What if we could imagine the ideal faculty? Proposals for improvement by university students with disabilities

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HIGHLIGHTS

- The faculty must show a positive attitude toward disability and be trained in attending to the needs derived from disabilities.
- The faculty should promote inclusive practices using alternative methodologies to the standard lecture.
- It's necessary that the faculty use new technologies in the classrooms and be trained in new technologies.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This article presents the partial results of a broader research project entitled, "University Barriers and Aids Identified by Students with Disabilities", which is currently underway at a Spanish University. The general aim is to analyze the role of faculty in inclusive education of students with disabilities, and more specifically, proposals for improvement made by these students. A biographic-narrative methodology was used to collect data. The study concludes that faculty must show a positive attitude toward disability, promote inclusive practices using alternative methodologies, make curriculum adaptations, use new technologies and be trained in attending the needs derived from disabilities.

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1. Introduction

The right of all people to access to Higher Education (HE) dates back to 1948 (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Art. 26.1, UN, 1948). This convention was followed by other international agreements establishing the obligation to guarantee people with disabilities undiscriminated access to higher education. Noteworthy, among others, are the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities in 2006 and anti-discrimination acts in countries such as Australia (1992), the United States (1990) and the United Kingdom (1995, 2010).

In Spain, this right is also recognized by legislation, such as Legislative Royal Decree 1/2013 on the rights of people with disabilities and their social inclusion, and the Organic Law 4/2007 on universities explicitly mentions inclusion of people with disabilities, guaranteeing them equal opportunity and non-discrimination.

Several studies on access by these students to HE have concluded that this is an opportunity for people with disabilities as an experience in empowerment and a vehicle for improving their quality of life (Moswela & Mukhopadhyay, 2011; Shaw, 2009). However, people with disabilities have a difficult road to travel, often described as an "obstacle course", in which their time at the university is exacerbated by the barriers they have already had to face in other stages of their education, and usually culminating in complicated access to the labor market.

Nevertheless, universities are gradually starting to become more committed to inclusion of students with disabilities, creating, among other initiatives, offices serving students with disabilities, or making rules that establish and regulate their rights. In this sense,

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we agree with Jacklin, Robinson, O'Meara, and Harris (2007) and Tinklin, Riddell, and Wilson (2004) that the presence of students with disabilities is challenging how HE works. In fact, the presence of these students is a challenge for the whole university, not only in terms of achieving physical access to buildings, but also access in the much broader sense of curriculum, teaching, learning and evaluation.

Indeed, curricular changes made to benefit students with disabilities have been found to be positive not only for them but for the rest of the student body as well (Shaw, 2009). In this sense, as mentioned by Ferni and Henning (2006), good teaching principles are relevant for the whole student body.

Despite the progress made in disability matters, there is still a long road to cover, and significant barriers to access, retention and graduation still persist for many students, especially, but not only, for students with disabilities (Pliner & Johnson, 2004). A significant number of studies have found a series of obstacles (attitude, access to curriculum, architecture), which hinder the educational trajectory of university students with disabilities (e.g., Moswela & Mukhopadhyay, 2011; Redpath et al., 2013; Shevlin, Kenny, & Mcneela, 2004).

Many of these studies have come to the conclusion that the university must be inclusive and guarantee participation, in which the entire student body belongs and learns (Hardy & Woodcock, 2015). Indeed, the inclusive education model (Doughty & Allan, 2008; Mäkinen, 2013) and the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990) are now being recognized as fundamental to ensuring that the needs of all students are responded to adequately.

Studies like the one by Leyser, Greenberger, Sharoni, and Vogel (2011) have concluded that critical factors in the university classroom for students with disabilities to be successful include faculty training, positive attitudes and willingness to adapt the curriculum. However, as Corbett and Barton (1992) suggest, there may be resistance among faculty members to changing their teaching practices. Overcoming this and helping university staff to change the way they think and practice is perhaps the greatest challenge to any organization concerned about faculty training in inclusive education.

In other studies it was concluded that awareness training is very important for faculty to show a positive attitude in response to the educational needs of the whole student body. In fact, attitudinal barriers have been identified as one of the main obstacles to people with disabilities studying successfully (Moswela & Mukhopadhyay, 2011). This reality is reflected not only in this study, similar results have appeared in previous studies in other international contexts. For example, Borland and James (1999) mentioned barriers to access to curriculum that impede entering the teaching–learning space, such as not being able to participate in certain practice activities or methodologies which prevent a student with a sensory disability from following them.

Other studies have discussed rigid, non-inclusive curriculums (Hopkins, 2011). For example, students with disabilities found it hard to get the necessary curriculum adaptation (Fuller, Healey, Bradley, & Hall, 2004). They mentioned not being able to get notes in advance, and that it takes students with disabilities much longer to get the information that is available to other students.

Some studies describe barriers such as faculty not letting them record classes, not offering alternatives to video presentations, or not adapting exams (Borland & James, 1999; Moswela & Mukhopadhyay, 2011).

This resistance may be related to some professors'[1]

understanding that adaptations provide students with disabilities an advantage over the rest of their classmates, or that it is hard for them to give "extra" help to students with disabilities because of the pressure they are under and their heavy workload (Riddell & Weedon, 2014). Sometimes they feel that if they make adaptations in their teaching practice it would lower the curriculum level.

Some studies have suggested the need for faculty training in teaching–learning strategies for curriculum adaptation specific to the educational requirements of students with disabilities. However, it is also significant that many of the faculty barriers found have nothing to do with disability. Jacklin et al. (2007) mention barriers that could also be found by any student with no disability (for example, inappropriate teaching methods or excessively broad course content).

A line of research arising from the need for training which was identified in several of the studies mentioned above has to do with the design, development and evaluation of faculty training programs in matters of disability. For example, the Teachability Project (Teachability, 2002) provides a resource for revising teaching and learning to improve accessibility by students with disabilities. Another faculty training program in this subject is the ASD curriculum (Debram & Salzberg, 2005). In Spain, Guasch (2010) coordinated the design of training materials for alternative methodological approaches in response to the educational requirements of students with disabilities.

Zhang et al. (2010) suggested that in online education the rhythm could be set by the student himself and the professor could participate more actively in it. This study also suggested that improving personal beliefs of faculty could be essential to improving services for these students. In another study (Murray, Lombardi, & Wren, 2011) faculty participating in training were found to be more knowledgeable and sensitive to students with disabilities.

However, the studies reviewed did not only find barriers. There are also aids contributing to the student's inclusion. Among them is the generalized use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in university classrooms, favored as a way of including students with disabilities in the university system (Hadjikakou & Hartas, 2008; Pearson & Koppi, 2006; Seale, Geogerson, Mamas, & Swain, 2015). However, it would also have to be noted that students have expressed their frustration in accessing technology resources (Claiborne, Cornforth, Gibson, & Smith, 2010).

Another type of recognized aid is related to testing and evaluation, such as extra time on exams, use of computers during exams, or taking the exam in other places. Faculty members have also contributed to the inclusion of these students, teaching them, motivating them and accompanying them throughout their education should also be highlighted.

Finally, this article includes some suggestions which the students thought would make their professors' teaching and their own learning more inclusive. This is precisely the main contribution of this study, since previous research has concentrated exclusively on the analysis of faculty barriers and aids identified by the students, but not how persons with disabilities suggest the university environments they are in could be improved (Hadjikakou & Hartas, 2008; Hopkins, 2011; Moswela & Mukhopadhyay, 2011; Pearson & Koppi, 2006; Riddell & Weedon, 2014). In short, the main barriers found by these studies refer to negative attitudes of faculty toward disability, strict, non-inclusive curriculum, lack of faculty training in teaching and learning strategies, new technologies and matters related to disability. Concerning aids, they emphasized the use of information and communication technologies, faculty members who motivate and assist them in learning and adaptations in testing and evaluation.

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[1] For the purposes of this article, "professor" refers to any permanent faculty position.