SPANISH UNIVERSITY STUDENTS WITH PSYCHIC DISABILITY: ACCESSIBILITY AND INCLUSIVENESS

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Abstract

According to data from the second report “University and Disability” [1], 17.3% of the Spanish university students have some kind of psychic disability. This percentage decreases higher is the education, being the 6.2% in doctoral studies.

The collective of university students with psychic disabilities is a very heterogeneous and complex group, since include many different situations of social diversity (intellectual disability, psychotic disorders, anxiety disorders or depression, etc.) Furthermore, the symptoms associated with this type of disability difficult university studies in many cases, although it does not have to necessarily assume academic failure. However, the ignorance of these issues may involve a stigma for these students, and may result in a silent or concealment of their situation to the rest of the university community. In addition, lecturers do not have the accurate knowledge to confront the daily academic and personal problems of these students.

In this paper, we study the current status of students with psychic disability in Spanish universities. We seek two objectives: 1/ establish a state of the art, and 2/ to analyse the information that Spanish Universities give about the attention to these students. To get these two goals, we collect the measures of promotion of inclusiveness used in higher education, and we suggest some possible improvements to help on the development of its academic activity.

We get two main conclusions: first, inclusiveness of students with psychic disabilities has a lack of support from the professorship, but not from the Disability Centers; second, there is no virtual assistance to students with psychic disabilities on the University websites.

Keywords: university, psychic disability, mental illnesses, accessibility, inclusiveness.

1 INTRODUCTION

According to the second report of “University and Disability” [1], the 17.3% of degree students with functional diversity in Spanish universities (approximately 3,100 students) have psychic disabilities, decreasing its representation in higher education up to the 6.2% in doctoral studies.

The psychic disability implies the presence of various disorders in the adaptive capacity, maintained on a permanent basis, and assuming emotional disturbances, cognitive or behavior [2,3]. Within the group of psychic disabilities, we can found intellectual disability and disease or mental disorder. In the first group, in the university context is feasible to find cases of students with mild intellectual disability. The second group includes mainly organic mental disorders, psychotic disorders, mood disorders, anxiety disorders, and personality and adjustment disorders [4].

To address the concept of mental illness it is necessary to define mental health. The World Health Organization (WHO) (2013) [2] defines mental health as “A state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease”. It is related to the promotion of well-being, the prevention of mental disorders, and the treatment and rehabilitation of people affected by mental disorders”.

Therefore, the psychic disability is a very heterogeneous group of problematic and social diversity, where, in addition, it coexists several added disabilities. To provide figures on this university student group is a big challenge, since many students do not report to the universities of their mental disorder either because the social stigma associated with their problem, or the disorder starts after begin university studies -since the higher education can be a triggering factor [5].

Spanish legislation ensures the interests and rights of access to higher education for persons with disabilities and their social inclusion [6,7,8]; however, Spanish universities have significant limitations to ensure their optimum accessibility [1].
The present work aims to provide a state of matter of the situation of the Spanish university students with psychic disabilities and to analyze the information provided by their websites about the academic approach to this group of students, by assuming this is an important point of information for the access to the university centers.

2 INCLUSIVE EDUCATION OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES PSYCHICALLY HANDICAPPED CREW IN SPAIN

University students with psychic disabilities are faced with numerous educational barriers: novel situation, prejudices, attitudes of rejection, tedious and stressful procedures, together with their inherent limitations of their own disability, as attentional problems, memory, medication side effects, etc.

To meet these requirements, it is necessary that the whole of the educational university community has available information and relevant training on psychic disability. There are three processes not observed in practice. Firstly, many students do not report their problematic. Secondly, both the teaching and administrative staff have many doubts about how to proceed [5]. And thirdly, the majority of the services of the attention to the disability of the Spanish universities focuses on programs of attention or adaptations for students with physical or sensory disability [1,5,9].

Several studies indicate that universities should offer programs for students with psychic disabilities that focus on the control of the stressors and agents in formation of the educational community university, mainly teaching and administrative staff [10]. For example, the Observatory University and Disability (2013) [5], reflects the general indications of Schelock (1995), that focus on promoting the inclusion and participation, promoting learning and the satisfaction, and offer to help the academic and social development of these students. These proposals are fleshed out in the form of a series of guidelines to accommodate students both before and during university studies. In this way, before they begin their studies, it raises the possibility of informing the students from the disability attention centers and the student support services, in addition to leveraging this contact to find out about the characteristics of this group. It is also desirable to have an individual interview to guide each student about the subjects that may be of their interest, and be able to do a follow up post, apart from producing a record of the university students with disabilities and those who look for support or not. Subsequently, in the course of their studies, it is important to know the learning style of each student and emphasize the coordination between the teachers to meet their needs. It is also good to provide each student reference contacts at the level of both the faculty and the students, and a place where they can exchange experiences and training with other students with disabilities.

If we focus on teaching, it is considered advisable to specify goals and contents, provide material before each class, use visual information in the explanations, use a clear and simple language, giving coherence to verbal and nonverbal communication. It also helps binding the contents with everyday experiences and items between yes, establish routines in the classroom, strengthen the interventions, allow leave the classroom or enter later, inform the delivery deadlines activities, and make flexible the time carrying out exams, activities or presentations (individual, group, in class, in the office…).

The Observatory University and Disability (2013) [5] insists on emphasizing the training of the teaching and non-teaching staff to know the characteristics of these students and how to interact with them, both directly and in a virtual form. In this sense, it raises a number of aspects to consider in order to adjust the web design to the rules laid down to ensure accessibility. And, furthermore, some indications are collected to ensure an accessible physical environment, with signposts, avoiding glare and noise, with good lighting and digital whiteboards, and appropriate furniture.

In addition to the general indications for students with psychic disabilities, we should take into account that the Asperger syndrome is one of the problems with greater educational care on several universities (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Universidad de Zaragoza, Universidad de Sevilla, Universidad de Málaga and Universidad de Burgos) [11]. As pointed from the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid [12], the university community has to be ready to receive students with Asperger Syndrome or high-functioning autism, allowing full integration. To get this goal, the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid created the Program APÚNTATE in 2001, giving support, training and research. It currently includes the universities of Zaragoza, Seville, Málaga, and Burgos.

In the same way that has been raised this program to meet and look after the students with Asperger's Syndrome, it would be desirable encourage similar proposals to foster the integration of all university students with psychic disabilities.
3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Data
We analyze the information that the websites of 79 Spanish universities offer to provide service, information, and support to students with psychic disabilities. Of the 79 universities, 29 are public and 50 private ones; and 6 are online or to distance and 73 are in-person ones.

3.2 Variables
We analyze four variables about the information in the websites of the Spanish universities:
- Existence of general information about care services to disability or diversity
- Existence of a specific guide for the attention to students with psychic disabilities
- Existence of information on specialized attention to students with psychic disabilities
- Existence of information on specific assistance to students with psychic disabilities

4 RESULTS
Although only two universities -that do not have any student with disabilities- of the 79 Spanish ones analyzed do not have an in-person disability center, 15% of the websites of those universities (Table 1) did not report general information of educational attention to students with disabilities.

Table 1. Web Information about attention to students with psychic disabilities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students with disabilities</th>
<th>Students with psychic disabilities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Web Information</td>
<td>Specific guidance on attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>67 (85%)</td>
<td>10 (13%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: websites of Spanish universities.

In addition, only 10 universities (12.7%) provide a specific guide to educational services for students with psychic disabilities: Universitat de Girona, Universidad de Granada, Universidad de Jaén, Universidad de Málaga, Universidad de Zaragoza, Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, Universidade de Vigo, Universidad de Deusto, and Universidad Católica de San Antonio.

At the same time, 9 of the above-mentioned institutions (11.4%) -except Universidad de Zaragoza-, indicate in their websites that they provide specialized attention to this student group; on the other hand, the Universidad Miguel Hernández, although not presented in their web page a specific guide in the field of psychic disability, it claims to have specialized attention for these students.

On the other hand, only 7 of the universities (8.9%) report information on specific study aid for this university community: Universidad Internacional de Andalucía, Universidad Nacional a Distancia, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, Universidad Miguel Hernández, Universidade de Vigo, Universidad de Deusto, and Universidad Católica de San Antonio.

The Universidad de Jaén is the only one that sets the specific aid that offers to students with psychic disabilities that present specific learning difficulties and mental illness. The rest of the universities that claims having specific aid does not indicate the type of problem they addressed.

5 DISCUSSION
The results found in the present work confirm the findings made by other authors: very few universities report a specific educational attention for students with psychic disability [1,5,9].

Bearing in mind that the information provided by the web pages is supposed to be an important access point to the possible enrollment in the universities, presumably the students with this type of
disability may opt for those universities who report having a specific educational attention to this group.

On the other hand, the fact that only a very small percentage of the Spanish universities report information in the subject of psychic disability may be due to a lack of training in the field, either to understand and know the various problems of this kind of diversity, or to provide and carry out a specific educational response [5, 10]. In fact, we have noticed that the universities do not specify what type of psychic disability they provide support, except the University of Jaén, which refers to students with specific learning difficulties or with mental illness. Furthermore, some of the universities that have specific information on psychic disability often include it in the category of “other disabilities”.

It is surprising that certain universities -such as Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Universidad de Sevilla and Universidad de Burgos-, that are part of the Program APÚNTATE [12], which aim is to help the students with Asperger’s Syndrome [11], do not have a specific educational guide for student with psychic disabilities. And, however, the Universidad de Málaga and the Universidad de Zaragoza appear in the list as a part of the program.

Perhaps the dissemination of specific study aids offered to the collective with disabilities and made by the universities is not entirely suitable or complete. Maybe there are concrete actions to address this group, but the information is not spread in a general way but in an individualized manner. And this, as we have pointed out above, could discourage students from enrolling in a university.

Finally, only the Universidad de Granada has guide attention to teachers of students with certain disabilities or cognitive language, which also leaves out the collective that ultimately is going to pay attention and teach to this student body.

6 CONCLUSIONS

Students with psychic disabilities require a specific educational attention to reduce or eliminate the barriers that affect their university studies. In addition, the faculty also needs information and care guides toward students with psychic disabilities.

While it is true that the percentage of these students is lower than in other types of disabilities, such as the physical disability or sensory disabilities, the data on the representation of students in the university community are far away from being real. In many cases, students with this disability do not report their situation to the academic center to avoid the stigma or rejection associated, which greatly complicates effective educational attention. To remove these prejudices and the potential stigma requires training in the subject led to the entire educational community. This work encourages the university centers to receive and provide training on this set of problems, since the universities are obliged to offer an inclusive education that meets all the educational needs.

Besides, it would be necessary that the centers of attention to students with disabilities will be specialists in the education and care of students with psychic disabilities, in a manner that ensures the successful completion of their university studies.

It is very likely that a student with psychic disability pass unnoticed if it is compared with other types of students with disabilities, such as the case of students with motor or visual deficits, but the educational needs are no less significant for having a disability less visible toward the other. In fact, it is possible that the invisibility of this type of disability is related to the great invisibility of information that can be found at the webpage of the disability centers of the Spanish universities.

It is clear that their needs, and, therefore, the specific aid cover many aspects (pre-departure orientation to university studies, co-ordination among the faculty, provide reference contacts, provide individualized support, more flexible standards of behavior in the classroom, etc.), but it is essential to improve the university system to achieve their full integration. However, all this can be summarized as the need for training of university staff, teaching and non-teaching, to interact with the students. With this, with the collaboration of the entire educational community, it is possible to get the full integration of students with disabilities in virtual and in-person educational environments.

However, we are aware that not all information can be found directly on the web. In fact, 97% of Spanish universities has an onsite service of attention to disability in their respective campuses. However, these data do not remove the responsibility of universities to provide all possible information in virtual societies, more if it should be one that is oriented to students or prospective students with disabilities.
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