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

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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:

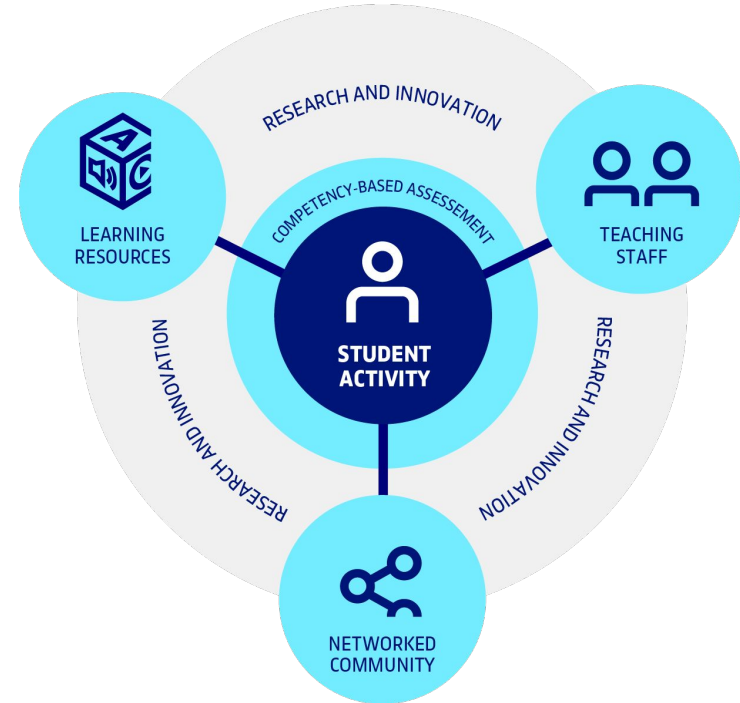
- Facilitating **universal access to higher education**
- Commitment to the **inclusion of students with disabilities (SWDs)**

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





SWDs' profile and University Services

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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