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Proposals for the improvement of university classrooms: the perspective of students with disabilities

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Abstract

This paper examines the proposals for the improvement of university classrooms from the perspective of Spanish students with disabilities. Using the biographic-narrative methodology, data was collected and analysed applying a system of categories and codes. The following instruments were used: group and individual interviews, lifelines, self-reporting, photographs, a day in their lives and interviews with key people for the life of the students.

These are the most important characteristics of an ideal classroom for the participating students: physical accessibility for everyone, participative teaching methodologies and the use of the many technological resources, positive attitudes on behalf of faculty regarding disability and specific academic-training in disability and new technologies. The conclusions section includes a series of suggestions to design accessible university classrooms for everyone. The proposals for improving the university environment as provided by the students are precisely the main contribution of this paper beyond previous research, which focused exclusively on analyzing barriers and resources as identified by students with disabilities.

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1. Introduction

Currently, one of the great challenges for higher education is moving towards a university model based on the principles of inclusive education. It is important to emphasize that the reality of today's classrooms is very different to that which existed just a decade ago. Changes in technological platforms for the teaching – learning process, changes in the ratio of classrooms, teaching approaches more focused on students, changes in the type of students, among other aspects, explain the changes that have occurred. However, a common feature in today's university systems is that every time there is a greater diversity among students or, as Thomas (2016) states, participation in college is wider, due to the progressive incorporation of groups that traditionally were outside of higher education.

The fact that students with disabilities access Higher Education (HE) is an ever-growing reality (Liasidou, 2014; Seale, Geogerson, Mamas, & Swan, 2015). In the specific case of Spain, the number of disabled students enrolled in the course 2014/2015 reached almost 22,000 (Universia Foundation, 2014), compared, for example, to the 18,418 students in the academic year 2011/2012. The approval of declarations and regulations aiming at promoting inclusion over recent years has influenced this increase. For example, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), established the obligation to ensure that persons with disabilities have access - without discrimination and on equal terms to rest- to higher education, vocational training, adult education and learning throughout life. Moreover, the European Union is committed to inclusive education in the context of higher education. For this purpose, it proposes the creation of support schemes and university services that improve access and educational inclusion of non-traditional students, including students with disabilities (European Commission, 2010).

Accessing Higher Education is a legal right in Spain as stated in Royal Decree 1/2013, which regulates the rights of people with disabilities and their social inclusion. In the case of HE, the current Organic Law 4/2007 for Universities, specifically mentions the inclusion of people with disabilities and guarantees equal opportunity and non-discrimination.

Such legislation is particularly relevant to guarantee that students have the right to access HE. Nevertheless, having such laws is not enough; it is also appropriate to have practical mechanisms that guarantee that these students continue enrolled at the classroom. This fact is extremely important when the dropout rate is highest among these students (Moriña et al., 2015). When considering that a number of studies state that HE is a vehicle to improve the quality of life of all students (Wehman, 2006), then these aspects become even more relevant. Similarly, several studies indicate that studying at the university is a true opportunity for students with disabilities.

Moreover, the creation of specific services in universities to support the educational needs of this group, the incorporation of new technologies, or the implementation of inclusive educational practices are factors that also contribute to explaining above-mentioned statistics. In fact, a significant number of countries have implemented measures to make universities more accessible to people with disabilities, becoming progressively more committed to the processes of inclusion (Jacklin, Robinson, O'Meara, & Harris, 2007).

However, statements and regulations are insufficient to ensure the right of these students to quality education without discrimination and based on the principles of inclusive education. Recent work (Gibson, 2015; Quinn, 2013; Thomas, 2016) conclude that it is not enough to ensure access to diverse students, because according to investigation (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011; Quinn, 2013) students with disabilities are at increased risk of prematurely abandoning college compared to students without disabilities. Therefore, it is necessary to design policies and strategies to support that these students remain at college and complete their studies successfully.

On the other hand, we agree with the premise that the presence of students with disabilities contributes to building a better university (Cerrillo, Izuzquiza, & Egido, 2013, Riddell et al., 2005; Shaw, 2009). It has also been investigated that the changes introduced for disabled university students benefit the rest (Powney, 2002; Shaw, 2009; Warren 2002). That is to say, as recognized by Ferni and Henning (2006), that good teaching principles are relevant to all.

The inclusive education model helps to explain the need for a quality educational response to all students, increasing the practices that lead to inclusion and removing the barriers that generate exclusion, in a framework based on the principles of justice and equity (Echeita, Simon Lopez & Urbina, 2013).

In this sense, there are several authors like Doughty and Allan (2008), Fuller, Bradley, and Healey (2004) or Hardy and Woodcock (2015), calling for the need for learning at college to be inclusive, with university being

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