



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

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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:

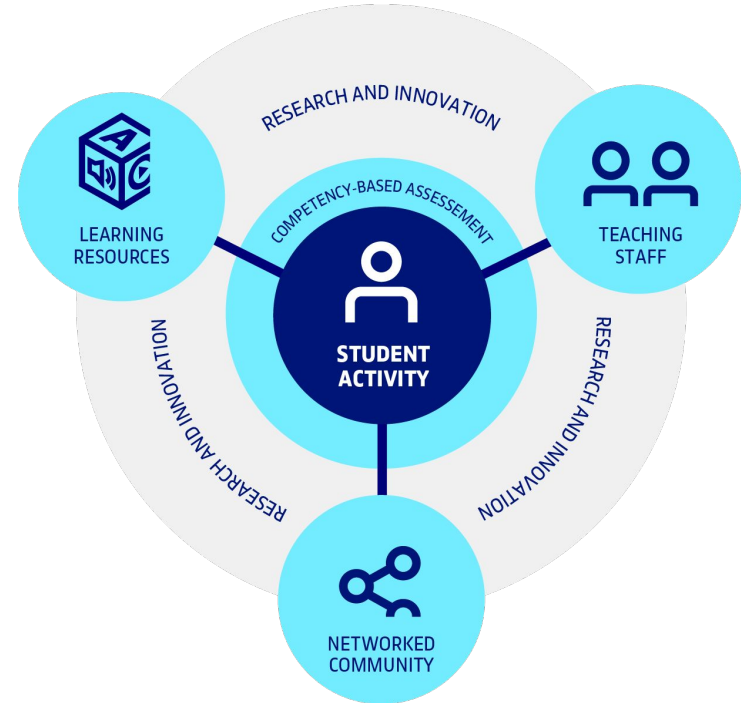
- Facilitating **universal access to higher education**
- Commitment to the **inclusion of non-traditional students**

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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