The lived experiences of students with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Universitat Oberta de Catalunya
EADTU Webinar: Diversity & Inclusion in Online Education
June 8th, 2021
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 disabilities (SWDs)

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. Which are 46% of Catalan SWDs in the year 2019-2020, and make the UOC the 2nd university in Spain with the most SWDs.
About the UOC: An educational model based on e-learning

- Fully online & asynchronous
- Student-centred
- Continuous assessment
- Intrinsically accessible campus
- Teaching materials in several formats
- Among its teaching staff, the academic advisor is a particular UOC’s academic figure that accompanies every student throughout their academic journey, from induction and first enrolment to graduation
**Profile** of UOC’s SWDs:
- Disability types: motor disabilities (37%), other physical disabilities (26%), mental disorders (15%), sensory disabilities (15%), learning disabilities (1%), others (6%)
- 86% aged between 30-60 years

**Support** for SWDs:
- Support staff
  - Support services, academic advisors, and instructors
- Resources
  - Accessible virtual campus
  - Adapted learning resources
- Reasonable accommodations
  - Personalised support
  - Accommodations for continuous assessment and final exams
Lockdown and study background

- In Spain, the lockdown period started in March 2020 and finished in June 2020
- The UOC employed measures to support all the students:
  - Time flexibility to deliver assignments
  - Online final examination

- How did the COVID-19 lockdown influence the SWDs' academic performance?
  - Lived experiences of 24 students with physical, sensory, mental, and learning disabilities interviewed by videoconferencing
    - Effects of the lockdown on their performance
    - Coping strategies
    - Diverse experiences among the SWDs depending on their profiles
The effects of lockdown on SWDs’ performance

● Positive effects
  ○ Increase of available time, flexibility, and support
  ○ New ways of communication and collaboration
  ○ Increase of engagement and motivation
  ○ Reduction of psychological issues and physical barriers

● Negatives effects
  ○ Reduction of social life
  ○ Management and concentration issues
  ○ Difficulties for reconciling studies with extra responsibilities
  ○ Increase of stressors, anxiety, and emotional issues
SWDs’ Coping Strategies during the Lockdown

- Developing new study techniques
  - Getting assistance from computer applications
  - Creation of new daily routines

- Looking for support from the University
  - Flexibility in time
  - Reduction of workload

- Looking for support from experts
  - Medications
  - Therapy
Diverse experiences depending on the type of disability and the academic trajectory

Disability type

- Students with physical, sensory, and mental disabilities
  - Increase of dedication, engagement, motivation, and concentration
- Students with learning disabilities
  - Increase of stress and anxiety
  - Reduction of cognitive functions

Academic trajectory

- First-year and intermediate students
  - Enough time, support, and flexibility
- Senior students
  - Enough time, support, and flexibility
  - Barriers to carrying out their practicums and final projects
Lessons learned

- Well-organised online education helps SWDs to overcome accessibility barriers
- Flexibility is a critical issue to promote SWDs’ inclusion in Online Education
- Online Education is better for SWDs when they receive quality support
  - Pedagogical support
  - Psycho-emotional support
  - Technological 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
Challenges for online universities

● Developing a **universal learning environment** in which everyone can participate and succeed
  ○ Building a **support community** that encourages students’ involvement
  ○ Promoting **online communication** among all the stakeholders, both in synchronous and asynchronous ways
  ○ Promoting **personalised support** depending on the students’ capabilities and needs
  ○ Improving **staff training to enhance disability awareness** and to promote the application of inclusive teaching in all courses

● Designing courses based on the application of the **Universal Design for Learning and/or Instruction**
  ○ Increasing flexibility in some key dimensions such as time, access, and ways of participation in the learning and assessment processes
Thank you!

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