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

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### **Introduction**

The expansion of distance and online education in the last two decades has opened the possibility to universalise access to higher education around the world. Hence, a diverse range of non-traditional students have enrolled in online higher education (Hardy & Meyer-Griffith, 2012; Henry, 2018) to start new studies or to complete the studies they started previously in face-to-face universities (Ilgaz & Gulbahar, 2017). There is a wide array of reasons why non-traditional students might prefer distance or online education, including convenience, flexibility, affordability, and geographical distance (Ilgaz & Gulbahar, 2017; Kent, 2015; Richardson, 2012; Smith, 2014).

Students with disabilities are a relevant group among non-traditional students undertaking online studies. The academic literature suggests an increase of students with disabilities taking official online courses (Coy, 2014; Kent et al., 2018; Roberts et al., 2011). In this context, some studies have preliminarily explored some of the reasons why these students might prefer online higher education over traditional education. For instance, Kent (2015), Richardson (2012), and Verdinelli and Kutner (2016) have suggested that students with disabilities choose online education because of convenience in terms of managing the circumstances resulting from their disabilities and their impact on their academic activities. These students might also prefer online learning in order to avoid disclosing their condition to their teachers and peers (Kent, 2015).

However, most of the previous studies addressing this issue have adopted a quantitative approach. Hence, understanding the reasons that lead students with disabilities to choose fully online institutions to pursue their studies need to be further analysed from a qualitative perspective. Exploring the preferences of these students may help both practitioners and researchers to understand their behaviour once enrolled in Online Higher Education, particularly in terms of their persistence, sense of belonging, and academic success. This study aims at gaining more knowledge about this issue focusing on the voices of students with disabilities about the factors that led them to enrol in a fully online university to pursue their academic studies.

The study was carried out in the Open University of Catalonia (UOC), a fully online university in Spain. The UOC has adopted an innovative and interactive, fully online educational model in which the students learn in a flexible environment that allows them to follow their own pace and balance their studies with other responsibilities (Sangrà, 2002). According to Fundación

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Universia (2018), the UOC is the second Spanish university with the highest number of students with disabilities, just behind the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED).

Accordingly, in this paper we explore the reasons provided by students with disabilities for choosing online higher education, as well as the factors they consider most important to opt for the UOC's educational model. In this context, the participants explained their decision to study in a fully online university, the characteristics of the UOC's educational model they considered for undertaking their studies, as well as the motives that led them to choose the academic program in which they are enrolled.

## **Methodology**

The study used a qualitative approach based on a case study (Yin, 2009) through conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with undergraduate and graduate students with disabilities taking online studies in the 2020-2021 academic year. Once the UOC's Ethical Committee approved the research, an open invitation letter was sent by email to all students registered in the Office for Students with Disabilities.

The final sample of participants was selected among the students interested in being interviewed, taking into account their type of disability: physical, sensory, learning, and mental disabilities. A total of 24 students were recruited in order to explore their experiences about the decision of choosing online studies. All the interviews were carried out online between November and December 2020, using video conferencing or email interviews depending on their particular situation.

The research team transcribed and coded the interviews using Atlas.ti 9. The information was categorized and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2012). In this regard, we organised the entire content of the interviews into common themes so that to analyse inductively the entire participants' experiences, their points of view, and their personal preferences.

## **Findings**

Most students with disabilities choose online studies because of the problems caused by their disability. This is a strong reason in the case of students with severe mental, sensory or physical disabilities, for whom attending face-to-face classes is unfeasible. These students prefer fully online education for both its accessibility and flexibility. Thus, studying online allows them to schedule their academic activities according to their own pace and health status, as well as to access learning resources adapted to their personal situation. Though some participants started their online studies prior to acquiring their disability, they value such decision because it affected their involvement later, helping them to balance their full-time or inflexible jobs with their studies. Students with mild disabilities also chose online education to balance academic and work responsibilities.

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Most participants prefer the UOC because of pedagogical factors. Accordingly, they highlight some key reasons such as the innovative pedagogical practices promoted by the University, the continuous assessment model, the accessibility, the educational offerings, and the geographical distance. Before their enrolment, they looked for suggestions about the reputation of distance universities from different sources, both from their personal circle (i.e., their family, friends, and workmates) and public opinions available on the internet. Furthermore, students with disabilities associate their choice of study field to personal interests. Although some few participants chose their studies for extrinsic reasons (e.g., to improve their employment status), most of them were motivated for internal reasons (e.g., pleasure, dreams, challenges, goals, and learning).

The kind and severity of disability influence the students' decision of choosing online education because it gives them flexibility and improves accessibility. However, fully online universities should make a particular effort to incorporate these students' expectations and characteristics in course design and policies, improving the pedagogical and academic support that would help them achieve success.

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