Students with Disabilities and explored their experiences of and views on studying during the COVID-19 lockdown.

After sending an open invitation letter by email to all students registered in the Office, the research team recruited the participants for the interviews taking into account both their type of disability (physical, sensory, learning, and mental disabilities) and their academic trajectory (freshmen and sophomore, junior, and senior students). All the interviews were carried out online between November and December 2020, using video conferencing or email, depending on the particular situation of each participant.

Once the interviews were transcribed, the information was categorized and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2012). This technique is highly appropriate for organizing and analysing qualitative information into common themes. To do so, the research team coded and analysed inductively the participants' experiences during the lockdown, identifying patterns among the participants taking into account the type of disability and the academic trajectory.

## **Findings**

We have observed some evidence supporting that the crisis contributed to an overall improvement of students with disabilities' academic performance. According to the participants, having more time available for studying or preparing their assignments influenced positively their learning experience and contributed to foster their motivation and engagement. The participants have also perceived an increase in the support provided by their teachers, and some of them took advantage of social media in a way that they had not done before, strengthening their relationship with the academic staff and developing new opportunities for collaboration with their peers.

Interestingly, some students with disabilities have found in their ongoing online studies a space for evading the psychological effects of the Covid-19 crisis. However, most participants with learning disabilities and a few with physical and sensory disabilities have had trouble to concentrate and keep their attention on their academic tasks. To cope with these issues, students have requested additional support from the university staff, obtaining an extension of the deadlines for submitting their assignments and agreeing to extend some subjects to the next semester in order to reduce course load. Some of them also have looked for psychological support and have developed new study techniques for improving their focus and concentration. There were no significant differences in the experiences and views of the students taking into account their academic trajectory. Those participants who faced psycho-emotional issues were evenly distributed along the different stages of their studies.

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Our exploratory findings suggest the need for developing new strategies and resources aiming to support students with disabilities in Online Higher Education, both in their learning activities and in managing their psycho-emotional difficulties. Improving the academic support for these students should be an institutional priority to ensure the equality of opportunities, particularly in scenarios such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

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