Students with disabilities in online education: The case of the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC)

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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 (SWD)**

The UOC in figures:
- 25 bachelor’s degrees, 54 master’s degrees, and 8 doctoral degrees
- 438 faculty members and research staff, and 4,721 affiliated teaching staff and counsellors
- 77,549 students, **of which 1,722 are SWD**. Which are **43% of Catalan SWD** in the year 2018-2019, and make the UOC the **2nd university in Spain** with the most SWD
About the UOC: An educational model based on e-learning

- Fully online & asynchronous
- Student-centred model
- Continuous assessment
- Intrinsically accessible campus
- Teaching materials in several formats
- Among the teaching staff, the tutor is a distinct UOC’s academic figure that accompanies every student throughout their whole academic journey, from (prior to) enrolment until graduation
Student Services and SWD: History and users’ profile

SWD receive support from the general Student Services Unit

Initiatives aimed at SWD over the years:
- Accessibility Commission (2009-2011)
- Group of accessibility leaders (2011-2012)
- Participation in national networks to improve SWD support (SAPDU, UNIDISCAT)

Profile of UOC’s SWD:
- 51% women
- 86% between 30-60 years
- 82% with previous university studies
- Types: motor disabilities (37%), other physical disabilities (26%), mental disorders (15%), sensory disabilities (15%)
Student Services and SWD: Communicating students’ needs

The Student Services Unit manages requests from students with not only disability certification but also any other justified special needs.

Virtual campus procedures addressed at requesting:
- Teaching accommodations
- Final tests accommodations
- On-site events accommodations

Personnel involved in SWD support:
- Tutors
- Management staff (Student Services Unit)
- Faculty (coordinating professors and course instructors)
The experience of SWD at the UOC (I)

Reasons why SWD choose online higher education:
- Overall accessibility to campus and materials; no need to commute
- Flexible schedule due to asynchronicity
- Disability becomes “invisible” (less stigma & stress)

However...

Disclosure as a recurrent dilemma
- Half of the certified SWD never communicate their disability (and non-disclosure has ill effects)
- The initiative and burden of proof rest on the students’ side
- Disclosure implies (emotional) risks and recurrent negotiations with different agents
- Is there an even larger hidden SWD population?
The experience of SWD at the UOC (II)

Two wide groups of disabilities:
- “Traditional”: i.e., motor, other physical, and sensory disabilities
- “Emergent”: i.e., learning challenges, ADHD, and mental disorders

The complex case of the students with multiple disabilities

The diversity of disabilities:
- Differences in identification with the SWD label (identity)
- Different institutional recognition
- Different needs and demands
Lessons learned

● The Student Services Unit was not conceived as a specific service for SWD
● The originally adopted generalistic approach made full sense within the context of the intrinsic accessibility of the UOC’s fully online model
● However, there has been an increase in both the number of SWD and the complexity of their needs over the years
● The current model of SWD support is under growing pressure and needs to be reconsidered
● Institutional plans and actions aimed at supporting SWD have been fragmented and have lacked consistency
Future developments

- Building a friendlier environment that celebrates diversity and proactively promotes disclosure of disabilities
- Improving staff training to enhance disability sensitivity and awareness and to promote a better understanding of the diverse needs of students with different types of disabilities (i.e., traditional, emergent, and multiple disabilities)
- Adopting a less bureaucratic, more simple, and flexible disclosure procedure
- Implementing more specialized support services to address this challenge
- Ensuring a personalized follow-up for all SWD throughout their academic journey
- Establishing a long-term, coherent institutional policy for the next years
Thank you!