



**IFCU**

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# INCLUSIVE HIGHER EDUCATION: Participation of Disabled Persons in Universities

## BACKGROUND

Access for disabled persons to higher education is critical as it reflects the significant cultural transformations that have taken place over recent years and highlights the importance of the right to education in all areas of society. In fact, it could be argued that it is not possible to achieve full inclusion, or at least advance toward meeting this goal, without an increasingly inclusive approach to education. For this reason, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, universities need to rise to the challenge of creating an academic space that embraces inclusive higher education (CERMI, 2015).

This social challenge requires universities to promote social policies of equality, fostering equal opportunities, non-discrimination and universal accessibility, guaranteeing the fundamental right to education and helping to create an inclusive learning system at all educational levels.

## UNIVERSITY ACCESS PROBLEMS FOR DISABLED PERSONS

Persons with disabilities have lower access to university studies than the general population. Various reports highlight that less than 10% of students with disabilities are admitted onto higher education courses. This means 1 out of every 10 persons with disabilities at university age are admitted, amounting to 1% of the student body. This figure is slightly higher than the one recorded in previous years but clearly insufficient from the point of view of level of participation and representation in higher education or from the perspective of the professional importance of university graduates in structures of social transformation and change (Martínez-Rico et al., 2018).

In this socio-educational context, there are still many barriers to achieving Full Inclusion in Higher Education (CERMI, 2015; UNICEF, 2013; Universia, 2016):

- The rights of persons with disabilities are a matter of citizenship and not of solidarity.
- Widening access for persons with disabilities to higher education is one of the most significant political, economic, social and cultural milestones of recent decades.
- Social inequality has been reduced over recent years but deficiencies in access to education at different educational levels and stages are still pronounced, especially in higher education
- The aim for the future is to widen access to face-to-face courses, promoting participation and representation in universities, making full inclusion of students a reality.
- This major challenge means making disability a priority in the institutional policy of universities, considering it as a transverse and interdisciplinary axis.

### a) School failure/school dropout:

The highest dropout rates for disabled persons occur in the transition from compulsory to non-compulsory education.

### b) Presence of students with disabilities at universities:

Most disabled students in higher education enrol for online courses or distance learning courses, accounting for over a third of students enrolled.

### c) Training and employment:

According to statistics across the different countries, the employment rate of persons with disabilities is considerably lower than that of the general public. As regards the employment rate, the data show a 20% increase for persons with disabilities who have a university degree (Martínez-Rico et al., 2018).

### d) Level and type of disability:

In distance learning institutions there is a significantly higher presence of students with mental disorders, visual and physical impairments than universities offering face-to-face courses. In the latter, the disabilities that students usually have

are physical, followed by organic, visual and hearing impairments while intellectual disabilities, learning disorders and general development disorders are much less prevalent (Universia, 2016).

#### **e) Hidden disability:**

Disability that has not been officially disclosed or partially assessed can be attributed to lack of demand for the support service, and of identification of certain types of disability associated with social attitudes of rejection, marginalisation and even stigmatisation.



## **KEY FIGURES AND ADVANCES**

#### **a) Presence of service professionals and disabled academic staff**

The number of persons with disabilities on the academic staff is very low, generally below 2%; while the percentage for administrative and service staff is only slightly higher. Besides, the participation level of persons with disabilities in the governing bodies of universities is inadequate.

#### **b) More support from academic staff**

Greater coordination and dissemination of university policies is needed as one out of three students state that teachers are not aware of their educational support needs, or the limitations deriving from their disability situation (Universia Foundation, 2016).

#### **c) Specific support services and programmes at universities**

The programmes included in most support services are mainly targeted at: a) information, educational assessment, guidance and careers advice; b) awareness and dissemination; c) curricular adaptation; d) monitoring and tutoring on academic courses; e) employability and socio-labour inclusion

of graduates; and f) national and international mobility, albeit with less emphasis on the latter.

#### **d) Accessibility efforts**

As far as the concept of Design for All or Universal Design is concerned, both physical and virtual and technological accessibility needs to improve at universities in general.

#### **e) Promoting access, grants and study bursaries**

Most countries across Europe promote university access, by reserving a quota of places for students with disabilities. In these countries, the legislative framework governs the basic regulations of access and admission procedures to tertiary education. Apart from the exemption from matriculation costs, grants and study bursaries help guarantee the success of disabled students. This area needs to be improved as less than half of universities offer study bursaries or allowances, especially for transport and the purchase of support products (Martínez-Rico et al., 2018).

#### **f) Disability as part of the curriculum**

The aim is to link professional deontological practice of all university degrees with more inclusive working environments; mindful of the significant contribution each academic discipline can make to achieving this goal, and the contribution each graduate can make in the future to building a more inclusive society.

This cross-curricular and interdisciplinary approach promotes the acquisition, development and assessment of disability in relation to disability and full inclusion.

#### **g) Research and development**

One of the main contributions universities make is through Research, Development and Innovation (R&D&I). In recent decades, social lines of research and transfer have received a huge boost. The near future of universities, as arenas for knowledge generation and transfer, may revolve around three key points. First, developing network strategies and the promotion of structures of transformation and social change. Second, creating spaces of exchange and reciprocity with the third sector. And finally, giving greater visibility to persons with disabilities that have been and still are marginalised, segregated, hidden and excluded (European Commission, 2010; OMS, 2011; UNICEF, 2013).



## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



In the framework of university training, regulations focus on formalising adaptations to admission tests, adjusted to the characteristics of the future student's disability, as well as on implementing awareness campaigns, ongoing information for academic staff and support from educational guidance services. (CERMI, 2015).

Many of the barriers described underscore the fact that even though social inequality has been reduced over recent years, deficiencies in access to education at different educational levels and stages are still marked, especially in higher education. **This means lower presence of disabled persons in spaces of social policy and representation, which decreases the chances of being able to live an independent life or of making an effective transition to the labour market.**

Tertiary education can help create social benchmarks and serve as an example of an inclusive community for other institutions. Students often state that universities represent distant, unattainable institutions for them. Notwithstanding, they associate higher education with freedom and independence, as higher qualifications bring greater chances of living an independent life.

**This analytical vision of the barriers, together with the milestones reached in higher education, permits us to assert that universities should be inclusive, integrating and accessible spaces for all persons with disabilities. In other words, universities should serve as social, cultural and educational reference centres.** This change in paradigm therefore translates into a far-reaching change in the intervention model, in which segregationist attitudes and propositions are replaced by a more inclusive and community-based view of disability. For this reason, as institutions committed to the common good, social transformation and human development, university research lines must promote a different concept of disability and social reality.

This major challenge means making disability a priority in the institutional policy of universities, considering it as a transverse and interdisciplinary axis. In this respect, disability policy needs to be adopted by the governing bodies of universities and provided for in their *Statutes* in order to give greater visibility to educational inclusion (Martínez-Rico et al., 2018).

The final impact of the university stage on labour market integration, unlocking knowledge and its potential impact on other organizations, makes universities an arena where such premises should be a priority and a challenge of critical importance.

### Resources

- Martínez-Rico, G., Tena, J, Cañadas, M. Pérez-Campos, C. & Garcia-Grau, P. (2018). Inclusive Higher Education: A Guide to Designing a Support Plan on Disability and Inclusion in Universities, España/Francia: FIUC/Brief Ediciones.
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