Why Students with Disabilities Choose Online Higher Education? A Case Study in the Open University of Catalonia

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Universitat Oberta de Catalunya
European Conference on Educational Research (ECER) 2021
September 6th-10th, 2021
Research problem

General topic

- Most non-traditional students might prefer online higher education (OHE) for convenience: flexibility, affordability, and geographical distance

Previous literature about students with disabilities (SWDs):

- SWDs might choose OHE to manage circumstances resulting from their condition
- OHE helps SWDs to conceal their profile

Why to investigate this topic?

- Increase of SWDs in online environments
- Lack of qualitative research
- Results may offer insights that could help to improve OHE for SWDs
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 non-traditional students

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. They represent the 46% of Catalan SWDs in the year 2019-2020, and make the UOC the 2nd university in Spain in terms of SWDs’ enrolment.
About the UOC: An educational model based on e-learning

- Fully online & asynchronous
- Student-centred
- Continuous assessment
- Intrinsically accessible campus
- Learning materials in several formats
- Support from teaching staff (instructors and academic advisors)
Methodology

- Approach: Qualitative
  - Aim: Exploring the reasons why SWDs choose OHE
  - Research Design: Exploratory case study
  - Data collection: In depth **semi-structured interviews** carried out at the end of 2020
  - Data analysis: **Thematic analysis**

- Why SWDs choose OHE to undertake their studies?
  - Experiences of **24 students** with physical (6), sensory (6), mental (6), and learning disabilities (6) interviewed through videoconferencing or email
    - Reasons for studying online rather than in on-campus universities
    - Reasons to choose the UOC’s educational model
    - Motivation for degree choice
Why SWDs prefer OHE over traditional universities?

● They all sought for an environment in which they could manage either some difficulties caused by their disability or their daily responsibilities with their studies.

● Most students also wanted not to disclose their condition.

● Participants with physical, sensory, and mental disabilities expected to remove physical and social barriers resulting from commuting and attending on-campus universities.

● Some students with severe mental and physical disabilities chose online studies to avoid negative thoughts about their condition.

● Students with mild disabilities chose online studies to combine their studies with their work.
Why SWDs choose the UOC to undertake their studies?

- Most of them got motivated by the UOC’s educational model as well as by the use of digital technology.
- Participants indicated that geographical location and cultural background also influence their choice.
- Some SWDs choose the UOC because of the official discount for people with disabilities.
- Some students took overall ratings, users opinions, and personal communities’ recommendations as reference before choosing the UOC.
- There were no significant differences among students considering their type of disability.
What motivates SWDs to choose their field of study?

- Almost all the students expressed that they were motivated for personal or professional interests to choose their degree.

- A few students got motivated by social or cultural reasons to choose their field of study.

- A few students with mental, learning or sensory disabilities were inspired by their experiences with the professionals who attended them or the context in which they work to choose their field of study.

- According to the participants’ experiences, having a disability does not influence their degree choice.

- No correlation between type of disability and choice of field of study was found.
Conclusions

- SWDs mainly seek **flexibility and accessibility** in OHE.
- The **type and severity of disability** influence the students’ decision towards OHE.
- SWDs follow their **personal interests** to choose a degree.
- Online education institutions should **take into consideration SWDs’ expectations and aspirations** to design courses and policies.
- Online universities should **increase academic, pedagogical, and psycho-emotional support** to promote SWDs’ success.
Reflections

- How does the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the motivation of SWDs into online learning?

- How we should be ready to support SWDs in online learning environments to allow them to achieve success?
Thank you!

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