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Getting ahead in the online university: Disclosure experiences of students with apparent and hidden disabilities

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ABSTRACT

Disabled students must communicate their condition to the university to access accommodations, but many do not disclose or do so late. We explored identity management and disclosure decisions in a sample of 34 students from a Spanish open university through email interviews. Results show that these students carefully assess disclosing their disability due to the emotional risks involved and that the administrative process poses an obstacle. Students with apparent disabilities (i.e., physical and sensory) emphasize self-sufficiency and normalization of their presence, while students with hidden disabilities (i.e., mental disorders and learning challenges) focus on avoiding stigma and increasing credibility. Online universities should acknowledge the distinct needs derived from the different types of disabilities, provide personalized support, and facilitate disclosure procedures.

1. Introduction

Students with disabilities (SWD) have a growing presence in higher education institutions, particularly in distance universities (Kent et al., 2018), both in the international (Santos et al., 2019) and the Spanish context (Fundación Universia, 2021a). This group of students perceives advantages in the virtual teaching modality, mainly in terms of the accessibility of materials and the campus (Reyes et al., 2021), flexibility in the organization of academic work, or the invisibilisation of their disabilities (Kent, 2015). However, a high percentage of SWD do not reveal their condition to the institution when they experience difficulties during their studies (De Cesarei, 2015). This decision prevents them from accessing academic accommodations that allow for equal conditions with the rest of their peers without disabilities and contributes to worse outcomes and higher dropout rates (Veitch et al., 2018).

This case study is centered on the Open University of Catalonia (UOC), an open, distance university, and explores the reasons why SWD decide whether or not to disclose their disabilities to the institution, the negotiations involved, and its impact in terms of identity management. Following a qualitative approach, our analysis focuses on the subjective experience of students and, particularly, how it is affected depending on whether they live with either apparent or hidden disabilities.

1.1. The dilemma of disclosure in the context of online higher education

Disabled students have, proportionally, a higher presence in online universities than in brick-and-mortar ones (Fundación Universia, 2021a; Kotera et al., 2021). However, research on the barriers they face in virtual universities remains scarce (Heindel, 2014).

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One of the main reasons why SWD choose this modality of higher education is the invisibilisation of the disability it provides (Kent, 2015). However, this invisibility produces contradictory effects. On the one hand, it avoids the discrimination and stigma associated with face-to-face interactions, but at the same time, it can lead to neglect of students' needs which would be apparent in a face-to-face environment (Kent, 2015).

In primary and secondary education, schools are required to identify SWD and provide the accommodations they need. However, in higher education, SWD must actively decide to disclose their disability to the faculty or Student Services to gain access to these accommodations. This reversal of the burden of liability may cause discomfort, doubt, and withdrawal (Barnard-Brak et al., 2010). This situation has serious repercussions since available evidence shows that SWD who disclose their disability to their universities are more likely to receive specific information on how to access reasonable adjustments (National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2015). In turn, SWD who make use of accommodations are more likely to persist and finish their studies compared to those who do not (Cole & Cawthon, 2015; Fossey et al., 2017; Grimes et al., 2017).

Students weigh both the academic benefit associated with obtaining the accommodations they need for their particular circumstances and the emotional cost of disclosing their disability (Nolan et al., 2015). A powerful reason for not disclosing is the need to move away from stigmatized identity and pass as "normal" (Lightner et al., 2012). In addition, the context of interaction in which students make this decision is relevant. An environment that provides security and autonomy (Breneman et al., 2017), as well as a culture of trust in the institution (Wang, 2014), are facilitators of disclosure. On the contrary, a negative experience will increase SWD's perception of stigma, which will lead them to not disclose in the future and therefore not receive the help and support they require (De Cesarei, 2015).

The procedure available to students to communicate their disability may constitute a barrier in itself. The declaration of disability is not a unique event but a process that extends throughout the academic career of students and involves multiple interlocutors in different contexts (Price et al., 2017). In this regard, it is important to bear in mind that approximately half of SWD do not report their condition to their institution at any time (Grimes et al., 2017; Kimball et al., 2016). Additionally, in the case of online universities, they often face the situation of having to reveal their disability, each semester, in every course they take (Kent, 2016). This tedious and repetitive procedure discourages disclosure, especially given that the burden of proof falls overwhelmingly on the applicant (Magnus & Tossebro, 2014).

1.2. Diversity in disability: students with apparent and hidden disabilities

In this study, we use the term "apparent disabilities" to refer to physical or sensory disabilities, which usually correspond to those that are most visible, and have traditionally been recognized by institutions (Kimball et al., 2016; Koch & Rumrill, 2016). People with apparent disabilities more easily access official certifications and experience disability as part of their identity in a more stable manner than students with other types of disabilities (Riddell & Weedon, 2014).

On the other hand, we use the term "hidden disabilities" (Kranke et al., 2013) to refer to learning disabilities and mental disorders. Students with such conditions account for an increasing percentage of SWD in higher education institutions (Thompson-Ebanks & Jarman, 2018). However, they often do not have easy access to official certifications, as they often live with invisible and borderline disorders that are not easily recognized from a medical and institutional perspective (Fox & Kim, 2004). This aspect adds complexity not only to their academic experience but also to the organization of the institutional response to their needs (Moriña et al., 2020). In this sense, Grimes et al. (2017, 2019) note that there is a largely invisible population of students with these types of disabilities who do not record or report their difficulties. In fact, they often do not even feel identified with the label "person with disabilities".

The distinction between these two SWD groups is highly relevant, as the literature shows significant differences in decisions around disclosure processes. For example, students with sensory disabilities, whether visual or auditory, disclose their conditions much more readily than those with disabilities with a higher associated stigma, such as mental disorders (Martin, 2010) or learning challenges (Kent, 2015). On the other hand, the context is also decisive. In face-to-face institutions, students with visible disabilities disclose their conditions involuntarily and immediately (De Cesarei, 2015), while students with hidden disabilities have more room to choose whether to disclose or not and to whom. In contrast, online universities render all SWD equal, making all disabilities invisible by default, and thus provide students with apparent disabilities with more freedom regarding disclosure. But other differences persist since students with apparent disabilities are more likely to disclose than students with hidden disabilities. In addition, the latter often disclose too late and experience feelings of guilt, shame, or a sense of taking advantage of their disability (Barnard-Brak & Sulak, 2010). This is because students with hidden disabilities are especially sensitive to the processes of stigmatization and discrimination that can occur after disclosure (Grimes et al., 2020; Kimball et al., 2016; Kranke et al., 2013), to considering that the accommodations do not meet their needs (Grimes et al., 2017), or to preferring to remain "unlabelled" (Cole & Cawthon, 2015). Online environments help to avoid the likely adverse effects derived from disclosing a disability, like the emotional upheaval involved or the stigma attached; but they do so at the high cost of losing its potential benefits, such as a better academic outcome or increased persistence (Barnard-Brak et al., 2010).

Finally, this research has also explored the experience of students living with multiple disabilities, regardless of whether their dominant disability is either apparent or hidden. This particular situation has not been widely studied so far, despite its relative frequency (Kent, 2016). Our participants with multiple disabilities have allowed us to address the comparison, in their own personal experiences, of the differentiated perceptions that both types of disability generate, as well as the effects that these experiences produce on their disclosure dynamics and their academic career in general.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Context of the study

This study was conducted at UOC, a fully online higher education institution offering a variety of bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. In the 2020–2021 academic year, the University had 87,500 students enrolled in its programmes, of which 1944 (2.2%) had a certified disability (Open University of Catalonia, 2022), making it the second in Spain by number of SWD enrolled (Fundación Universia, 2021b). The main legislation guiding the inclusion of SWD in higher education in Spain is the Royal Decree 1/2013 and the Organic Law 4/2007 on Universities. The former covers the general rights of disabled people and social inclusion, while the latter seeks to ensure effective equality of SWD with their counterparts by compelling universities to provide specific support programmes and personalized academic accommodations. At UOC, support and guidance for SWD are embedded within the general Student Services. Students can address their requests either to the Student Services, the faculty they are working with in the classrooms, or the academic advisor, who accompanies all the students enrolled at the University throughout their whole academic path.

2.2. Participants

We sent an invitation to participate in our study to 1547 students with disabilities with the collaboration of the University Student Services. We received feedback from 114 students interested in participating in the study, of whom we selected 34 to be part of the final sample. We utilized a purposive, criterion-based sample method (Ritchie et al., 2014) to collect a variety of students' experiences but did not intend for it to be statistically representative, considering the exploratory, qualitative nature of our study design.

We based the selection of the sample on two criteria: the type of disability and the stage of their bachelor's degree studies they were at. On the one hand, concerning the type of disability, the objective was to represent both students with apparent (physical and sensory) and hidden (mental and learning disorders) disabilities in similar proportions. On the other hand, we considered the stage at which the students were by classifying them into three groups: Students in the initial stage of their bachelor's degree studies (up to 60 ECTS credits obtained), in the intermediate stage (between 60 and 180 ECTS credits obtained) and in the final stage (between 180 and 240 ECTS credits obtained) or recently graduated. Thus, our study allows representation of students with little experience in online learning and those with a longer academic trajectory at the University. In addition, we considered the participants coming from a range of bachelor's degree programmes. Table 1 displays the characteristics of the sample.

2.3. Instruments

The research was based on a qualitative research design, via e-mail interviews. This medium is particularly favourable for accessing groups such as SWD as it is perceived as less stigmatizing than conventional face-to-face interviews (Benford & Standen, 2011). To draw up the interview guide we reviewed the literature on the experience of SWD in online higher education institutions (Kent, 2015, 2016; Kent et al., 2018), paying special attention to disclosure of disability (Barnard-Brak et al., 2010; Kranke et al., 2013) and the conditions of this process (Cole & Cawthon, 2015; Lightner et al., 2012; Wang, 2014).

The interview included 10 open-ended questions, organized thematically into three blocks: context, communication, and recommendations. In the context block, we included 5 questions related to the type of disability of the participants and its impact on their studies. In the communication block, there were 3 questions about the process of disclosing a disability, the reasons for deciding whether or not to do so, and the circumstances surrounding this decision. Finally, in the recommendations block, we asked about the main elements that should be considered to improve their academic experience. One last question was a request to openly bring up any other issues relevant to the participants that had not been addressed in the interview.

Table 1
Characteristics of the participants.

Characteristics	Number (%)
Gender	
Female	21 (62%)
Male	13 (38%)
Age	
20 - 29 years	7 (21%)
30 - 39 years	9 (26%)
40 - 49 years	12 (35%)
50 - 59 years	6 (18%)
Stage in education	
Initial stage	12 (35%)
Intermediate stage	13 (39%)
Final stage or graduates	9 (26%)
Type of disability	
Apparent	18 (53%)
Physical (mobility difficulties and chronic diseases)	12
Sensory (visual and auditory)	6
Hidden	16 (47%)
Mental disorders (depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and personality disorder)	10
Learning disorders (dyslexia, ADHD)	6
Total	34

2.4. Procedure

We conducted the interviews in December 2019. The procedure for the exchange of questions and answers followed the recommendations available in the literature regarding e-mail interviewing (Bowden & Galindo-González, 2015; Meho, 2006). We sent the questions in two consecutive blocks of 5 questions each. After receiving the answers to each of the blocks, we sent out additional questions with the aim of clarifying the answers to the previous questions and delving deeper into the topics under investigation. The average response times for each interaction were between 1 and 3 days.

At all times, our goal was to maximize the response rate, maintain the interest of participants through a fluid dialog, obtain quality responses for analysis, and minimize dropout among participants. Finally, after the exchange from the two question blocks, as well as their respective follow-up questions, all participants completed the interview within a maximum period of 16 days. Only one participant abandoned the study before completing the second block.

2.5. Data analysis

To analyze the information obtained in the fieldwork, we used thematic analysis. We followed the six-step protocol described in Braun and Clarke (2006) from a reflexive standpoint (Clarke et al. 2017). This reflexive approach was adopted to make the research team aware of our own assumptions and position in this study. In our case, the main source of concern had to do with the fact of being non-disabled researchers studying the experience of disabled students. Not being able to fully overcome this vulnerability, we were at least aiming for “empathetic neutrality” (Holmes, 2020).

Although no transcription of the answers was necessary given the written nature of the email interviews, we had to organize the textual responses of each participant’s interview, clean up the data of irrelevant fragments (questions, colloquial introductory phrases), and match the format for the analysis. Then, we utilized the NVivo software to process data and facilitate analysis.

After several readings of the corpus, we outlined an initial set of codes. Some of these codes were progressively recombined into new broader codes, while some others were eventually discarded. To check the reliability of the process, the authors held frequent debriefing sessions where disagreements were discussed and resolved. This iterative process of progressive refinement of the codes was simultaneously accompanied by the identification of subthemes and overarching themes.

3. Results

We identified three major themes in the responses of the participants: identity and stigma (117 references from the data analysis), disclosure experiences (161), and suggestions on how to improve institutional support (78). Following, we present our results based on these overarching themes.

3.1. Identity and stigma

In this theme, the students referred to how they perceived themselves as SWD, how they felt they were perceived by others, and how they experienced their disability in an online university setting. The following arguments were especially highlighted by students with apparent disabilities, although they are positions shared, less explicitly, by the rest of SWD.

Firstly, participants repeatedly expressed a preference not to be treated differently. In part, so as not to feel judged or pitied, but also to not be perceived as people trying to take advantage of their personal circumstances.

would not like the teachers to think that I want to be favoured in any way or that I want to use my physical limitations to be treated differently than my colleagues. I do not want to be judged on my personal circumstances.

Students with apparent disabilities want to go unnoticed and therefore be treated like everyone else. This is easy for them at an online university, as it allows them to make observable differences invisible. However, as set out in the University’s evaluation model, at the end of each semester they must sit exams at a physical location. These tests are often lived with anxiety by students with physical disabilities, as the benefits of going unnoticed through the online course disappear, and they must face again the difficulties of face-to-face interactions and the lack of environmental adjustments to their conditions.

Secondly, students with apparent disabilities emphasized their ability and capacity to progress in an environment where they are at a disadvantage. Coping with difficulties promotes their resilience and allows them to develop strategies to step up and build useful life tools. In addition, this group of students underlined the need to be the protagonists of their visibility and presence at the University. When they perform self-affirming actions that go along this line, this situation typically results in a net gain in terms of self-confidence and self-assurance.

I think it is you that has to manifest your own needs (...) Life for a person with a disability is more difficult minute by minute and you have to learn to develop strategies to meet the challenges of everyday life.

Students with hidden disabilities, on the other hand, highlighted the different needs they have regarding those of students with apparent disabilities. This group pointed to two types of psychological anxiety triggers, both related to social interaction. One has to do with the fact that the final exams are in person. The other relates to the methodology of the courses, specifically to participation in group tasks.

The main challenges or problems have been, at the top of the list, carrying out group tasks. They are a real torture for me, they cause me anxiety and unrest.

Students with mental health problems perceive stigmatization in a particularly marked manner. In contrast, in the case of students with learning challenges such as dyslexia and other language problems, in-person tests generate more of a sense of alienation and inadequacy than anxiety.

In general, this group of students considered that hidden disabilities are not taken as much into account as physical disabilities. Mostly because they are not visible issues, but also because of prejudice or lack of knowledge on the part of the different actors within the institution with whom they must negotiate accommodation requests.

If you have a physical disability (deaf, blind, wheelchair, etc.), it's like it's more understandable (at all levels, not just academic, but also social). But if it is emotional, psychological, basically something not going quite right in your own little head, managing emotions is a whole world. It's not just that they do not conceive these things as problems, but on top of it all, if they find out, they look at you weirdly.

Finally, we have to consider the case of a few of our participants that live with multiple disabilities. These students go through very complex vital and academic experiences, in which the limitations imposed by their conditions overlap with the lack of receptivity on the part of their interlocutors or the lack of accommodation of the context to their needs. When the more salient of their disabilities is a hidden one, they too find more institutional recognition for this type of disability is lacking. In the following quote, a student with fibromyalgia, depressive disorder, and spinal problems points out the different perceptions that their different conditions cause.

Of course, I notice differences because they hardly even take fibromyalgia into account. Perhaps added aspects such as my depressive anxiety syndrome may make more of a point, but in my case, I only get attention when I show my spine and [they] see all the surgery (...) It is also difficult, in general, to explain to anyone what my disability is, as the reality is that I have multiple and very varied symptoms.

3.2. Disclosure experiences

In this theme, participants discussed the reasons that led them to reveal their disability or not, the factors that facilitated or inferred their disclosure, and the people with whom they preferred to share their concerns.

Students with disabilities, both apparent and hidden, agreed on certain arguments. One of them was their lack of knowledge about the procedures needed to communicate their disability, or about the services and accommodations they are entitled to. Many students have the feeling of having to cope by themselves in their university career, without sufficient support from the institution.

No one had told me, and no one at the University informed me. The feeling was that "you have the information here and you use it the way you want." Fend for yourself!" Then, you do so, and you try, and you ask for all the help you can.

Another of the most related reasons was finding themselves in the situation of having to repeat the revelation to obtain accommodations each semester, which implies addressing each of the new professors for each new course.

It is a bit annoying to have to ask for the accommodations for the tests every semester (...) There are many lifelong disabilities. This should be taken into account and accommodations should be made for the duration of the degree.

In addition, students perceive that, once they decide to reveal their disability, the negotiation process depends too much on the particular professor they have to deal with. Sometimes, they find that teachers do not even know what steps to take with students that have a disability.

I told the other professors, and no one knew what to do, not even my tutor. I was denied [the accommodation] until I did some research and found a university document where it stated that I should receive a more careful follow-up.

SWD experience discouragement from bad experiences in negotiations, often resulting in a reluctance or refusal to communicate their disability in the future. On other occasions, it is the desire to be autonomous and self-sufficient that inhibits the declaration of disability. In any case, when students decide to do so, they carefully weigh the advantages and disadvantages. That is the potential benefits that will be gained through academic accommodations and the risks that the statement can pose, mainly in emotional terms.

Students with hidden disabilities feel they have low credibility when dealing with various institutional actors, as this student with ADHD commented:

When I explained my situation to the professors, some were very kind and gave me advice and a little margin. Others took it as an excuse and told me that they could not do anything because we should all have equal opportunities. I imagine that it is because of the controversy that exists in relation to this disorder, many people do not think it is real.

In general, this group of students thinks that their particular needs are not adequately reflected in the sections of the virtual campus that refer to people with disabilities and that channel their requests.

Many of the commented drawbacks are overcome when students get the official certificate that recognizes their disability, which is an important step forward for them to relieve their anxiety about disclosure and speed up the bureaucracy. Finally, SWD pointed out that the disclosure of their disability to professors usually does not require a prior trust relationship but rather stems from the sheer need for accommodations. In contrast, disclosing to fellow students does indeed require good prior bonding or friendship.

3.3. Suggestions on how to improve institutional support

In this last block, SWD expressed their suggestions on how the institution may improve its support services. The most widespread proposal was to revise the disclosure procedure so that it does not have to be repeated every semester for every course, because, as

several students noted, “disabilities do not disappear in one semester.” Our participants also suggested the need to have a protocol for all the processes, to have specific Student Services aimed at SWD, to receive more information about their rights as a group, and to encourage awareness campaigns aimed at the entire university community.

SWD also expressed the need to gain a presence in the institution as a specific group, to feel their voices recognized and heard, to be received proactively, but also to receive personalized accompaniment throughout their academic career.

First of all, given the diversity of people with disabilities and their diverse needs, I would ask, individually, what each person's reality is and what specific needs we may have.

SWD considered empathy and support to be very important cross-sectional factors in their interaction with the institution's academic staff, a perception especially highlighted by people with mental disorders.

Someday I would like to receive an e-mail from the professor, tutor, head of studies, or the committee for disabled student care that simply says: "Hi J, how are you? How is the semester going? Can we help you with anything? You know that, although virtually, we are here." And one question: Will there be a turning point at this University regarding the care of students with a disability that stems from a mental disorder?

The students with hidden disabilities once again showed differential needs that translate into specific demands, such as having a psychological support service.

In the case of students with mental problems, technical competence in communicating with them and knowing what information to provide, such as social and emotional competence, is so important: A lot of patience, empathy, and flexibility are needed. The student cannot be perceived as being judged nor evaluated, they just need to feel heard and supported.

4. Conclusions and discussion

This study explored the diversity of experiences disabled students undergo throughout their academic careers at an online university. Specifically, we addressed the management of their identity and the negotiation around disclosure in order to gain access to academic accommodations. Our main conclusions are presented below.

4.1. Disability disclosure is a dilemma that permeates the students' experience

As in previous research (Barnard-Brak et al., 2010; Brenman et al., 2017; Grimes, 2019), our participants also think that the decision to disclose or not to disclose their disability is one of the main dilemmas they face during their learning experience. When they finally decide to do so, they have often carefully assessed the risks and benefits it can bring. For SWD, disclosing means giving up privacy on a particularly sensitive aspect of their identity and exposing themselves to emotional risks, arising from the perception of stigma, rejection, or distancing from “normalcy”. On the other hand, the benefits they expect are primarily academic, since obtaining the accommodations often makes the difference between passing the courses or not doing so.

Participants with apparent disabilities appear to disclose more frequently than the group with hidden disabilities. However, when they avoid doing so, their motivations include the desire to feel self-sufficient and autonomous. On the other hand, the group with hidden disabilities experiences more credibility problems regarding their issues. For these students, obtaining an official certification of their disability is often more complicated than for the group with apparent disabilities. When they finally get it, as is the case with our participants, it helps them feel legitimized to ask for the support they need and avoid the perception of them taking advantage of their situation. This perception is very common in students with hidden disabilities and has been repeatedly pointed out in the literature (Barnard-Brak & Sulak, 2010; Ryan, 2007). On the other hand, this group of students is often less likely to disclose, and do so later, putting their academic results at risk (Cole & Cawthon, 2015).

According to Wang (2014), establishing a trusting relationship is a prerequisite for disclosing a disability. However, our participants only agree with this statement regarding their fellow students. When it comes to revealing their difficulties to their professors or the Student Services, the motivation to do so arises from the strictest need and urgency to access the accommodations they require, even if their confidence in their interlocutors is diminished by prior negative experiences.

4.2. The disclosure process involves a recurring negotiation with uncertain results

A significant number of SWD, especially those in the early stages of their studies, are unaware of the services they are entitled to and the process for accessing them. A very common feeling among them is that they have to “fend for themselves” without sufficient support and follow-up from the institution. In addition, once students know the procedures for revealing their disability, and thus access accommodations, the way the process itself is conducted can be discouraging (Kent, 2016; Price et al., 2017). Our participants experience the disclosure procedure as a repetitive and bureaucratized process. On top of that, the results they obtain are often excessively dependent on the predisposition of the professors assigned at any given time.

We reckon that, as Grimes et al. (2017) point out for the Australian context, it is very likely there is a hidden population of SWD at our university who do not declare their situation through established procedures and therefore do not register as such. These authors remark that the causes of this situation may have to do with the lack of knowledge of their rights and the procedures for making them effective, the lack of personal identification with the disability label, or the discouraging effect caused by prior negative disclosure experiences. In this regard, all these circumstances have been repeatedly pointed out by our participants.

4.3. Students with apparent and hidden disabilities display differentiated identities and needs

There are several identities within the SWD group interviewed. Far from being a homogenous population, they present traits that obey very different logics and needs, some of which are at odds with each other.

Students with apparent disabilities exhibit less ambivalence about the disability label than students with hidden disabilities. Riddell and Weedon (2014) point out that people with apparent disabilities incorporate this feature more steadily into their identity while wanting to be perceived as “normal” people and avoid being stigmatized or receiving paternalistic treatment. Having easier access to an official certification than students with hidden disabilities contributes to this fact, as the nature of their condition and the rights that its recognition entails are rarely up for debate.

Riddell and Weedon also remark that the adoption of the SWD identity brings more benefits than harm in higher education. According to our results, this is especially true for students with apparent disabilities, but not so much for students with hidden disabilities, especially if they have not obtained certification. The latter group of students experience their disability as a less stable feature within their identity and therefore display greater ambivalence toward their identification as a SWD. Contributing factors include the fear of stigma and discrimination experienced by students with mental disorders (Kranke et al., 2013; Martin, 2010) and the lack of awareness and knowledge about their conditions experienced by students with learning challenges (Lipka et al., 2020). Indeed, these students’ perceptions are in line with the available evidence (Bunbury, 2020) highlighting how professors and other university staff often struggle to acknowledge these conditions and trust students asking for accommodations, particularly when hidden disabilities are uncertified.

Both groups of SWD also express distinct needs. Students with apparent disabilities, from a position in which they enjoy greater recognition by the institution, demand greater presence and visibility. While, from a more peripheral position in terms of recognition and entitlement, the hidden disability group demands more understanding, empathy, and support. Moreover, the psychological anxiety triggers (Kent, 2015) are also very different. While students with apparent disabilities highlight aspects related to accessibility and usability, students with hidden disabilities place more emphasis on social interaction. Beyond these differences, all SWD agreed in expressing the need for the institution to take them more into account as a group, to see a greater representation of their position, and to have their voices effectively heard.

4.4. Students with multiple disabilities have a distinctive perspective on the different perceptions triggered by apparent and hidden disabilities

A significant portion of the SWD population lives with more than one disability, with students with a mental disability as well as a physical disability being the most frequent case (Kent, 2016). However, there is little literature available exploring the particularly complex experiences of these students in the context of higher education. When this population is studied in other environments, it is often done from a medical perspective (Banks & Kaschak, 2003; Koch & Rumrill, 2016) or without specifically addressing the joint felt experience of the different types of disabilities (Hernández, 2011).

In this sense, our participants with multiple disabilities have a particular point of view that allows them to compare, in their lived experiences, the different reactions caused by hidden or apparent disabilities. In general, these students confirm that, in dealing with institutional agents, both types of disabilities are treated unevenly. When the hidden disability is dominant, these students have more credibility problems, a greater perception of stigma, and their experience in the negotiations following disclosure is more complicated, as well as often having more uncertain results. Their points, therefore, confirm the difficulties reported by the group of students with hidden disabilities.

4.5. Implications for practice

The results of this study lead to some recommendations regarding attention to disabled students at online higher education institutions. First, advancing towards an inclusive curriculum that removes barriers for all students beyond sheer accessibility (Reyes et al., 2021) may make the need for individual accommodations less frequent (Bunbury, 2020), thus benefiting non-disclosing SWD. Otherwise, it is necessary to provide personalized support and follow-up to SWD also encompassing socio-emotional aspects (Reyes et al., 2021). Secondly, institutions must be aware of the different needs of people with apparent and hidden disabilities, as well as those with multiple disabilities. Thirdly, it is important to establish an agile disclosure protocol. In this sense, a unique but flexible application would preserve SWD’s autonomy and right to privacy, allowing them to regularly update their disclosure preferences (Kent, 2016): whether they would rather disclose or not, to whom, and for how long. This procedure would avoid the need to repeat the process every semester for SWD who need ongoing support while enabling those in need of punctual assistance to communicate their will swiftly to all actors involved. Finally, universities must acknowledge the positive impact SWD have as an example of motivation and will (Moriña et al., 2020) and the fact that, in the end, any measure that contributes to improving the academic experience of this group would be beneficial to all students regardless of their particular characteristics (Magnus & Tossebro, 2014).

4.6. Limitations and future research

The students who participated in this study belonged to a single institution. Additionally, they all had an official certification of their disability and were currently carrying out their studies or had recently completed them successfully. To expand the possibility of generalization of results, it would be advisable to investigate the experiences of SWD at other online institutions and the effects of

different levels of recognition and institutional support on the different types of disability. In this sense, incorporating the perspective of those who dropped out of their studies would be particularly enlightening.

The use of e-mail interviews proved to be a valid option to reach and hear the voices of non-traditional students (Bye et al., 2007; Meho, 2006). However, this method also has limitations compared to face-to-face interviews, mainly the lack of social cues and the increased difficulty in building rapport (Bowden & Galindo-Gonzalez, 2015).

Future research should directly address the fact that the SWD population does not always reveal their condition at online universities and therefore do not appear in the institutional registers. These students are primarily from the group with hidden disabilities. In this sense, a feasible strategy to increase their involvement in disclosure processes could be to review the terminology used to refer to disabilities, using less pathologizing terms (Grimes et al., 2019). In addition, it would be desirable to advance knowledge about students with multiple disabilities in order to increase our understanding of how the different types of disabilities with which they live impact their academic experience and outcomes.

Despite the limitations, our study is novel as it situates the dilemmas surrounding the disclosure of disability in a fully online higher education context. In addition, it gathers the comparative perspective of students with hidden and apparent disabilities. Finally, this study can help program designers, faculty members, and Student Services personnel at other universities better understand the needs of disabled students in a context of growing adoption of online or hybrid models.

Declaration of Competing Interest

No potential competing interest was reported by the authors.

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