

**Disability
& Society**
THE LEADING JOURNAL IN DISABILITY STUDIES

Disability & Society

ISSN: 0968-7599 (Print) 1360-0508 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cdso20>

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To cite this article: Anabel Moriña, Rosario López-Gavira & Beatriz Morgado (2017) How do Spanish disability support offices contribute to inclusive education in the university?, *Disability & Society*, 32:10, 1608-1626, DOI: [10.1080/09687599.2017.1361812](https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2017.1361812)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2017.1361812>



Published online: 29 Aug 2017.



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How do Spanish disability support offices contribute to inclusive education in the university?

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the functioning of disability support offices and their contribution to inclusive education in seven Spanish universities from the perspective of staff. Using a qualitative methodology, interviews with office staff were conducted, and data were analyzed through an inductive coding system. The results are organized around five themes: characteristics of disability support offices, staff training, functions performed by different services, barriers and opportunities identified by office staff, and proposals to improve attention given to disabled students. Information gathered leads to the conclusion that the work carried out in disability support offices must receive support from universities, as these offices are a key element for the access and retention of students with disabilities in the university and for the successful completion of their studies.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 3 November 2016
Accepted 27 July 2017

KEYWORDS

Higher education; disability support offices; inclusive education; barriers; aids

Points of interest

- Disability support offices in universities contribute to inclusive education in higher education.
- The research found that disability support offices may work with a very small number of students.
- Some students are not known to disability support offices because they prefer not to disclose their disabilities.
- The research concluded that vocational guidance is a key factor leading to access to the university.
- Disability support office staff considered they are not sufficiently trained, so more actions are needed in this direction.

Introduction

The European Union is committed to inclusive education within the framework of higher education. For this purpose, it proposes the creation of university support plans and services to improve the access and educational inclusion of non-traditional students, among whom are students with disabilities (European Commission 2010).

As in other countries (Tinklin, Riddell, and Wilson 2004), Spanish university regulations acknowledge that universities should provide appropriate support and counseling services for students with disabilities (Royal Decree 1393/2007). As a result of this legislation, most Spanish universities currently have a disability support office. The existence of these offices is especially necessary because in Spain, as in other countries (Korbel et al. 2011; Seale et al. 2015), the number of students with disabilities has recently increased. In fact, in 2011 there were 18,418 students with some type of disability but in 2015 there were 21,577 students with disabilities enrolled in Spanish universities.

Another aspect to consider is that some research suggests students with disabilities have a greater risk of prematurely dropping out of university studies in comparison to students without disabilities (Mamiseishvili and Koch 2011; Quinn 2013). This shows that guaranteeing access to the university is not sufficient; it is also necessary to design policies and strategies that encourage students to remain in the university and successfully finish their studies (Thomas 2016). This is particularly important when taking into account that higher education offers opportunities for social and occupational inclusion (Johnson and Nord 2011). Accordingly, students with disabilities who have participated in various investigations have argued that attending university should be compulsory for people with disabilities, as it is considered a way to improve their quality of life and occupational insertion (Moriña 2017; Moswela and Mukhopadhyay 2011). However, obviously, not all students with disabilities can or wish to attend university. Nevertheless, mechanisms should be foreseen to ensure the best opportunities for people with disabilities are offered, including university or non-university training, depending on their possibilities and preferences.

In the same vein and according to Tinklin, Riddell, and Wilson (2004), students with disabilities represent a challenge for the university, not only in terms of physical access to the buildings, but also with regard to a much broader access to the curriculum, teaching, and assessment systems. As Shaw (2009) noted, changes undertaken for the inclusion of university students with disabilities are beneficial for all of the students.

The reality, however, is that students with disabilities must overcome an obstacle course during their university trajectory where institutions do not adopt sufficient strategies to eliminate the barriers they face (Gibson 2012, 2015). Moving toward the principles of inclusive education is still a challenge for the higher education sector. In this context, we argue, universities should adopt Oliver's (1990) social

model of disability. This model emphasizes the need for institutions to be transformed to remove barriers so that students with disabilities can participate in the same conditions as the rest of the students. It is argued that the practices, attitudes, and policies of the social context generate the barriers and/or opportunities that hinder or favor access and participation in the different areas (Oliver 1990). According to this model, universities should avoid the use of medical labels to identify the learning needs of students with disabilities, and make efforts to establish the model as part of a daily practice, with inclusive teaching strategies (Matthews 2009).

Research on the topic of higher education and students with disabilities reveals both positive opportunities and negative barriers in the students' university trajectories (Mullins and Preyde 2013). With regard to the removal of disabling barriers, possibly the most important are attitudinal issues of faculty and staff. Research shows that reasons for dropping out of higher education are often unrelated to academic ability but instead are associated with pressures concerning support to access and accommodation and faculty attitudes (Fuller et al. 2004). In addition, other types of barriers are identified by students with disabilities, such as architectural barriers, access to information, rules that are not applied, the process of disclosure (students with disabilities often prefer to be treated like non-disabled students and will sometimes therefore conceal their disability), or methodologies that do not favor inclusion (Mullins and Preyde 2013; Strnadová, Hájková, and Květoňová 2015).

In the specific case of disclosure of impairment upon reaching the university, research has shown many students want to go unnoticed, especially students whose disabilities are invisible (Matthews 2009). They consider the stage of entering university as an opportunity to reinvent themselves and to refresh an identity that may have been damaged during other educational stages (Prowse 2009). Stigmatization (Goffman 1963) that disabled students may have experienced at other moments of their lives may lead to their preferring their disability to be undisclosed so they can enjoy a college experience as 'normalized' as possible and in similar conditions to their classmates. On another hand, many of the barriers identified by students with disabilities are also shared by the rest of the students (Adams and Holland 2006; Madriaga et al. 2010). Nevertheless, for people with disabilities, these issues may be more complex and may need time to resolve.

With regard to the major requirements for assistance, the support services of the university, modifications of syllabus (additional study time and alternative formats for examinations, learning strategies), and family support or peer support have been identified as noteworthy (Lombardi, Murray, and Gerdes 2011; Strnadová, Hájková, and Květoňová 2015). Individual faculties within the institution are key to the success of disabled students in university life; the degree of knowledge of disability, attitudes held, and the range of strategies used to provide academic accommodations within the faculty are key determinants of inclusion.

Most studies carried out to date on disability and university concentrate on analysis of the opinion of the students with disabilities, very seldom considering the perspective of other university agents. There are few studies from the perspective of the staff of the university support services. Nevertheless, there is some evidence in the international literature, such as the works by Fossey et al. (2017), Koca-Atabey (2017), Riddell, Tinklin, and Wilson (2005) and Thomas et al. (2002) which all conclude that the existence of support services in academic institutions is essential for the success of students with disabilities. In general, although mostly these services require improvement, they are recognized as facilitators of educational inclusion (López Gavira and Moriña 2015).

In studies carried out in Spain (for example, Cabeza et al. 2014; Díez et al. 2011; Ferreira, Vieira, and Vidal 2014; Sánchez 2009), considerable heterogeneity of disability support offices has been highlighted. Such offices differ in name, the organizational structure in which they are located, the number and training of the service staff, the programs and services offered, or the specific legislation developed by each university. All of these differences have an impact on the quality and type of attention given to students with disabilities.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the functioning of the disability support offices in seven Spanish universities and to determine how these offices can contribute to inclusive education in higher education.

Method

This article is based on a research project financed by the Regional Government of Andalusia (P11-SEJ-7255, 2013–2016). The goal of our study was to explore elements of policy and practice that could hinder or contribute to inclusive education in the university from the viewpoint of staff from the disability support services.

Specifically, this article focuses on analyzing how the disability support offices function and contribute to the inclusion in the university of students with disabilities. Five research questions guided this work:

- What are the defining characteristics of disability support services in the Spanish universities studied?
- What training profile do staff have?
- What functions and actions are carried out by the disability support services?
- What barriers and aids are identified by office staff?
- How could the actions carried out by the disability support services improve?

To collect a sample of respondents we contacted the disability support services of nine public universities in the southern area of Spain (Autonomous Andalusian Community). However, only the services of seven of these universities agreed to participate. In 2015, these universities had 2170 students with disabilities, out of the total 21,577 disabled students in Spain. In contrast to other international universities, Spanish policy does not generally define specific learning challenges,

like dyslexia, as 'disabilities.' Few Spanish universities have an action and support protocol for these students.

To identify each university and preserve confidentiality of information, we assigned a number to each university (i.e. University 1). Eight experienced professionals participated in this study (each service had one support provider, except for University 5 which had two). Regarding the professional profile, in general, the staff had an average of 10 years' experience in the services. Most of them had no other professional experience other than that acquired through their work in disability support offices.

The study used qualitative methodology. To collect data, we analyzed the websites of the various participating services and conducted semi-structured interviews about different issues: actions carried out by the service (targeting students with disabilities and the university community in general); other university services for students with disabilities; people assisted (number and characteristics); procedures that the student should fulfill to apply for assistance from the service; main barriers the office encountered to assist students with disabilities; most significant aids identified; and proposals to improve the service.

Comparative data analysis of all information was done using a system of categories and codes, following the proposal of Miles and Huberman (1994). We used the MaxQDA10 computer program to analyze the data.

All participants gave their informed consent to participate in the study. We guaranteed their anonymity and the confidentiality of all data collected. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time, and their data would then be deleted and would not be included in the analysis.

Results

The results of this work are organized around five themes: characteristics of the disability support services, training of the disability support offices' staff, functions carried out by the different offices, barriers and aids identified by the staff of these offices, and proposals to improve the disability support services of the universities.

Characteristics of university disability support offices

Most of the disability support services were created between 2004 and 2008, with the exception of University 5 which has been working with disabled students since 1992. In general, there is only one experienced professional in the analyzed services, but the participants informed us that other coworkers from similar services (administration staff, scholarship holders, students in practices) helped them, although they were not directly employed by the support office.

The support office name differed in each university. In some universities it is called 'Unit of attention to ...,' in others 'Support service for ...,' and in one of them 'Support Office for People with Disabilities.' Likewise, the office was not

always linked to the same area of university management. In some universities, it was ascribed to the Students' Vice Rector, in others to the Rector of Culture and Commitment or Social Responsibility, and in one institution (University 2) to the Support Service of the University Community.

With regard to the rules that govern these services, the framework of the participant universities was the European and State legislation on disability, as well as the Organic Law of Universities of the Government of Spain (Royal Decree 1393/2007). However, each university had developed its own set of specific rules to attend to students with disabilities. Although the services were generally comparable, each university used its own resources and protocols to run its programs and provide its services.

In relation to the service users, the offices target the entire university community but mainly attended to students with disabilities. Regarding the initial procedure to contact the students, all of the offices carried out an informative campaign to disseminate their services by means of email, websites, or telephone. Subsequently, interested users came to the service to express their needs, their resources, and the actions they required.

However, in accordance with rules on personal data protection, the services did not inform the faculty members that students with disabilities would be attending their classes. The students themselves were advised they could contact each professor individually to explain their situation if they considered it appropriate.

The number of students that each office could assist varied as a function of size of the university, ranging from 80 to 600 students. However, very few students with disabilities came to the services. For example, in University 3, with a population of students with disabilities exceeding 500, only about 50 students requested aid annually.

Lastly, the different offices attended to students with all types of disabilities. However, in three universities they highlighted the increased inflow to the offices of students with mental health issues due to their increased presence in the university. The participants in the study thought that it is more difficult to meet these students' needs than those of other users:

Students with academic needs related to mental disability require more follow-up because they need more orientation ... We meet with them frequently to see how their studies are going, how they are organizing their work and, most importantly, their inclusion in the classroom. (University 2)

Training of the disability support offices' staff

The interviewed staff had received training related to education and attention to diversity. Specifically, most of the staff of these services were licensed in psychology, pedagogy, or social work. They had received complementary training through diverse master's degrees, courses, and conferences and they conducted research on disability:

Since I began my work in this unit, I've been constantly upcycling, I try to participate in every congress, conference, or seminar held on attention to disability, I go as a listener or else I present some paper in this area. (University 2)

I am a psychologist, expert in early attention ... both my thesis and my work prior to the thesis were related to the architectural barriers of University 3. I have received different training courses about sensitivity and university and I am performing several investigations about this. (University 3)

The participants indicated that continuous training was essential to appropriately meet the needs of students with disability, as well as to offer adequate advice to faculty members:

The upcycling continuum is absolutely essential because the profile of students with disability entering University 2 is very different from that of many years ago, which was more of a visual and auditory level, and now there is more of a mental level and hence, the importance of this continuous training. (University 2)

Participants informed us about a network of support services in Andalusia that helps to coordinate the diverse staff from Andalusian universities, and that they are trying to work in the same direction:

In Andalusia, we have a work group [offering us] physical and virtual contacts and we have more or less unified the service programs, which is important for direct work. (University 7)

The support offices staff also mentioned a network in Spain, promoted by the 'Real Patronato de Discapacidad' (Royal Board on Disability), which organizes annual meetings to exchange experiences and propose actions to improve the different services. In addition, the Universia Foundation (a private non-profit organization that promotes higher inclusive education and access to qualified employment for people with disabilities in Spain) has a cooperative university network in Spanish and Portuguese language (made up of 1401 institutions of higher education from 23 Iberian-American countries). These initiatives offer considerable support both to the disability support offices and to the students themselves.

Functions and actions performed by disability support services

The functions performed by each service were varied and orientated both toward students with disabilities and toward the rest of the university community. The following outlines the most relevant functions:

- facilitation of access to the university in the first year;
- management of necessary resources for students' inclusion in the university and follow-up of the accomplishment of their studies;
- offering information about the resources offered by the university;
- issuing reports to guide faculty staff about the necessary curricular accommodations;

- generally attending to issues raised by students, faculty staff, and administration staff; and
- supporting occupational inclusion.

After the professionals determine the students' needs, they deal with the necessary modifications to promote their inclusion and to offer certain resources to achieve this goal: material resources – laptops, self-copying notebooks, specific software programs – and human resources – collaborating students or sign language interpreters. One of the participant universities (University 4) had a specific mobility program for students with disabilities and students from foreign universities.

Besides these actions for students with disabilities, the disability support services also conducted other actions targeting the educational community. Specifically, they offered orientation to the faculty and administration staff about the modifications and resources they should provide to these students. Accordingly, most of the universities offered awareness and training programs targeting the faculty and administration staff.

Two of the universities had created the role of the 'supporting academic tutor.' This was a volunteer faculty member who advised students with disabilities in the different faculties. In other universities, support for students lay exclusively with the office:

In every faculty, there are faculty-tutors, who volunteer to tutor students with disabilities. The information is sent to them and they are responsible for distributing it to the other faculty members. (University 5)

Lastly, except for University 7, these offices also coordinated other university services that offered psychological attention and orientation, scholarships, and training for employment.

Barriers and aids identified in the disability support services

Focusing firstly on barriers, it should be noted that the participating universities could not attend to all of the students with disabilities, because not everyone eligible to be included in this group made their disability known or came to the service:

The main barrier, I think, is that many students do not want to come to the service. For example, there may be 500-some disabled students enrolled, but not all of them come, I attend to an average of 50 or 60 per course. (University 3)

Another obstacle was related to the need for information and guidance. Some students thought that they did not receive enough information about enrolment formalities and other aspects of the university, and they also requested more orientation (especially concerning which university studies to choose):

We apply surveys and one of the most demanded topics are the items referring to information, not only university formalities, but orientation about which career to choose. Not in the sense of telling them 'don't study this,' but guiding them so they know that 'if

you study this, you'll find this problem and if you study that, you'll find this other problem.'The students are completely unaware of this because nobody does this. (University 4)

In three universities, the greatest limitation to inclusion was economic: on the one hand, because it was necessary to remove architectural barriers to facilitate inclusion and, for this purpose, an economic investment was required. On the other hand, economic barriers were seen where more staff were required in the offices to expedite some of the necessary formalities to meet the needs of disabled students.

Lastly, with regard to barriers, only one university reported that the service found no barriers and that they were able to resolve any problems that might arise day by day:

They get to know us more and more because there are increasingly more students, and when they see how we work – that we are working for equal opportunities – there are no barriers as such, we think that we resolve them day by day. (University 2)

In general, concerning support, almost all of the services received a financial subsidy from the Regional Government of Andalusia. With regard to technical aid, they had some technological resources, with the collaboration of the ONCE (National Organization of Blind Spaniards, whose mission is to improve the quality of life for the blind and visually disabled in Spain) and a grant of support products offered by the Universia Foundation. With regard to their own resources, the offices had developed a system of involving collaborating students in support work, developed the self-copying book, and engaged a sign language interpreter. In addition, the advice given to academic staff on how to make curricular modifications was identified as a facilitator of inclusion. Some aids only existed in one of the universities, such as a personal assistant for students. In general, in all of the universities, the staff who took part in the research considered the demands of disabled students to be resolved successfully.

Proposals to improve disability support services

A first proposal for improvement involved greater coordination among universities. University 3 proposed the appropriateness of this coordination so that if a student transferred from one university to a different one there should not be any noticeable differences between the two universities:

Greater coordination among universities is required. At the national level, each university operates differently. Each university has different resources, we should uniform this a little because, at some universities, students receive more, less, or different resources. (University 3)

This need for coordination was also proposed to the university itself, in the sense that the different services of each university should coordinate with each other and know how to meet the needs of students with disability.

Another recommendation was related to bringing the university nearer to pre-university education so that more students with disabilities would have access,

as many of them, either due to lack of knowledge or to the belief that they were excluded from the university, did not even try to gain access.

Vocational guidance should also be provided upon access to help disabled students to choose their university studies in accordance with their interests and competences. This would prevent continuous career changes or premature drop-out from university studies:

I believe that vocational guidance [is necessary] because, at these ages (18 years old), some students know what they want to study but most of them are not so sure. I believe that this could be taken care of when they enter the university because students with specific disabilities will encounter problems about which they should be warned. I don't mean to limit their choice or tell them 'do not study this,' but they should know what this is like. I think that this is important work that is lacking in all the universities. (University 4)

Another suggestion to improve the support given by university disability offices was to inform the faculty members that they will have students with disabilities in their classes and alert them in advance to the general and specific needs of these students. This information-sharing process was typically not fast or clear enough and when a faculty was finally informed about a disabled student taking one of its courses a large part of the academic year had already gone by:

Reaching faculty members sooner is a proposal for improvement. The faculty must be informed that a student with a certain need will be coming to the classroom because he or she has to teach the course and must often adapt a lot of material to the student. But we begin to work when the student arrives. Some students drop out in the second half, when they see that things don't go as they had hoped, and then we are already too late. (University 3)

Lastly, the office staff thought it necessary to provide more information, higher awareness, and more training to the academic staff to improve their reaction to the students:

I suppose [we need to provide] a lot more information, I believe that some reactions are due to misinformation, not to bad intentions. I think that faculty training and sensitization are two very important tools in this field. (University 2)

Conclusions and discussion

In contrast to most of the prior investigations in this field, which have mainly analyzed student perspectives of support in the university context (Fuller et al. 2004; Madriaga et al. 2010; Milic Babic and Dowling 2015; Mullins and Preyde 2013), our work focused on the viewpoint of the disability support office staff, to analyze how their offices function and how they could improve the inclusive response to disability. Therefore, the main contribution of this article has been to provide another perspective on the processes of inclusive education in the university and the resources provided by the disability support offices. In addition, contrary to the existing research literature that focuses on barriers and aids (Gibson 2012;

Hong 2015; Strnadová, Hájková, and Květoňová 2015), in this article we also offer proposals to improve the work carried out in these offices.

The results of this study coincide with those obtained in other research reported in Spain (Cabeza et al. 2014; Díez et al. 2011; Ferreira, Vieira, and Vidal 2014), which considers the heterogeneity of the different disability support offices. As we have seen, there is variety ranging from their different denominations (as unit, service office), the different organizational structures in which they are located, and their action protocols. Although the services are comparable, each office uses its own resources and protocols for the programs and services offered, although, as reported by Ferreira, Vieira, and Vidal (2014), the ONCE collaborates with all of the offices and they all receive a grant of support products from the Universia Foundation. This heterogeneity of the different services is probably due to the fact that each university has developed its own regulations to attend to students with disabilities. As suggested by the participants in this study, although existing work groups and networks both at regional and national levels offer considerable support for the coordination among universities, there is still a long way to go, and greater coordination among universities is needed in order to compare the resources provided to the students. Some general agreements on policy and practice for inclusion of disabled students among all of the universities would facilitate the mobility of students with disabilities between universities, if required.

However, the results of this study reveal that, in accordance with the Data Protection Law, the disability support offices do not inform the faculty members about the presence of students with disabilities in their classrooms and the needs of these students. Students themselves are responsible for this, and the office only intervenes when it has previously held a meeting with the students and they have given their consent. This is a sensitive issue because, according to other studies (Moriña 2017), students think that the academic staff should have this information and that they should not have to go from one faculty member to another, explaining that they have a disability. This issue is especially complex for students who have invisible disabilities, because the faculty does not immediately know that there is a student with disabilities in the classroom and therefore cannot readily identify or attend to the needs of that student (Love et al. 2015).

According to Koca-Atabey (2017) this difficulty of sharing information is compounded by the fact that each disability support office attends to a very small number of students and there are situations in which the faculty members do not receive necessary information. There are various reasons why only a small number of students have access to the offices. One of them is the desire of the student themselves to go unnoticed in the classrooms and not be labeled as a disabled person. In previous studies it has been concluded that being considered and treated in the same way as non-disabled peers is a matter of concern to university students with impairment (Riddell and Weedon 2014; Roberts, Crittenden, and Crittenden 2011; Schelley, Davies, and Spooner 2011). This concern can lead students to conceal their disability (Matthews 2009; Riddell, Tinklin, and Wilson 2005), and they

only disclose impairment in close relationships or when it is absolutely necessary; for example, when they require some type of modifications or, as Prowse (2009) states, to obtain economic support, as in the case of free tuition. Some students think that if they disclose their disability, they would be at a disadvantage compared with the rest of their classmates (Allard 1987). Martin (2010) points out that many students are afraid of being stigmatized, especially those who are mental health service users. Other disabled students feel they have no additional needs and therefore they do not ask for support (Hadjikakou and Hartas 2008). Generally speaking, these students do not want to adopt a disability identity (Barnes 2007) and the fact that they require some type of aid does not mean that they do not want to be treated like any other student (Riddell, Tinklin, and Wilson 2005). They defend the right to be treated in the same way as their non-disabled peers and to avoid discrimination and stigma. However, this is a complex issue, because the students who need support the most might conceal their needs and not even request or receive the support they need in order to avoid being stigmatized all over again in the university context (Goffman 1963).

This set of dilemmas could be resolved if the universities would adopt a social model of disability instead of a medical model (Oliver 2013). In addition, if courses were designed and developed based on the universal learning design (Powell 2013), any student could be included in the university and the difficult process of having to disclose a disability to receive the necessary adjustments and curricular modifications could be avoided. In this way, by designing a subject to make it accessible, the students' possible diverse needs are anticipated, ensuring that everyone is capable of learning successfully. In this sense, teaching and learning processes are designed that try to minimize the potential barriers students may encounter (Hitch, Dell, and Larkin 2016; Waitoller and King Thorius 2016). The goal is the full participation of all students in the processes of education – curriculum, teaching, and evaluation methods (Burgstahler 2015; Rose and Meyer 2002).

Another reason why disabled students do not come to the disability support office is their lack of information about the services provided, whom to contact, or where to go. This outcome has also appeared in studies such as that of Jacklin et al. (2007). A study carried out in Spain by the Universia Foundation similarly concluded that 72% of students with disabilities had not gone to a support office because they were unaware of its existence. This leads us to suggest, along with Matthews (2009), that disability support offices should act proactively, seeking mechanisms to reach disabled students instead of just hoping that the students will come to them.

A third reason for disabled students not going to designated support offices can be their physical location. In some of the universities studied in this research, the university campus is not located in a single geographic space but instead the different faculties are scattered throughout the city. Thus, any action needed to gain support that involves covering long distances may discourage some students from going to the services. This could be resolved with actions like those of two of

the participating universities, which have created the figure of the faculty-tutor, who serves as a link between the support office and the students of each faculty. In this way, immediate day-to-day needs can be met in the students' own faculty and they would only have to interact directly with the disability support office when necessary. Another proposal is the creation in each faculty of mutual support groups or plans of tutorial action (student mentors). Gairín and Suárez (2014) have recommended promoting tutorial and orientation plans in the universities, both at a general level and by faculties and careers. No doubt these initiatives would have to be supported by the corresponding universities and offices in order for them to make a real institutional impact, and not just be a reflection of the goodwill of each center.

Regarding the need for anticipatory responses from the offices and the university, the transition processes undergone by the students when reaching the university from prior educational stages also deserve attention. It is known that at this time of early transition, students are more vulnerable to dropping out of their studies (Fordyce et al. 2013). For this reason, the staff we interviewed report that disabled university students need more information and orientation about what studies to undertake than they currently receive. Vocational guidance is a key factor at the beginning of the university future of students with disabilities (Shah, Bennett, and Southgate 2016). This topic of course guidance, which is a crucial one for students with disabilities, is also important for non-disabled students, as Tinto (1988) has noted. Therefore, universities should treat this matter as a priority, because it would improve the retention and success of all the students and consequently contribute to greater general inclusivity.

Although our study found that the university disability support services studied provide disability awareness and training for staff and faculty members, in the offices themselves the staff consider that they are not sufficiently trained so more actions are needed in this direction. In Spain, there is no common training policy for the staff of university disability support services. In each service, the staff decide where and when to train. In addition, there is also no accreditation program, as in the case of United Kingdom where accreditation can be obtained, for example, through the Professional Association for Disability and Inclusivity Practitioners in Further and Higher Education (NADP). Such an accreditation system in other countries might incentivise university-based disability support staff to engage in more training.

In the same vein, coinciding with Fordyce et al. (2013), we consider that the university disability support offices should inform faculty members about the students' needs. This conclusion has also been reached in works focused on student opinions (Fuller et al. 2004; Madriaga et al. 2010; Mullins and Preyde 2013). It is essential for disability support service staff to be trained so they can provide faculty members with guidelines and methodological tools to achieve inclusive education and thus respond effectively to the needs of students with disability.

Universities should also design training policies so that faculty members are generally informed and can learn about disability and diversity issues (Bezrukova, Jehn, and Spell 2012). Some universities have already taken on this challenge and have designed training programs and prepared their academic staff for this undertaking. Worthy of mention, for example, are the Teachability (2002) proposal in Scotland (University of Strathclyde), the materials designed by Healey et al. (2001) in the United Kingdom (University of Gloucestershire), or the Debrand and Salzberg (2005) proposal in the United States (Utah State University). The studies carried out in these institutions conclude that training faculty members in disability and inclusive education benefits not only students with disabilities, but also the rest of the students (Garrison-Wade 2012).

Our data suggest that universities should create the necessary conditions and promote an inclusive environment to reduce the barriers that students with disabilities encounter in teaching, learning, and assessment. Likewise, coinciding with Riddell, Tinklin, and Wilson (2005) and Thomas et al. (2002), universities should support the work carried out in disability support offices to help disabled students remain in the university and successfully complete their studies. Accordingly, the research carried out from the perspective of students with disabilities (Lombardi, Murray, and Gerdes 2011; Riddell and Weedon 2014) and projects analyzing the perspective of the staff (López Gavira and Moriña 2015) have both reached the conclusion that disability support offices are one of the major facilitators contributing to the inclusion of students with disabilities in the university sector.

However, we believe that implementing a set of measures to contribute to the inclusion of students with disabilities is not enough to secure inclusion. Once such measures are implemented it is necessary to continually evaluate the actions undertaken to ensure they are adequate and effective. To sustain and optimize inclusive practice, universities are required to apply quality audit systems and to identify and publicize examples of good practices related to disability and inclusive education.

Limitations

This study is limited to the opinions of the staff of university disability support services. It would be interesting to consider other perspectives on disability support practices across other staff groups in universities; for example, gathering the views of faculty members, administration staff, and so on. Most of the investigations to date on this subject have focused on the students' perspective and we hope our work provides complementary information about the reality of students with disabilities seeking inclusion in higher education.

Another limitation of our study is related to the data collection techniques. In addition to interviewing the staff, it would be useful in future to conduct observations in disability support offices to see first-hand how they work and how they

support students with disabilities. It would also be beneficial to expand the study with data from other universities both at the national and international levels. For example, if we knew how disability support services work in the rest of Spanish universities, we could perform comparative analyses of these services to determine actions for improvement, which would be very enriching.

Future research

We recommend future research to expand the analyses to include the opinions of other groups involved in supporting disabled students at university and, as well, to include investigation within more universities. In addition, in Spain we recommend performing research projects to examine the networks between different national and Andalusian universities. These studies might lead to new proposals for strengthening networks to better coordinate their work and facilitate inclusion of disabled students so that all the universities would offer them the same high-quality resources and the same opportunities.

Another line of research could be the creation and assessment of disability support groups within faculties. Pilot projects could be designed in a faculty to create a group of professors, students, and staff to work together to agree on improvements that benefit and support the students with disabilities in that faculty. Further studies could also be carried out with regard to training. Training programs could be designed, developed, and evaluated to offer advice to professors and other university providers based on the tenets of inclusive pedagogy.

Finally with the aim of improving the service that the universities provide to students with disabilities in future, good practice guidance could be created for disability support services. A helpful example to follow can be found in the proposals made by the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD Ireland) or the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD USA). Among other proposals, these associations offer interesting guides for universal design, inclusive teaching, and learning or guides to disclosure.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the Regional Government of Andalusia [Grant P11-SEJ-7255].

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