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## Hidden voices in higher education: inclusive policies and practices in social science and law classrooms

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This paper pertains to a broader biographical-narrative research project which studies barriers and support as identified by students with disabilities at a Spanish University (*Barriers and Support That Disabled Students Identify in the University*. Project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (Dir. Dr Anabel Moriña; Ref. EDU 2010–16264, 2010–2014)). The present study focuses specifically on barriers and support identified by students with disabilities enrolled in undergraduate programmes in the Social Sciences and Law. The purpose of this paper is to analyse, from the point of view of disabled students (applying the biographic-narrative methodology), which barriers and which support this group encounters in Higher Education. To this end, findings are organised in the following categories: general institutional data; infrastructure, architectural and accessibility-related data; faculty and teaching-related data; data relating to fellow students; and suggestions for improving the university and/or university classrooms. In the Conclusions section, we return to our earlier discussion of key findings which shed some light on how the University helps or hinders learning among participants in the study. From this perspective, taking as a reference the social model of disability, we conclude that in order to be inclusive, the University needs to commit itself to adopting proactive measures that eliminate the barriers that do not permit the learning and the full participation of the students in question.

**Keywords:** inclusive education; disability; barriers; support; higher education; social sciences and law

### 1. Introduction

Inclusive education at the University has been advancing as a movement that challenges any and all situations of exclusion. A growing number of voices are calling for higher education (HE) environments in which all students can learn, participate and develop a sense of belonging (Barnes 2007; Fuller, Bradley, and Healey 2004; Hurst 1996; Moriña, Cortes, and Melero 2014; Moswela and Mukhopadhyay 2011). From this standpoint, students with disabilities represent an opportunity for HE institutions to review and revise inclusive practices and policies.

If we consider the statistics, the reality of the situation is that – in many countries – the number of students with disabilities is growing steadily. Several underlying factors

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explaining this trend include the growing body of norms and regulations recognising disability rights, deployment of inclusive educational practices, new, accessible technologies (Hockings, Brett, and Terentjevs 2012), new university services, initiatives designed to provide support for educational needs, and so on.

In this sense, since the 1990s there has been growing emphasis on the need for inclusive policy and praxis in HE. Yet, as findings from a range of studies in different international contexts demonstrate, students with disabilities do not always have a positive HE experience; the university system is, in fact, among the least inclusive environments in terms of access and long-term success (Fuller, Bradley, and Healy 2004; Holloway 2001; Hopkins 2011; Mullins and Preyde 2013; Nielsen 2001; Prowse 2009; Riddel and Weedon 2014; Shevlin, Kenny, and McNeela 2004). As these studies point out, students with disabilities, in practice, face significant barriers to participation and learning opportunities – despite the existing anti-discrimination laws.

In the case of Spain, provisions for students with disabilities are laid out in Organic Law 4/2007 for Universities (*Ley Orgánica de Universidades 4/2007*), which establishes that the principles of equal opportunity and non-discrimination must be ensured and that university environments (buildings, grounds and facilities) must be accessible. At the local level, the University that has been the host institution for the present study has approved by laws regulating academic considerations affecting students with disabilities, including the need for curricular adaptations on the part of lecturers and zero-cost tuition for first-time and subsequent enrolment (Agreement 8/CG 9-12-08, 12 January 2009).

That said, while it is true that Higher Education may provide an opportunity for students to participate more fully in society, a considerable body of literature identifies significant barriers hampering participation, progress and success among students with disabilities. These obstacles are mainly attitudinal, structural and resource-related (Moswela and Mukhopadhyay 2011). Participation in HE environments can be limited by inaccessible curricula, negative attitudes among faculty and staff, and architectural barriers (Ferni and Henning 2006; Oliver and Barnes 2010). Moreover, students with disabilities face additional hurdles and challenges that become more manifest the more they struggle to succeed in their quest for a college education, as Adams and Holland (2006) explain. These barriers are reinforced by a society where, despite the existence of anti-discrimination laws, full inclusion is far from being a reality (Slee 2013).

In fact, although some research has identified actions that favour the inclusion of students with disabilities – as an example, the creation of student support offices at most universities (Hanafin et al. 2007) – in most cases, such initiatives depend upon the attitudes and good will of the staff rather than institutional policies (Fuller, Bradley, and Healey 2004). On the other hand, these studies usually identify obstacles that work as solid hindrances in university careers. In some cases, it is even a determining factor for students to abandon their studies. In general, some of the studies reviewed conclude that when it comes to the inclusion of people with disabilities, it appears on paper but in practice, it is rarely applied.

According to the social model of disability, it is precisely the society – and in this case, the university – that erects the hurdles hampering inclusion (Oliver 1990). In this sense, teaching and learning praxis, in and of itself, can be a barrier to learning for students with disabilities (Fuller, Bradley, and Healey 2004; Powell 2003). While the medical model sees disability as an ‘individualized problem’ (Armstrong and Barton 1999, 212), the social model, in contrast, does not approach disability as a personal

tragedy, an abnormality, a disease needing a cure – but rather as a catalyst for discrimination and oppression (Barton 1998). From this perspective, the need arises to restructure educational environments with a view to empower all students to participate (Oliver 1990). In keeping with the social model, universities should avoid using medical labels to identify learning needs and develop inclusive teaching strategies and a daily praxis of inclusion instead (Matthews 2009).

For the purposes of this study, then, *support* and *barriers* are linked, conceptually, to the social model of disability (Baron, Phillips, and Stalker 1996). In this sense, we understand ‘support’ as a set of factors (effective strategies, positive attitudes, relationships, etc.) which contribute towards social and educational inclusion of students in HE classrooms. Barriers, on the contrary, are factors which impede inclusion, hinder learning, and limit membership and active participation on equal terms. As Messiou (2006) explains, an individual may experience exclusion, for example, when he or she cannot access the curriculum, is not offered opportunities to participate, is rejected by peers or even denied the right to social interaction, or when his or her skills and abilities are not valued. Barriers, argue Ainscow and Miles (2009), can also refer to how access, participation and overall learning experience can be hampered, for some students, by inappropriate teaching methods or a lack of resources, need-specific programmes and expertise.

The literature recognises that all excluded students – including students with disabilities – can be classified as ‘lost voices’. A number of studies have explored student perspectives and experiences in different educational stages (Beauchamp-Pryor 2012; Hopkins 2011; Stevens 2009). Other studies make the case that people who experience exclusion – when listened to – can provide valuable feedback which can provide relevant information regarding inclusive education (Corbett and Slee 2000; Tangen 2008). The general consensus is that people who experience exclusion should play a key role since their unique perspective is an asset when it comes to constructing inclusion.

Taking the personal history of students participating in this study as our point of reference, we may reflect upon how the range of attitudes, practices and behaviours disabled students face in classroom and other university settings have an impact on their academic trajectory. These voices also inform us when formulating a series of proposals aimed at making inclusive higher education a reality.

## 2. Methodology

The findings presented here fall within the broader framework of a research project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, entitled *Barriers and Support That Disabled Students Identify in the University*. Conducted by a team of faculty from a variety of departments and disciplines (Education, Economics, Health Sciences and Experimental Sciences), this ongoing study (2009–2014) aims, primarily, to examine barriers and support identified by disabled university students themselves as affecting access, their academic trajectory and overall performance. The three key objectives were:

- (1) Identify, describe and explain barriers and support that students with disabilities perceive as impacting access, academic trajectory and overall performance at the university, as an institution.

- (2) Identify, describe and explain barriers and support that students with disabilities experience in HE classroom environments.
- (3) Design an online faculty training guide with a view to better provide for the unique educational needs of disabled students.

To this end, we took a biographical-narrative approach and conducted our research in two phases. Phase 1 comprised two stages. In the first stage, a series of discussion groups (at least one group per each of the five fields of study<sup>1</sup>), and individual oral/written interviews were carried out with a total of 44 students. In the second stage, mini-life histories were recorded for 16 of the first-stage participants. These histories are thematic in nature as we focused on a specific life period: the university experience. Three data collection instruments were employed: lifelines, focused interviews and self-reports. In Phase 2 of research – currently underway – the life histories of eight students who participated in the second stage of Phase 1 phase were taken up again in order to carry out what, in biographical-narrative methodology, is known as in-depth life histories and polyphony of voices (Frank 2011). A wide range of data collection techniques were used, including in-depth interviews, photography, interviews with key players in the life of each student, observations, and so on. The final phase of the study, still under work, will culminate in a proposal for an online faculty training guide on responding to diversity.

This paper focuses on Phase 1 of the project (realised in the academic years of 2009/2010 and 2010/2011) and, more specifically, on the second research objective: understanding barriers and support impacting the Social Sciences and Law classroom environment. The study population included students with disabilities enrolled at the University during the 2009/2010 academic year. At the time, there were a total of 445 students with disabilities enrolled, out of a total student population of 72,358 (0.6%).

A total of 44 students participated in the project, 8 of whom were enrolled in degrees in the field of study we focus on in this paper: Law (two), Business Sciences (two), Economics (one), Business Management (two) and Employment Sciences/Labour Sciences (one). With regard to year of study, the breakdown was as follows: first-year (one), second-year (one), third-year (three), fourth-year (two) and fifth-year (one). The average number of years at university thus far was five years. It is worth noting that several students had been at university as long as seven–nine years already. With regard to type of disability, four students had a sensory disability: sight-related (three); hearing-related (one); two students had general physical disability; and two students had specific psychical disability.

Finally, a comparative analysis of data from this phase of the research involving all participants and research techniques employed is carried out using MaxQDA10 data analysis software and a system of categories and codes, as proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994).

### **3. Findings**

The findings presented here shed light on barriers and support students perceive both in university classrooms and in the broader arena of the university, as an institution (libraries, buildings, facilities, etc.).

#### **3.1. *The role of the university as an institution***

In this section we present our analysis of the university experience, in the broad sense of the term. The objective is to study institutional barriers and support which impact rules

and regulations, access to information, campus architecture and infrastructure accessibility, disabled student services (DSS), and so on, as identified by the students themselves. Finally, we take a closer look at what the ideal university would be like for these students.

### 3.1.1. *A university which makes room for students with disabilities?*

Generally speaking, study participants identified a significant number of positive aspects when asked to reflect on the university as an institution. However, a series of areas where improvement was needed were identified as well. Overall, the barriers outnumbered the instances of support mentioned in every case.

With regard to the initial stages of the university experience, participants identified a range of hurdles disabled students were faced with from the outset. One student, RSE8,<sup>2</sup> for example, pointed out that no guidance was offered to help students with disabilities understand university structures, how the university operates, and so on. This participant underscored the general lack of knowledge regarding disabled students at the university and suggested the need to warn them of this reality as early as possible.

Another obstacle, according to participants, was the fact that there was very little information out there regarding the individual situation of disabled university students. Several participants also identified bureaucratic hurdles (paperwork required for scholarships and other financial aid, for example), which they faced throughout their university experience.

On another front – policies providing support for students with disabilities at the university – there appeared to be a vast gap between policy and practice. The general consensus was that, on paper, the university was all promises and good intentions; the reality, however, was a very different story.

RSE3: The University is designed very well; organically it is almost perfect, organically speaking. Another story is when people apply the rules and regulations, in practice. But the rules and regulations, in theory, are in good shape . . . and any issue you can think of, there's the university website that takes you to online learning, takes you to accessibility . . . almost perfect in that sense. Another thing is when you put those charts and policies into practice, that's when things fall apart.

On the issue of international mobility, a lack of coordination with university support centres in the host country was identified as problematic. Students spoke of how difficult it was to actually take the step to study abroad and expressed a desire for more information from their home institution regarding resources available to students with disabilities at the host university.

Study participants also gave examples of support they have received throughout their university experience. Virtually all of the students we interviewed had had access to some sort of support; and, across the board, free tuition – allowing these students to continue on at the university – was the most frequently mentioned. New technologies were highly valued as well, as tools which fostered integration and helped disabled students adapt to higher education and university life. One visually impaired student spoke of the special importance online access to information and course materials had for his education.

RSE8: Good things . . . well, e-mail and university online . . . that they keep sending you e-mails is very important because it makes you fully accessible. The e-zines they send

you, it's all fully accessible, which means you can actually access the information. Now it's you who decides ... I'm not interested in this e-mail so I'll delete it, I won't even bother to read it ... but if I want to inform or be informed ... I get constant e-mails from the university informing me about everything that's going on.

Finally, participants in our study valued interaction with non-faculty university personnel and highlight widespread goodwill and readiness to meet their needs among this sector.

### 3.1.2. *Do DSS promote inclusion?*

Virtually all of the participants in this study made some mention of the support they had received throughout their university experience thus far. Help from student aides,<sup>3</sup> for example, was highly valued across the board. DSS – or SAD (*Servicio para el Alumnado con Discapacidad; Service to Students with Disabilities*), as the service is known at this University – was seen as providing essential support for the disabled student community as well.

Several students also expressed their satisfaction with how DSS has helped them overcome daily obstacles such as access to parking, self-copying carbonless notebooks and larger screens for visually impaired students.

That said, while DSS is generally seen as being supportive, participants made a point of mentioning a number of barriers that they had encountered and also pointed out areas where improvement was needed. Several students expressed the opinion that DSS should get behind creating specific spaces for disabled students on the different university campuses. Another petition was for the service to be more proactive when it came to getting the word out about the support they provided – especially among incoming first-year students.

Finally, study participants had nothing but praise for the support provided by organisations outside the university, such as the ONCE,<sup>4</sup> Spain's national organisation for the blind.

### 3.1.3. *Architectural barriers at the university?*

Participants in our study pointed out that the university was plagued with architectural and structural barriers affecting access to classrooms and facilities – and agreed that there was much need for improvement in this area. Among other examples, students highlighted too many stairs and an almost total lack of ramps. It should be noted that accessibility was a problem even in the case of modern campuses, such as the School of Labour Studies, which despite having been built in recent years were not designed with people with disabilities in mind.

Barriers due to inappropriate or inadequate signage were reported as well. Trouble areas included: signs in university copy centres, grade postings on department bulletin boards, general information screens and displays, classroom identification signs, contrast on signs throughout the university, and so on.

Yet another area of concern was classroom acoustics. It is worth noting that, while the student who initially reported the problem had a hearing impairment, various other students who did not share this disability mentioned poor acoustics as a barrier as well.

Finally, a significant number of other physical barriers affecting classroom space were identified – for the most part relating to cramped classroom layout, poor lighting,

inappropriate or inadequate classroom furniture, and so on. The lack of specific spaces for students with disabilities was of special concern.

#### 3.1.4. *Dreaming of the perfect university*

In this section, the students shared their thoughts on what their perfect university would be like. One of the early proposals was the creation of specific spaces on each campus where students with disabilities could share experiences, participate in sports activities, and so on. Such spaces would foster coexistence among students with disabilities while providing the opportunity for social interaction and mutual enrichment.

New, stronger, working relationships with partner institutions would be needed as well. A great deal of value was placed on collaboration between the university and organisations such as the ONCE, aimed at providing support, increasing accessibility and creating opportunity for students with disabilities.

More opportunities for practical engagement and obligatory internships were another common demand. To this end, students mentioned the desirability of working towards agreements aimed at adapting the workplace to people with disabilities.

RSE5: One of the weak areas at the university is practical engagement . . . internships, should be required, not optional. It has to be obligatory, so when you go out into the real world you have some real experience, right? Not just go out there full of theory . . . because what they're really looking for out there, apart from a degree, is real-life experience.

Another petition was that disabled students be provided with more guidance and training – at the start of their university experience – as to university structure and operation as well as regarding the resources, support and opportunities available to them.

Study participants also highlighted the importance of more personalised services, taking each case, each set of needs into account. They noted that sometimes disabled students were not given the individual attention they deserved. The university should adapt to the students rather than asking students to adapt to the university.

Finally, several students emphasised the need to invest more resources in improving infrastructures, buildings and classrooms, reducing the number of students per class, hiring and training faculty, and creating spaces for students with disabilities, among other improvements.

### 3.2. *Is there room for disabled students in university classrooms?*

In this section, we analyse university classroom environments as experienced by disabled students in Social Sciences and Law degrees. Analysis is divided into three subsections: teaching/learning processes and the role of the lecturers; peers and classmates; and recipes for the perfect classroom.

#### 3.2.1. *Building bridges or raising walls?*

Lecturers took centre stage in the experiences narrated by the students in our study. While in certain cases faculty were seen as a source of support, for the vast majority of students, they were associated with barriers; so much so that the most commonly mentioned barrier was the fact that lecturers failed to adapt their classes to include



disabled students. The students considered that faculty should take their needs into account and not treat them as if they did not have disabilities to deal with.

RSE1: Some lecturers see you there and don't even say anything to you, they aren't concerned at all. They treat you like any other student, and I don't think it should be like that. You aren't just another student, you have special needs and the lecturers should realize that.

One of the most commonly cited problems was overuse of outdated teaching strategies, that is, traditional lecturing, on the part of faculty. Many of these students rejected this methodology in a generalised manner, questioning what is learned in this way. The students believed that the use of this methodology was due to the concerns on the part of the lecturers to finish the syllabus, with no place for a methodological approach other than the raw expository. The students reflected about what they learned with this methodology and they said, '... it is explained, it is studied for the examination, the examination is taken and then, have I really learned anything?'

Study participants also perceived the fact that some lecturers showed little or no interest in teaching motivating, participatory classes – or in teaching at all, for that matter – as clearly negative.

It is important to point out here, however, that, on the whole, the problems students with disabilities identified and talked about were not directly related to their disability; they were common to any other student, as they had to do with teaching methodologies and lecturers' varying ability to transmit their knowledge.

One recurring complaint involved what was perceived as poor or even negligent use of tools like PowerPoint. Students reported that many lecturers simply went from one slide to the next, reading verbatim without giving any added explanations or clarifications. Information received in this way was perceived as being insufficient. This was especially problematic for students with certain types of disabilities – visual and auditory impairment, for example – as they found it impossible to retain all of the information they were being given.

Another concern, as RSE1 pointed out, were those courses in which attendance was weighted highly, as this may be a disadvantage for students with disabilities who found it necessary to miss class for long periods of time.

Yet another problem area was the numerous exam-related barriers that disabled students had to face. The students we interviewed spoke first-hand of hurdles such as being denied enough time to take exams, not having access to exams adapted to their disability, and so on. In some cases students went to the extreme of temporarily abandoning the course and waiting, in the hope that a more disability-friendly lecturer would be assigned to teach the subject.

Another clear barrier with respect to faculty was the use of new technologies – considered crucial to accessibility and inclusion. All too often it seemed lecturers failed to make use of the new technologies in the classroom. The students we interviewed believed that this was due to a closed-minded attitude and general lack of training among faculty.

In relation to the above, some participants said they believed that the basic problem was the lack of lecturer training for the disabled. Thus they considered that it was important that lecturers were trained, but also recognised it as a difficulty, as it would be complicated to meet any form of disability. In short, they said lecturer training on disability in a more general way would be possible. Moreover, they thought that –

even though lecturers did not have adequate training – there were easy things to do that would help to respond to their needs (like putting oneself in the place of the other, showing interest in what was happening to them, etc.).

Moreover, participants also expressed the numerous occasions where they received help from the lecturer. In this sense, aid valued by them was their willingness to help them, worrying about them, asking them, sending class materials, posing accessible exams, being available by e-mail, and so on.

Furthermore, the participants applauded those lecturers who taught pleasant, participatory classes and showed an interest in motivating students.

RSE8: My favourite lecturers are the lecturers who manage to get and keep students' attention. I have several very prominent lecturers, good researchers, whatever ... who aren't very good teachers, in my opinion, because they come to class, lecture at us for a while ... sure, they lecture very well, but to be honest students are neither motivated nor paying much attention to what the lecturer is saying because it's *all so monotonous*.

Finally, RSE4 appreciated the support and care provided by some lecturers in office hours. He noted that lecturers had facilitated the schedule to attend tutorials and, thus, he was able to better understand the subject.

### 3.2.2. *Classmates: bane or blessing?*

In the course of university, classmates were a mainstay for students. Regarding people with disabilities, they commented on how they became essential to help them overcome the various obstacles they were facing in their day-to-day experience.

However, participants also identified some barriers related to peers. In this sense, RSE1, RSE8 and RSE2 highlighted the difficulty of making friends at university.

Finally, RSE4 and RSE7 said that they had had problems when working in teams with colleagues.<sup>5</sup> In particular, they struggled to come to agreements, had problems with peers who did not cooperate, who would not work, and so on.

RSE4: Group work is terrible, I mean you waste tons of time, arranging things with a load of people ... that's not how you learn to work as a team. Forcing five or six students to work together and to ... that's not how you teach people to work as a team.

However, it should be noted that the number of peer support identified by participants was much higher than the barriers. Thus, many noted that classmates were an essential support for them, essential for an inclusion in HE.

### 3.2.3. *Dreaming of the perfect classroom*

Regarding the ideal university classroom, first, the students raised the need to promote new technologies, having computers accessible, introducing the widespread use of the electronic board, and so on.

Also, in relation to teaching methodologies, it was noted that the groups should be smaller and methodologies adapted to students with disabilities.

As for faculty, the importance of the relationship with students was emphasised. Many participants noted that lecturers should have a closer and more personal relationship with their students.

With regard to teaching materials, for the students it was essential to count on the materials for the subjects. For that purpose, they believed that lecturers should be concerned with providing these materials on beforehand and adapt them accordingly to the disability if necessary.

Regarding classes, they suggested that lecturers should try that classes were jovial, dynamic and with student participation. They also emphasised the importance of providing a practical approach to the subjects.

Finally, in terms of training about disabilities, participants considered that the origin of the main problems with lecturers came from a lack of training about disabilities. In this context, it was argued that if the lecturers had the proper training they could meet their needs.

#### **4. Conclusions and discussion**

To conclude, we provide a synopsis of the main ideas that students with disabilities of Social Sciences and Law highlight regarding their university experience, both in the classroom and in other university settings. As seen in previous studies (Fuller, Bradley, and Healy 2004; Holloway 2001; Hopkins 2011; Nielsen 2001; Prowse 2009; Shevlin, Kenny, and McNeela 2004), university contexts, even though they sometimes facilitate participatory processes and student learning, in other cases can result obstructing them. As the results presented in this paper have shown, students with disabilities have to face additional challenges and barriers compared to other students (Adams and Holland 2006). Thus, it can be concluded that, although students recognise that there are positive factors that have provided help and support in their university experience, much remains still to be done.

This leads us to believe that in order to achieve progress regarding inclusion and equity, universities need to have policies, strategies, processes and programmes to realise these goals. Therefore, universities should be responsible for creating an inclusive environment by reducing the barriers that students face in classes, learning and evaluation (Fuller, Bradley, and Healey 2004), ensuring that policies in favour of students with disabilities are realised through practices of inclusion.

From the evidence gathered in this study, it can be stated that the number of barriers exceeds the number of support factors. That is to say, participants recognise that, at times, they receive support that facilitates their academic experience in the classroom; however, they reveal many more barriers that hinder them day after day in their learning process.

As for the barriers from the perspective of the university as an institution, the need for providing more information to guide students from the beginning of their studies has been shown; the need for ensuring that regulations are not converted into dead letters but put into practice; and the need for making the university accessible, in terms of technologies, spaces, and so on (Castellana and Sala 2005; Holloway 2001; Moswela and Mukhopadhyay 2011, accessible university buildings and classrooms are claimed, too).

Regarding institutional aid, the free-of-charge enrolment is positively valued, the support received from administration and service staff and the importance of the new technologies for the learning process of disabled students.

In the university context, the services provided by the SAD are particularly highlighted. Although some issues that could be improved are identified, in general, like in the paper of Hanafin et al. (2007), this service is very much appreciated by the

students for the aid it provides, the role of the partner student, the provision of self-copying notebooks, and so on.

In relation with classroom experience, the main barriers are related to faculty, as there are inadequate methodologies, not provided materials, not adapted exams, insufficient use of new information technologies; impersonal relations to students; and missing training regarding matters of disability.

As the participants themselves suggest, this study confirms that good teaching practices not only benefit students with disabilities but the student body as a whole. In this sense, inclusive curricula provide new opportunities for all students, as authors such as Ferni and Henning (2006) or Hopkins (2011) recognise.

For some time now, we have been aware of a number of factors that contribute towards building inclusive classrooms (e.g. Hopkins and Sterns 1996): strategies such as peer tutoring, project-based learning, collaborative learning, multi-level learning, and so forth, are known today to effectively meet a wide range of educational needs. We also know that international agreements exist – such as UNESCO (2009) – regarding the role of teachers as facilitators and the role of students as protagonists of the learning process.

Regarding the training of faculty, students comment about its importance, as they believe that many of the obstacles that they face could be avoided if the lecturers were prepared to attend their needs. Hence, they consider such training as essential. Hurst (2006) even recommends that training on disability should be mandatory for all university staff. These results show that it is necessary for universities to draw up a policy of training in this sense.

Therefore, like Hopkins (2011) or Sciamè-Giesecke, Roden, and Parkinson (2009), they propose that training in this area is required, and more particular, how to design flexible and inclusive curricula. In fact, there are studies that show that lecturers who have participated in training programmes on disability show more positive attitudes towards this matter (Doughty and Allan 2008; Lombardi, Murray, and Gerdes 2011).

On the other hand, the most important support that students receive from faculty is as follows: the willingness to help, showing concern for their needs, sending materials before classes, posing accessible exams, making themselves available by e-mail, using accessible methodologies, applying new information technologies and doing continuous evaluation.

Finally, barriers referring to classmates are related to the difficulty in making friends, problems in teamwork and the scarce assistance offered by some fellow students (such as providing notes, sharing literature, etc.). However, most students recognise classmates as being essential in their university careers, questioning even their remaining at university if they could not count on their help.

We conclude with a reference to the title of this paper and the methodology applied in our research. We have said that students who experience barriers as described in this paper may be considered as ‘hidden voices’. More than that, we agree with Hutcheon and Wolbring (2012) and Kraus (2008) that students with disabilities have not been included in the hegemonic discourse and are not sufficiently represented in HE.

Precisely the biographical-narrative approach is an excellent methodological tool for setting free these voices and making them heard; voices which often have been silenced, as denounced by Owens (2007). Through these methods it is possible to visualise and explain processes of oppression, discrimination and exclusion suffered by some groups (Booth and Booth 1996; Goodley 2001). Narrative methods can give privileged data about how people perceive the world, and in our context, what are the

barriers and supports encountered at university (Goodson 1992; Goodson and Sikes 2001). Therefore, as Barton (2010) recognises, it is imperative to hear the voices of people with disabilities, so that they adopt an active role in the development of inclusive practices, as the decisions made will affect the quality of their lives. In short, perhaps the leitmotiv of the disability movement sums it up the best: ‘Nothing about us without us’.

### Notes

1. The academic disciplines at the University are: Health Sciences; Experimental Sciences; Social Sciences and Law; Engineering and Technology; Humanities.
2. In order to safeguard the confidentiality of participants in this study, the following abbreviation system is used: RSE (Social Sciences and Law) plus the number designating each of the eight participants.
3. The student aide is a volunteer position at the University, whose function is to help students with disabilities both in the classroom and around campus. Functions may include note-taking, help with accessing information, escorting students to, from and around university buildings, etc.
4. ONCE is a non-profit organisation known as Organización Nacional de Ciegos Españoles, meaning National Organisation of Blind Spaniards, whose mission is to improve the quality of life for the blind and anyone with a visual disability in Spain.
5. However, it should be noted that both in the field of knowledge and in the rest, group work was identified by the participants in this research as a strategy that contributes to learning and participation in HE.

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