

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:

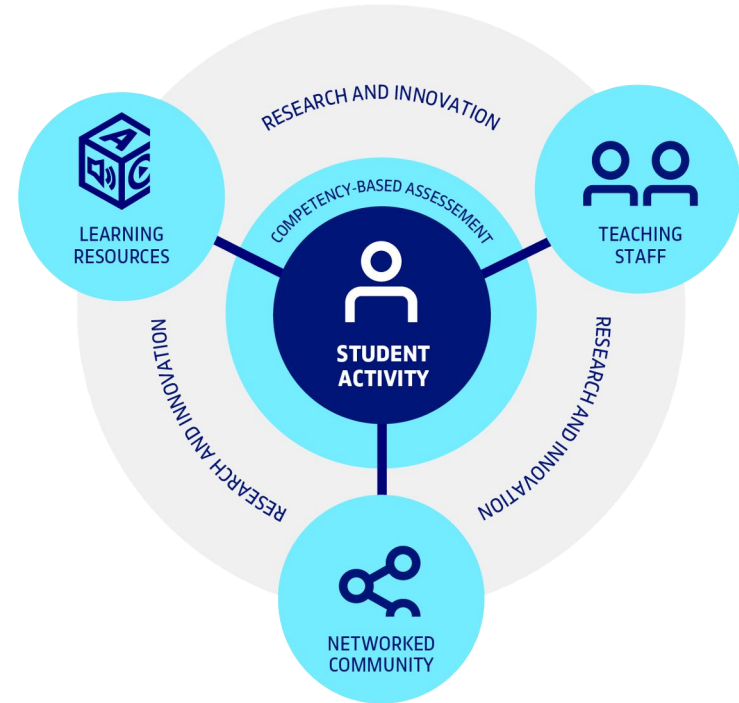
- Facilitating **universal access to higher education**
- Commitment to the **inclusion of students with disabilities (SWD)**

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)
- 2 Disability Action Plans (2013-2014 and 2015-2016)
- 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!



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