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## The ideal university classroom: Stories by students with disabilities

Beatriz Morgado Camacho<sup>a</sup>, Rosario Lopez-Gavira<sup>b,\*</sup>, Anabel Moriña Díez<sup>c</sup><sup>a</sup> Department of Developmental and Educational Psychology, University of Seville, Spain<sup>b</sup> Department of Accounting University of Seville, Spain<sup>c</sup> Department of Teaching and Educational Organization, University of Seville, Spain

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## ABSTRACT

This article analyzes what Spanish students with disabilities would like their public university classroom to be like. A biographic-narrative methodology was used. These students made recommendations that contribute to creating their ideal university classroom: participatory teaching methodologies and the use of new technology resources, positive lecturer attitudes regarding disability and specific teacher-training in disability and technologies. The conclusions section includes a series of suggestions for design of accessible university classrooms for all. This is precisely the main contribution of this study, as previous research has focused exclusively on analyzing barriers as identified by students with disabilities rather than proposals suggested by these students for improving the university environment.

## 1. Introduction

The fact that students with disabilities access higher education is an ever-growing reality. Research from a variety of countries indicates that the number of such students has increased over the past twenty years (Riddell & Weedon, 2014a; Seale, Geogerson, Mamas, & Swain, 2015). In the specific case of Spain, 20,793 students with disabilities were registered at universities in the 2016/2017 academic year, accounting for 1.4% of total university students (Universia Foundation, 2017). Access to higher education, as in other countries, 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. With respect to higher education, the current Organic Law 4/2007 on 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 access to higher education. Nevertheless, the legal right to access to higher education is not enough, there must also be practical mechanisms, such as support groups, tutorial action or mentors for students with disabilities that facilitate their permanence in the university and ensure that these students successfully complete their degrees (Thomas, 2016). This is extremely important, as the dropout rate is much higher among these students than students without disabilities or those who do graduate but take longer to complete their degree programs (Moriña, 2017; Gibson, 2015; Lombardi et al., 2016). For example, one of the problems in the Spanish university is facing is the high dropout rate of students with disabilities in their first year, which recently has been around 30% as opposed to an average of 19% for the rest of students (Spanish Ministry of Education, Culture & Sport, 2014). Considering that a number of studies have found that higher education is a vehicle for improving the quality of life of all students (Fuller, Healey, Bradley, & Hall, 2004; Shaw, 2009), all of this then becomes even more relevant.

However, research shows that the university environment often fails to facilitate these inclusion processes; instead, additional barriers appear which students with disabilities must face (Beauchamp-Pryor, 2012; Buzick & Laitusis, 2010; Riddell & Weedon,

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [rlopezgavira@us.es](mailto:rlopezgavira@us.es) (R. Lopez-Gavira).

2014b; Seale, 2017). Students feel that they sometimes have to work harder than their peers, because they must cope with both a disability and their studies (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012). Or as Moriña, (2017) concludes, these students have to work twice as hard to achieve half as much as their fellow students. This is a reality experienced not only by Spanish students with disabilities. In other countries and other under-represented groups in higher education, such as students pertaining to minority ethnic groups, the elderly or students from a low socio-economic origin have the same problems (Adnett, 2016; Weedon & Riddell, 2016).

These university students face a number of hurdles, including institutional barriers, lack of information and attention towards them, as well as excessive and slow bureaucracy. Other barriers appear in the actual university classroom. There are ergonomic barriers (acoustics, furniture, etc.). However, there are also other hindrances that refer to the lecturer,<sup>1</sup> such as the teaching methodology, the lecturer's attitude towards disability, adaptation of the curriculum or the need for training in the field of disability awareness. Particularly, this article studies classroom related barriers. Students with disabilities offer a number of recommendations to address such barriers to build an all-inclusive classroom.

Concerning classroom design, numerous studies point out accessibility issues and physical barriers in higher education; such hindrances directly affect students with disabilities (Fuller et al., 2004). From the practical point of view, there are still policies and actions that are typically found in the rehabilitating model, which proposes that people with disabilities adapt to society. Even today, there are extensive distances between one classroom and another, a lack of elevators or ramps, emergency exits that are locked, fixed seats in the class, and so on. These spaces are designed from a standardized perspective rather than applying a design taking into consideration the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990). Designing spaces from such a model implies making a stand for the universal design (Powell, 2013; Watchorn et al., 2013). This approach recognizes people's manifold needs while seeking to design products and environments to be used by the majority without requiring adaptations for a minority.

On the topic of lecturer-related barriers, these could vary to include methodologies, limited use of new technologies, negative attitudes towards disabilities or a lack of training in the field of disability. Along these lines, a number of studies have found that students with disability generally run into problems when adapting and coping with the transition from high school to university. All of this stems from a lack of information about the course material, lecturer attitudes toward these students and an evaluation system that fails to adapt to their needs. In this latter case, on occasion, these students prefer to "conceal" their disability, as they fear being "labeled" (Fuller et al., 2004; Goode 2007; Vickerman & Blundell 2010). In this regard, many students decided not to reveal their disability in an attempt to be treated "normally" (Matthews 2009; Riddell et al., 2005). In other cases, they failed to reveal the disability because it would have placed them at a disadvantage, or they were fearful of being stigmatised, as in the case of mental illness (Riddell et al., 2005). Sometimes, they simply did not consider themselves as having any special need or disability (Hadjikakou & Hartas 2008). In general, these students, whether their disability was invisible or not, did not want to be identified with it. As some studies have explained, the fact that they require some type of help does not mean they do not want to be treated like any other student.

Although we have not found any studies profiling the inclusive university classroom in the literature, as this subject has been little investigated, there are works, however, in which the voices of students with disabilities describe their difficulties and the aids they usually find during their university trajectory. From this perspective several studies have concluded that ideally, the classroom methodology should be participatory and flexible while at the same time taking into consideration a universal design for learning (Burgstahler, 2012; Liasidou, 2014). These studies also show the importance of close relationships between lecturers and students.

Indeed, it is also important to note that the barriers faced by some students with disabilities (including lack of lecturer-student interactions, obsolete teaching methods and academic concerns about the content and accessibility of subject material) differed very little from those of their non-disabled peers (Fuller et al., 2004; Jacklin et al., 2007). This situation leads the authors of this work to ponder the need to design inclusive course curriculums (Gorard, Smith, May, Thomas, Adnett, & Slack, 2006) that benefit the entire student body. Therefore, and as proposed by the inclusive educational model (Booth & Ainscow, 2002), not only would it be advisable to contemplate the presence of students with disabilities at the university, but to also count on their active participation and promote quality learning for them. Accordingly, inclusive education is quality education for all (Hardy & Woodcock, 2015; Lawrence-Brown & Sapon-Shevin, 2013).

The inclusive education model in higher education is a challenge for institutions as it promotes educational environments in which all students can participate and be treated as valued members. As Ainscow (2015) states, the progress towards more inclusive universities requires a significant change in mindset. This implies rejecting the explanations of dropout and lack of success, which focus exclusively on the characteristics of a particular student. On the contrary, it requires attention to the analysis of the obstacles to participation and learning which students are confronted with in educational organizations.

In the light of the difficulties and methodological barriers that students with disabilities face, a variety of studies have found that information and communication technologies could be elements that favor their inclusion into the university system. More specifically, it has been stated that learning with new technologies overcomes physical, transitory and cognitive barriers. Some authors such as Hockings, Brett, and Terentjevs (2012), Pearson (2001) or Pearson and Koppi (2006), established that introducing e-learning in the classroom was beneficial for students with disabilities.

In recent years, distance learning has been in great demand (Roberts, Crittenden, & Crittenden, 2011). Indeed, it is generally accepted that the use of information technologies could eliminate barriers by promoting the inclusive education of university students (Seale et al., 2015). More specifically, students with disabilities could find themselves at a disadvantage when they fail to have the adequate technologies (Davies, 2007; Draffan, 2009); examples of such disadvantages include university web sites with accessibility

<sup>1</sup> The word lecturer is used in this article in general, without distinction of the particular position occupied in the university.

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