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# Perceptions of university students with disabilities in Spain: ideas and beliefs about attitudes towards their inclusion

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## ABSTRACT

Despite big advances, in recent years, students with disabilities have not been greatly present in the university world, and those who do enter higher education are confronted with architectural and psychosocial barriers. Among the latter category, it is necessary to highlight the attitudes of their classmates and teachers towards students with disabilities; but we also need to take their own ideas and beliefs into account. This study therefore examines the ideas and beliefs of university students in Spain with disabilities about attitudes towards disabilities. Taking their responses into consideration, it can be concluded that the students in question consider neither their disability nor the university to be an obstacle to them accessing and finishing their studies. Furthermore, they perceive the attitudes of their teachers and peers to be positive, thus feeling themselves to be fairly well integrated into the university community. However, they also call for better training on disability.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Attitudes; disability; higher education; inclusive education; students; teachers

## Points of interest

- This article examines the ideas and beliefs held by university students with disabilities in Spain on the attitudes of their teachers and classmates towards their inclusion.
- This article looks in detail at the real-life interactions between students with disabilities and people without disabilities.
- The students with disabilities, although considering their peers and teachers to have positive attitudes towards them and feeling themselves to be included, called for the educational community to be better informed about their disabilities. For them, it is essential to have a welcome plan and a central unit coordinating and advising the entire educational community on this issue.

- This type of research is important, because it can help to give students with disabilities a voice.

## Introduction

As this paper is about disability in university environments in Spain, the preferred term in Spain – ‘people/students with disabilities’ – will be used. It is understood that English-speaking countries have other preferred terms.

At the present moment, the percentage of students with disabilities enrolled in Spanish universities is 1.5%, as a proportion of the student body as a whole. This percentage is higher in distance-learning universities (4.1%) than in face-to-face universities (1.0%), which could be due to the ease offered by distance-learning when it comes to access, and the accessibility of information, as well as the flexibility to adapt the programme around one’s needs (Fundación Universia 2018). However, the proportion of students who remain in university decreases as study programmes progress. Therefore, the problem does not lie in accessing higher education but in staying on campus – given that the higher the stage of university education, the lower the presence of students with disabilities. The situation that is being lived by students with disabilities in Spanish universities merits further investigation, as differing experiences of university life have come to mean that, in the present-day university context, those students experience greater difficulties than the population in general. This is because, in addition to their own disability, they must overcome not only access-related and architectural barriers, but also psycho-sociological ones. Within this latter category, it is essential to highlight the role played by the attitudes of people without disabilities, which can become an obstacle even greater than the disability itself (Bausela 2008). In particular, the attitudes of their university peers are a key factor, as a negative attitude from one of them can become a significant barrier to inclusion (Aguado, Flórez, and Alcedo 2004; Polo and López-Justicia 2005; Shannon, Tansey, and Schoen 2009), and can even negatively influence students with disabilities concepts of themselves (Moriña and Orozco 2021).

But in order to achieve inclusion, the attitudes of their peers and of teaching staff are not the only factor. It is also important to take the subjective perceptions of students with disabilities into account (Saura 1995); that is to say, to analyse the image that students with disabilities believe that their classmates and teachers have of them. In thus allowing students with disabilities their own voice, we will have a more comprehensive picture of their lived reality – which will help us to more clearly identify the problems that exist and find solutions.

In order to accomplish this, we have analysed the ideas, beliefs and – in particular – the perceptions that students with disabilities in a Spanish

university have of the attitudes of the educational community (teachers and students) towards them. Nonetheless, it should not be forgotten that this perception is always subjective, since our ideas and beliefs influence that perception and the meaning of reality (Illera and Illera 2015), and therefore our attitudes: hence the relevance of the analysis proposed in this study.

We begin with a review of the existing literature that relates to, on the one hand, the attitudes that students and university teaching staff have towards people with disabilities; and, on the other hand, the perceptions that students with disabilities have of these attitudes and perceptions. We then briefly describe the methodology we have used, including details on the study participants, the instruments and the procedure followed. Finally, the results found are presented and discussed – leading, in turn, to the article's final conclusion.

## Literature review

### *Attitudes of students and university teaching staff towards disabilities*

On the one hand, the literature has reflected that, in general, attitudes towards the disabilities of university students are quite positive (Gómez and Infante 2004; Klooster et al. 2009; López-Ramos 2004; Moneo and Anaut 2017; Moreno et al. 2006; Polo and López-Justicia 2006; Polo, Fernández, and Díaz 2011; Suriá 2011). Nonetheless, in several cases, students at this educational stage have also shown more neutral or negative attitudes (Girli et al. 2016; Kritsotakis et al. 2017; Uysal et al. 2014). So much so that a study carried out by Alarcón and Busqués (2014) found that a quarter of students questioned were not very keen on carrying out an academic assignment with a classmate with an auditory or visual disability.

In addition, the teacher also plays a fundamental role in the effectiveness – or lack thereof – of educational inclusion and, owing to this, the attitudes of this group and the variables that can influence those attitudes have been a source of interest for numerous investigations in recent years (Cook, Cameron, and Tankersley 2007; Chiner 2011; Dorji et al. 2019; Garabal-Barbeira et al. 2018; Martín and Soto 2001; Martínez and Bilbao 2011; Parasuram 2006; Polo and Aparicio 2018; Saloviita and Consegna 2019; Stauble 2009). More specifically, in the case of universities, teaching staff have been shown to have largely positive attitudes (Bilbao 2010; Cobos and Vélez-Calvo 2016; Garabal-Barbeira et al. 2018; Martínez and Bilbao 2011; Polo, Fernández, and Fernández 2017, 2020; Rodríguez-Martín and Álvarez-Arregui 2015; Sánchez-Palomino 2011; Soto 2007), but studies have also reflected their preoccupation with not having enough training to be able to offer these students a quality education that is sufficiently adapted to their characteristics and needs (Garabal-Barbeira et al. 2018; Sánchez-Palomino 2011). In

this same line, several studies have shown that many students with psychosocial disabilities avoid telling their teachers about their disability, as they believe that teachers would not know how to behave around them and that they risk inviting negative attitudes towards themselves by so doing (Vergunst and Swartz 2020).

### ***Perceptions relating to the inclusion of university students with disabilities***

On the other hand, it is also essential to listen to students with disabilities themselves, and to find out how they feel – to try and discover their own perceptions of their inclusion in the university environment. Although on an international scale there are many studies that have been carried out (Borland and James 1999; Brown and Leigh 2018; Fuller, Bradley, and Healey 2004; Hadjidakou and Hartas 2008; Holloway 2001; Babic and Dowling 2015; Ule 2017; Vickerman and Blundell 2010; Yusof et al. 2019) as well as reviews on similar questions (Jaafar et al. 2020), the literature on this topic in Spain remains scarce. Among the investigations that have been carried out, we found several studies that aimed at giving voice to university students with disabilities, and to shine a light on the support that they see themselves as needing (García-González et al. 2021; Moriña, Cortés, and Melero 2013; Moriña and Perera 2020; Rodríguez and Mendoza 2014; Sánchez-Palomino 2009; Suriá 2012). It should be noted that, although positive attitudes on the part of their classmates and teaching staff were reported, the truth is that students with disabilities do not feel fully integrated, and believe that it is necessary to continue promoting more positive attitudes towards them (García-González et al. 2021; Rodríguez and Mendoza 2014; Sánchez-Palomino 2009; Suriá 2012).

Furthermore, they feel that their teachers are really prepared to work with them, although they believe further training for teachers in supporting students with disabilities is needed (Sánchez-Palomino 2009). However, this feedback is not universal, since, on other occasions, students with disabilities have highlighted the lack of specific teacher training in supporting students with disabilities as being a significant barrier to their inclusion at university (Babic and Dowling 2015; García-González et al. 2021; Rodríguez et al. 2013; Fundación Universia 2018), or have reported low levels of awareness towards students with disabilities on the part of teaching staff (Yusof et al. 2019). However, they have reported feeling supported by those teachers who build closer relationships with students, and who use more innovative methodologies (Moriña, López, and Cotán 2010).

When it comes to their peers – although they do not see a need to promote greater student awareness of fellow students with disabilities – some students with disabilities have highlighted that their classmates are

not prepared to interact or work with them (Babic and Dowling 2015; Sánchez-Palomino 2009). In fact, in a study carried out by Moriña et al. (2010), students affirmed that their classmates can be both a great help to them fully living their university life and, on occasions, a barrier: in particular because of their refusal to work with their classmates with disabilities. However, other investigations (Langørgen and Magnus 2018) have found a more positive perspective, with many of the participating students acknowledging feeling included by their peers and even feeling that they are part of a group, both inside and outside the classroom.

However, we need to take into account the fact that students' attitudes and perceptions about their own university inclusion may be influenced by a series of factors; although few studies have made reference to them. On the one hand, a previous study has found that it was female students, and those with a physical disability, who had more positive attitudes and who spoke more favourably about their integration into their university (Sánchez-Palomino 2009). However, on other occasions (Suriá 2012), it was those students with sensory disabilities who reported feeling that they are well integrated and receive higher levels of support. The results are unclear when it comes to the variable of age: some studies have shown that younger students feel more included (Suriá 2012); in other cases, older students have been reported as feeling themselves to be better integrated (Sánchez-Palomino 2009).

As we've seen, despite the fact that the attitudes of students and teaching staff towards the inclusion of people with disabilities have been amply studied, there is still very little known about the perceptions and beliefs on these attitudes held by students with disabilities themselves. Thus, taking the relevance of this theme into account, this study aims to go deeper into the ideas, beliefs and subjective perceptions of students with disabilities about the attitudes displayed by their community (teachers and classmates) in their university context.

## **Research process**

### ***Participants***

We asked for participation, on a voluntary basis, from students with disabilities enrolled in a Spanish university. We succeeded in getting a sample of 50 participants. In addition to following standard practice dictated by legislation on data protection and the use of data, we also followed recommendations for conducting research in inclusive education (Parilla 2010). Furthermore, participants were able to stop participating in the study at any moment they wished to.

The study sample was made up of 14 male and 36 female students, with ages ranging between 20 and 60 years old, although the majority of the participants were aged 30. All students were enrolled in degrees in education.

Finally, in relation to disability type, the majority of participants declared themselves as having a physical (16), hearing (14), visual (13) or mental disability (3) (this last category means, specifically, anxiety and/or depression: disorders included in the American Psychiatric Association's 2013 DSM-5), or as having multiple disabilities (4) (generally sensory and motor disabilities).

As can be seen from the above, the sample was heterogeneous in terms of disability type, which means that – although we are aware of the diversity of characteristics contained within this group – we have chosen to use the term 'disability' throughout the article to refer to all the participants in general. In order to protect individual confidentiality, specifics on participants' disabilities have not been detailed, and each participant was given a number for anonymity.

All the procedures used in this study were in accordance with the ethical standards of the relevant institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards on studies involving human participants. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

### **Procedure**

This is the pilot study for a larger investigation that is currently underway at a Spanish university. It is hoped that further studies will be carried out by those responsible for students with disabilities in each faculty, in order to give voice to of students with disabilities enrolled in their faculty, across different academic courses (Enrolment years: 2017/2018, 2018/2019 and 2019/2020).

Those who agreed to participate in said study were explained the study objectives and the manner in which the study would proceed. Once all the information had been received and clarified where necessary, they could then complete the questionnaire. The process of filling it in required approximately 45–60 min. The time invested in collecting completed questionnaires from all the participants was therefore approximately twelve months.

### **Instruments**

The data to be investigated was gathered via two questionnaires relevant to the subject of this investigation. Firstly, we used the Scale of Attitudes towards people with disabilities (Verdugo, Jenaro, and Arias 2002), which was used in similar investigations carried out in the university context (Polo, Fernández, and Fernández 2017, 2020; Polo, Fernández, and Fernández 2020; Vickerman and Blundell 2010).

The scale is divided into five factors: *Assessment of capacities and limitation*; *Recognition/denial of rights*; *Personal involvement*; *Generic qualification*; and,

the last, *Assumption of roles*. As well as capturing attitudes towards disability, this questionnaire also allows us to gather information relating to the socio-demographic characteristics of the person being surveyed and to contact people with disabilities.

The questionnaire *Ideas and attitudes*, created by the educational community of the University of Almeria (Research group on Diversity, Disability and Special Educational Needs), explores perspectives on the educational and social integration of students with disabilities. To create this questionnaire, they initially followed the guidance of experts in the field. Once the first draft had been formulated, it was analysed by experts in education, which led to later versions.

## Results

We begin with a description of the *ideas and beliefs* of students with disabilities; then a descriptive analysis of *attitudes* in order to relate different variables (such as type of disability, gender, age, and course studied).

When it comes to items on **accessing and completing** university studies, the participants showed complete disagreement with respect to several statements, such as: the university not being the most well-adapted place for the academic and professional training of their group; or that there are limitations placed on them when it comes to accessing their qualification or degree. Neither did they consider their disability to be an obstacle; that they never should have started their studies; that they need to make more effort to complete their degree programme (or any other degree course they take), in comparison with their classmates without disabilities.

Nonetheless, they believe it necessary that the university puts in place measures to ensure they are not discriminated against, and that it guarantees them equality of opportunities and access.

With respect to the ideas and beliefs of students with disabilities on the attitudes of **teaching staff** and their **classmates**, they did not believe that either group had difficulties in relating to them, or in working with them. They did not consider that their situations could elicit pity from teaching staff or classmates, nor that it would cause them anxiety. Furthermore, they stated that training and/or information on disabilities is needed, as well as disagreeing that both students and/or teachers should be informed in advance that they will be sharing classes with a student/students with disabilities. Likewise, they indicated that teaching staff take their presence in the classroom into account in order to carry out the necessary adaptations.

In a similar vein, the means and measures that the university puts at their disposition meet their needs, although they agree that access to course



content must be facilitated, adapting the methodology and evaluation as necessary; and that there must be a respectful evaluation of their situation to ensure equal opportunities.

Next, they considered that the university does not have the means to finance every type of adaptation needed to access the curriculum, for which reason they asked for an increase in economic resources to improve the support they receive. At the same time, they agree that there is a need for a central unit which coordinates and assesses students with disabilities, comprising teaching staff and staff from the university administration. Signing a contract of collaboration with public and/or private associations and institutions would also contribute to supporting their needs; as would a specific code of practice for supporting students with disabilities within the university.

### ***The attitudes of students with disabilities***

In general terms, it can be stated that the attitudes that the students perceived towards people with disabilities are very positive. They agree overall with: the conception that is held of them in terms of capacities and performance and how they infer attitudes towards them; that their fundamental rights are recognised; and that the university community is favourably disposed to effectively accommodate and accept people with disabilities in social and work situations.

In relation to global ratings and generic qualifications around the presumed defining personality traits and behaviour of people with disabilities, there were no evaluations that indicated instances of stereotypes, or negative or pejorative tones used towards people with disabilities. Similarly, they positively valued the conceptions that people with disabilities have of themselves.

Subsequently, the influence that the disability type, gender, age and study course of the participants could have on the factors that make up the Scale of Attitudes towards disabilities was studied. (These factors are: *Assessment of capacities and limitations; Recognition/denial of rights; Personal involvement; Generic qualification; Assumption of roles*).

The study carried out here found that all of these variables seem to have an influence on students' perceptions of attitudes towards them, with the exception of disability type.

With regards to gender, female university students presented as having a more positive perception of attitudes towards disability, in comparison with male students.

Furthermore, it was also found that those students ages between 41–50 presented, in general, with more positive perceptions than the participants in other age groups.

Lastly it was observed that, when it came to differences according to degree course studied, those students studying Early-Years Education showed a more positive subjective perception of attitudes towards disability for the variables of *Generic qualification* and *Assumption of Roles*.

## Discussion and conclusions

In spite of advances made in recent years, people with disabilities continue to see their opportunities in accessing, staying in and completing university studies as diminished compared to the population in general, and they consider themselves as experiencing greater social exclusion than the rest of society. It is therefore a priority to find answers on how to avoid exclusion in this context. Attitudes towards disability are a key factor for inclusion (Girli et al. 2016), as detailed not only in this research but in other similar studies, such as that Sánchez-Palomino's study carried out at the University of Almería (2011).

Teacher training is considered to be of primary important when it comes to influencing the quality of inclusive education (López Torrijo 2005), and its influence on attitudes towards disability (Beh-Pajooch 1992; Coutsocostas and Alborz 2010; Lissi et al. 2014; Martínez and Bilbao 2011). In this way, those teachers with little training exhibit more negative attitudes (Coutsocostas and Alborz 2010; González 2019; Moriña et al. 2010; Muñoz, Velásquez, and Asprilla 2018; Sesay 2018; Sevilla, Martín, and Jenaro 2018) than those with targeted knowledge on disability, who show themselves to be more supportive of inclusion (Dorji et al. 2019; Engstrand and Pettersson 2014; Lee et al. 2014; Polo and Aparicio 2018; Sandhu 2017; Schmidt and Ksenja 2015). The positive attitude of teaching staff is one of the main factors in encouraging true inclusion, since it is this – together with the appropriate adaptations – that will make students with disabilities feel that they have the same opportunities as the rest of their classmates (Martínez and Bilbao 2011). In this case, the students surveyed affirmed that, even though the teachers made adaptations to facilitate their learning, they needed specially designed training to do this: something that has also been highlighted in previous research (Sánchez-Palomino 2009).

In relation to their peers, and as found by Langørgen and Magnus (2018), the respondents did not consider their classmates to have difficulties in relating to them or in working with them, which does not concur with data gathered by other authors (Alarcón and Busqués 2014; Babic and Dowling 2015; Sánchez-Palomino 2009, 2011; Sánchez-Palomino and Carrión 2010), which found that, in several cases, students were not prepared to carry out a piece of academic work with classmates with disabilities. This could be attributed to a lack of information on the issue itself, as the information they receive on disability throughout the length of their time at university

could be one of the determinants of their attitudes (Carberry, Waxman, and Mckain 1981; Reina 2003). As argued in other studies (Sánchez-Palomino and Carrión 2010; Sánchez-Palomino 2011), students should be provided with information on students with disabilities, as it would be useful to (among other things) develop a welcome plan, have a central unit that coordinates and assesses the whole educational community around disability access, or to have a special code of practice for the support of students with disabilities.

As well as the ideas and beliefs of students with disabilities that have been presented in this study, there is also an incipient line of analysis, given the scarcity of literature on the topic: the perception of attitudes towards disability held by students with disabilities themselves. In agreement with the findings of this study, previous investigations have also found that students with disabilities perceive their professors and classmates as having fairly inclusive attitudes towards them (Ocampo 2012; Salinas et al. 2013; Sánchez-Palomino and Carrión 2010; Sánchez-Palomino 2011; Tapia and Manosalva 2012; Villafañe, Corrales, and Soto 2016), although it must be acknowledged that there are variations according to gender, age and area/level of studies.

In contrast, no difference was found relative to the type of disability of the respondents, which was not the case in data from the University of Almería, in which it was those students with physical disabilities who had more favourable ideas about their integration into the university. We also found ourselves in agreement with other similar studies (Sánchez-Palomino and Carrión 2010; Sánchez-Palomino 2011), in which it was older students who showed a more positive perception, specifically amongst those enrolled in Early Years Education in the present study, and in Law in Sánchez-Palomino 2011 study. When it comes to the variable of gender, we note that the proportion of women included in the sample is higher: a trend that is repeated in degrees related to education in general: women are more prevalent in the field of Education, making up 77.9% of enrolled students (Ministerio de Universidades 2020). This is a topic that should be addressed in future investigations in order to achieve a homogeneous sample.

We can therefore conclude that the study participants' ideas and beliefs around attitudes towards disability were, in general terms, positive. It should be added that this is a pilot study, meaning that there is a shortage of publications with which to compare this information. As this topic is often under discussion in higher education, this justifies the need to carry out further research with a larger sample size and to incorporate qualitative methodologies to give us access to the information needed to bolster our work in this area.

The need to include students with disabilities in higher education is a booming topic of discussion for several reasons: firstly, the population of

people with a disability condition accessing universities is growing; secondly because the university community needs to be able to serve this population. It is of course imperative that they transform their surroundings to do so (Fontana-Hernández and Vargas-Dengo 2018), by eliminating not only architectural barriers but also psychosocial ones – from which springs the importance of listening to students with disabilities, and learning from how they themselves perceive things.

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