European Journal of Inclusive Education (EJIE)
2025 Vol. 4, Issue 2,
https://doi.org/10.7146/ejie.v4i2.157577

Accessibility as a tool for inclusion in higher education: Views of lecturers from Catalan, Basque, and Andalusian universities

Blanca Arias-Badia[1] and Irene Hermosa-Ramírez

Abstract

Accessibility allows individuals to partake in all areas of life, regardless of their physical, sensory, cognitive, or even technical abilities. It contributes to granting basic human rights, such as participation in cultural life or education. It is a basic tool to achieve true inclusion and equal opportunities in university classrooms, especially for students with disabilities. In Spain, the present dropout rate among students with disabilities is very high due to factors such as insufficient support from universities, exclusionary practices, and misunderstandings. These students report facing barriers that hinder their full participation and inclusion in university life. In some cases, these barriers stem from practices implemented by their lecturers. Within the framework of the UnivAc project "Sensory accessibility at the Spanish university: current needs and prospective solutions", this paper explores access provision in higher education, with particular emphasis on the role of lecturers as key stakeholders. To this end, the contributions of eleven participants from two focus groups and a diary are analysed qualitatively applying reflexive thematic analysis; in all cases, the participants are lecturers with experience in teaching or supervising research of students with sensory disabilities in Spanish universities. Findings show that lecturers are calling for more effective communication channels with student support units, for specialised training and practical guidance on how to make teaching and learning materials accessible. Their working conditions —most notably, time constraints— often hinder the adequate preparation of the courses taken by students with disabilities. Many feel that the additional effort required to make materials accessible is not acknowledged by their institutions. In some cases, their negative perception of the burden entailed in access provision is closely linked to a view of students with disabilities as overly demanding. These lecturers' perspectives are part of a larger puzzle that includes the perspectives of other key stakeholders in access provision (student support services, ICT services, communications team, accessibility professionals, and so on) to gather a full understanding of the present needs and solutions available to make universities more inclusive environments.

Points of Interest

- Students with disabilities in Spain face a high dropout rate due to factors like insufficient university support, exclusionary practices, and barriers such as the lack of adaptations and difficulties in relationships with faculty.
- This article reports the results from a study in which university lecturers with experience with students with sensory disabilities shared their practices and challenges regarding access provision.
- The results show that accessibility in Spanish higher education is applied on an unsystematic, case-by-case basis, rather than being proactively planned by default and following the principles of universal design.

[1] Corresponding author: blanca.arias@upf.edu

ISSN: 2794-4417
https://tidsskrift.dk/ejie

- The study points out the continued focus on disability as a medical issue at universities and the ongoing discrimination against disabled people. Some lecturers associate access provision with a view of students with disabilities as 'overly demanding'.
- Lecturers urgently request more effective communication channels with student support units and specialised, practical training on how to make teaching materials accessible.

Key words: accessibility, higher education, university lecturers, students with disabilities, ableism

1. Introduction

Access, understood as 'entry', to higher education in Spanish universities has increased in recent decades for both students with and without disabilities[2]. For the former, however, another dimension of access, namely communicative accessibility, is particularly significant throughout their university journey. This paper focuses on the latter form of access provision. The *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD) defines accessibility as the measures applied "to enable persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life" (United Nations, 2006, p. 9), among them the physical environment, transportation, information and communications, facilities and services, and primary, secondary and higher education:

> States Parties shall ensure that persons with disabilities are able to access general tertiary education, vocational training, adult education and lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis with others. To this end, States Parties shall ensure that reasonable accommodation[3] is provided to persons with disabilities (United Nations, 2006, p. 18).

Accessibility measures for students with sensory disabilities (d/Deafness and blindness[4]) are legally in place in Spanish universities, as per Royal Decree 193/2023, of March 21, which regulates the basic conditions of accessibility and non-discrimination of people with disabilities for the access and use of goods and services available to the public, and they are one of the tools to make higher education more inclusive. In quantitative terms, the Fundación Universia report (2023) identifies over 22,000 students with disabilities in Spanish universities for the academic year 2021-2022: i.e., 1.6% of the total student population. To put these figures into perspective, it is worth noting that approximately 7% of people in Spain have a disability, according to the State database of persons with disabilities for 2023 published by the Spanish Institute for the Elderly and Social Services. The dropout rate among students with disabilities is reported to be high for reasons such as lack of support from their universities, exclusionary practices and the feeling of being misunderstood or unsupported by their institutions (Los Santos et al., 2019).
In particular, students with disabilities in Spain report that there are barriers in place that hinder their full participation and inclusion in higher education (presented here in order of frequency), at least two of which are related to their lecturers: 1) physical/architectural barriers, 2) lack of exam and study material adaptations, 3) relationships with faculty, 4) various other problems and difficulties, 5)

[2] As per the reports *La Universidad Española en Cifras* [Spanish University in Numbers] report (CRUE, 2021-2022) and the *VI Estudio sobre la Inclusión de Personas con Discapacidad en el Sistema Universitario Español* [6th Study on the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in the Spanish University System] (Fundación Universia, 2023).
[3] As per the CRPD (United Nations, 2006), a reasonable accommodation is a modification or adjustment not imposing a disproportionate or undue burden to enable individuals with disabilities to exercise all human rights and fundamental freedoms. Reasonable accommodations may be understood as instruments that underscore the obligation of institutions to remove barriers and promote inclusive practices.
[4] This paper uses the term *(sensory) disability* to avoid lexical repetition of specific end user groups who are prototypical beneficiaries of the access solutions considered in the study; namely, persons with low vision, blind persons, hard of hearing persons and d/Deaf persons.

administrative paperwork, 6) relationships with other students, and 7) relationships with other (administrative) staff (Fundación Universia, 2023, p. 11). These specific obstacles are manifestations of academic ableism, a system in which academic institutions mandate "able-bodiedness and able-mindedness, as well as other forms of social and communicative hyperability"; that is, "rewarding bodies and minds and forms of communication and sociality that are the right (constrained) shape" (Dolmage, 2017, p. 7), see also Section 4.2. Lecturers thus play a role in "enabling" or "disabling" their students with disabilities.

The present article qualitatively examines Spanish faculty members' perceptions of their own practices, attitudes and needs regarding access provision for students with sensory disabilities. The paper thus focuses on lecturers as relevant agents in access provision at university, instead of placing the focus on end users of access services such as students with disabilities. The study aims to capture up-to-date perspectives from lecturers on their role in managing accessibility, a process that typically begins when they learn that a student with a sensory disability will be enrolled in their course. A reflexive thematic analysis approach is adopted to gain deeper insights into their perceptions of accessibility and disability.

The article is structured as follows: Section 2 is devoted to a literature review on the role of academic teaching staff in rendering university accessible. Section 3 describes the methodology of the present study, focusing on the participants and the procedure involving two different qualitative research instruments, namely focus groups and a longitudinal diary. Section 4 presents the main results of the study and Section 5 concludes with a discussion of these results and final remarks.

2. Literature review

There is an abundance of academic publications both on students with disabilities' experiences in higher education (Bessaha et al., 2020; Rodríguez-Martín & Álvarez-Arregui, 2014) and on university faculty recounting their experiences with students with disabilities, the latter being the focus of this literature review. The number of studies of this nature is in fact a lot larger than publications on academic staff with disabilities themselves, as explored further in Hermosa-Ramírez and Tamayo (forthcoming). This is to say that universities appear to be more aware of the needs of students with disabilities and their lecturers than they are of the needs of lecturers with disabilities themselves (Brown & Leigh, 2018). Although this is not the main topic of the present article, this too reflects the exclusionary and ableist nature of higher education institutions internationally. Here the focus will be on two key themes from the literature: the training needs of academic teaching staff and their attitudes towards disability and accessibility.

Focusing on the needs of lecturers with students with disabilities in the context of Spain, training (and the lack thereof) is one of the most recurring topics in the literature. According to Aranda Redruello et al.'s study (2015), 93% of the participating lecturers (16 in total) in their interviews and questionnaires had had previous experience with students with disabilities, of which 45% were with students with sensory disabilities. However, 75% of the lecturers had not received training on disability. In spite of the reported lack of training, 56% of these lecturers claimed to have applied adaptations or reasonable accommodations for their students. Additionally, Aguirre et al.'s (2021) study involving 25 semi-structured interviews with lecturers from seven Spanish universities reports that pedagogical training is not compulsory for academic teaching staff, and, on top of that, there are few and often brief available courses devoted to inclusion and accessibility offered on a voluntary basis. The participating lecturers in Aguirre et al.'s (2021) report that their strategies rely rather on a good lecturer-student relationship based on closeness, empathy and respect and a willingness to offer learning resources in different formats and adapt evaluation methods. The fact that students have time and time again pointed to a systemic lack of disability awareness (Kendall & Tarman, 2016) coincides with this perceived need for training from lecturers.

Beyond the Spanish context, Bong and Chen (2021) provide a set of recommendations for training academic and administrative staff, specifically in digital accessibility for inclusive education. They emphasize the importance of enhancing "institutional competence", keeping lecturers motivated to engage in this type of training, and involving end users in the process. The authors also encourage

"hands-on practice" to ensure that teaching and learning materials, particularly digital documents in different formats, are made accessible.

In terms of attitudes, faculty are generally willing to accommodate the needs of their students with disabilities (Murray et al., 2008; Sniatecki et al., 2015), although these positive individual actions "are not indicative of a systemic attitude conveying any sense of community membership or academic belonging for disabled learners" (Bruce & Aylward, 2021). Previous works reflecting on the large number of stakeholders involved in access provision at university have raised the need for the university system to make accessibility part of the "mainstream culture" (JISC, 2006, in Seale et al., 2020, p. 17).

In terms of specific accommodations, according to a previous study in a Spanish university, most faculty is willing to adapt course materials, but 41% of the surveyed lecturers disagree with accommodating evaluation criteria for their students with disabilities (Garabal-Barbeira et al., 2018). Furthermore, some lecturers, as reported by Kendall (2018) hold certain negative views towards their students with disabilities, such as them being too demanding, or they point to technical problems in terms of ensuring equal participation beyond their control. Similar positive and negative instances of attitudinal (in)accessibility[5] are expected in the current study. In particular, the present study aims to complement the existing literature by investigating the views and perceptions of lecturers in Andalusian, Basque and Catalan universities of how these institutions communicate the needs of students with sensory disabilities to lecturers, how effective they deem the guidelines provided to them on how to accommodate to the needs of students with sensory disabilities, and how they describe the training on accessibility and universal design which they have received (or not).

3. Methodology

The aim of this article is to examine the views and experiences of lecturers in situations in which they have been asked to make content more accessible in Andalusian, Basque and Catalan universities for students with sensory disabilities, expanding on the study by Arias-Badia (2023) on the measures that lecturers adopt to cater for needs of their blind and partially blind students. To achieve this aim, a convergent design of qualitative mixed methods (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017) is applied combining two focus groups and a diary as the methods of data collection (Bryman, 2012, pp. 239–244). Following a convergent design, the data from the different research instruments are collected and analysed at the same stage to compare and merge the results.

This research is part of the project UnivAc. The data management plan of the project has been published open access on the CORA DMP tool[6]. Likewise, a summary of the research activities conducted with participants, including the focus groups reported in this paper, can be found on the project's website and is open access[7].

3.1. Participants

The eleven participants are at different stages of their academic career, from predoctoral researchers to full professors. They are all currently employed at public universities in Andalusia, the Basque Country and Catalonia, the regions on which the UnivAc project is focused. Table 1 summarises the academic profiles of the participants, links them to the research instrument used for their participation and assigns a code to them, which will be used when reporting direct quotes in the results section. To recruit the

[5] Attitudinal inaccessibility, as defined by Llop in Arias-Badia et al. (2022, p. 64) refers to those situations where "we, persons with disabilities, think we aren't valid enough to participate in what is understood as normal life and refuse the challenge to fight for our rights and endeavours." Apart from these self-imposed limitations, attitudinal inaccessibility can also be imposed by others, in this case by university lecturers on their disabled students.

[6] Retrieved October 17, 2025, from https://dmp.csuc.cat/plans

[7] Retrieved October 17, 2025, from https://www.upf.edu/web/univac/informes

participants, the authors used their personal contacts as well as a snowball sampling strategy[8], starting with the first identified lecturers who have experience teaching students with sensory disabilities.

Table 1. *Description of the participants*

Participant code	Academic profile	Research instrument
P1	Full professor with experience supervising a PhD thesis by a person with low vision	Focus group 1
P2	Lecturer and researcher with experience teaching students with blindness and low vision and supervising BA and MA theses by students with blindness and low vision	Focus group 1
P3	Lecturer and researcher with experience teaching students with blindness and low vision at BA level	Focus group 1
P4	Predoctoral researcher with experience teaching students with blindness and low vision at BA level	Focus group 1
P5	Lecturer and researcher with experience teaching a student with low vision at BA level	Focus group 1
P6	Associate professor with experience teaching students with various disabilities	Focus group 2
P7	Associate professor with experience supervising a PhD thesis by a hard-of-hearing student	Focus group 2
P8	Assistant professor with experience with D/deaf BA students	Focus group 2
P9	Associate professor with experience teaching students with blindness and low vision at BA level	Focus group 2
P10	Senior lecturer with experience teaching a Deaf student	Focus group 2
P11	Predoctoral researcher with experience teaching students with blindness and low vision at BA level	Longitudinal diary

The first focus group included only Translation and Interpreting and Modern Languages teaching faculty members from the Autonomous University of Barcelona, the University of the Basque Country and the University of Cordoba. The second focus group included teaching faculty in Nursing, Translation and Language Sciences, and Education and Sport from Universitat Pompeu Fabra, the University of the Basque Country, and the University of Seville. The diary was written by a lecturer from the University of the Basque Country.

3.2. Procedure

The research procedure was approved by the Ethics Committee of Universitat Pompeu Fabra and informed consent was obtained from all participants. The research instruments applied in this study were, as introduced earlier, two focus groups lasting approximately one hour and 15 minutes each– which were conducted online on 19th July 2023 and 30th October 2023–through Microsoft Teams, and a research diary including 12 entries written over the course of May 2023-May 2024. Focus groups were chosen as the main data-collecting method for this study because of the possibilities in co-construction of meaning that the group interaction allows Kitzinger (2004). The focus group questions were designed considering the four main phases in the user journey approach to a product or service, which, from the lecturers' perspective in this case, were applied as follows: a) discovery of a need (in this case, cater for

[8] According to Bryman (2012, p. 202) snowball sampling is a form of convenience sample where "the researcher makes initial contact with a small group of people who are relevant to the research topic and then uses these to establish contact with others". In our case, the initial group were researchers from our area of knowledge who we knew had experience of teaching students with sensory disabilities. They then referred us to other colleagues with experience in this regard, but from other areas of knowledge.

a disabled student's needs), b) information gathering, c) decision-making process on how to handle accessibility, and d) follow-up (Arias-Badia et al., 2023). Solicited diaries–"records of researched phenomena, produced under researchers' guidance, based on events or recorded at regular intervals, which records in essence contain participants' perceptions and reflections on their experience" (Cao & Henderson, 2021, p. 4)– allow for the documentation of events as they are lived, instead of recounting a past event or feeling retrospectively and thus with less accuracy (Cao & Henderson, 2021). As is the case here, they are often used within mixed methods in combination with interviews or other social research methods. The diary questions asked the participant lecturer about their experiences of making content accessible over the past three weeks (relative to the date of each diary entry) to facilitate recalling their experiences. After consultation, the participant indicated a preference for providing this information using a pre-designed Google Forms questionnaire. The guiding questions used in each research instrument can be consulted in the Annex to this paper. The focus groups were recorded and automatically transcribed by saving the automatic captions from Microsoft Word and then edited for accuracy. The authors analysed the focus group and diary data (all in the format of text documents) by applying reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2012) and using the qualitative analysis software AtlasTI. Data analysis involved agreeing on themes from the study and the codification of the transcripts in consensus. The data were collected in Spanish and direct quotations have been translated by the authors in this article.

4. Results and discussion

This section reports on the major theme identified in reflexive thematic analysis, namely the lack of a systematic approach to accessibility in higher education, as well as three other themes. The latter include, on the one hand, what the authors understand as the underlying motivations for the main theme, namely, (a) ableism in higher education, and (b) the medical model of disability still in effect in higher education; and, on the other hand, (c) specific challenges in access provision as identified by lecturers, in connection with the students' disability disclosure, with the handling of students' expectations, and with the lack of institutional support and recognition.

4.1. Theme 1: The lack of a systematic approach to accessibility in higher education

The main result of our analysis was the finding that, consistently across different university settings (different institutions, campuses, departments, types of degrees…), accessibility fails to be systematically adopted. To date, it is not part of the "mainstream culture" (JISC, 2006, in Seale et al., 2020, p. 17) in Spanish higher education institutions. The universities where the participants in the study work do not seem to have *planned* communicative accessibility or apply it to environments by default (in a sort of universal design approach) or *ex ante*, but rather apply case-by-case access solutions each time a student discloses their sensory disability. All of the participants reported being informed about how to (re)act when specific students with disabilities were about to join (or had already joined) their lectures. No general accessibility guidelines were explicitly made available for them apart from in those cases. The accessibility studies literature has insisted that this kind of approach tends to result in lacking accessibility solutions (Greco, 2018).

Previous research within the UnivAc project (Lamela & Macrea, forthcoming) has shown that most of the inclusion units from the universities represented in this study offer resources specifically aimed at university lecturers on how to adapt materials for diverse students on their websites. The input from the focus group and diary participants signals that this kind of information does not reach most university lecturers (none, in our study). Similarly, some of the participant universities offer continuous learning courses on inclusion, but these courses were little known by the participants in the study. As reported in Section 4.4, the participants feel an overall lack of institutional support and demand practical training to be able to meet students' expectations. These results show serious communication problems within higher education institutions regarding accessibility, a crucial tool for all students' inclusion. Lecturers understand that accessibility is applied on case-by-case basis to the extent that some participants expressed being sceptical of the usefulness of any training offered by default:

> I do not know if it is possible to be trained in sensory disabilities because each person, regardless of their disability status, has a personality, different objectives, different ways to manage their disability and their integration. Of course, I would be willing to participate in any didactic or awareness-raising activity, I don't really refuse it, but I question how you can train faculty without having one specific case on the table [P7].

The fact that accessibility is not applied *ex ante* in the university digital environments is also illustrated by the way in which the participant universities handle digital accessibility. End users, namely, persons with disabilities who study and work at university, are not included in workflows to improve web accessibility. P1 showed their disagreement with this approach:

> Even when the website of the university was being redesigned, and there was a perfect person for it, because they are a person with a disability, we could have taken this opportunity to make the whole interaction accessible. But the university preferred to change the entire website without even contacting this person. It's really mean-spirited [P1].

In our reflexive thematic analysis, we interpret the lack of systematicity in access provision as mainly caused by themes 2 and 3 as summarised below.

4.2. Theme 2: The current bias against persons with disabilities in higher education

Lecturers' negative attitudes toward students with disabilities have been reported in previous studies as a barrier to learning and the overall university experience (e.g. Moriña and Orozco, 2020). Structural ableism, that is, "a pervasive system of discrimination and exclusion of people with disabilities … privileg[ing] temporarily able-bodied people and disadvantag[ing] people with disabilities" (Griffin et al., 2007, p. 335), had been raised in previous research with disabled people organisations interviewed regarding accessibility in higher education in the context of the UnivAc project (Hermosa-Ramírez & Arias-Badia, 2024). Some of the interventions in the focus groups signal such structural bias against persons with disabilities: one lecturer described students as manipulative in nature and explained that they are used to 'playing with' lectures to achieve their aims:

> And then what you keep hearing is, "That professor did this to me," "that teacher did that." And you? Well, look […], they do play with you a bit, and they know what they're doing, because it's not the first time it's happened to them [P6].

Another lecturer described teaching disabled students as being placed in an 'impossible situation', thus implicitly judging the disabled student as incapable of following higher education studies or simply 'understanding' content:

> I believe it is the university's responsibility to avoid placing me in an impossible situation. I know that this particular student did not make good use of the degree program; he didn't understand what he was reading [P10].

As will be explained in section 4.4, one of the recurrent ideas raised in the focus groups and expressed in the diaries was the lack of training on accessibility offered by higher education institutions; although most participants were willing to be trained in disability awareness and sensory accessibility, some were at times more critical of the need or appropriateness of this training:

> No, I do not want to be trained, I want someone to make the decision that this person is able to follow their university studies before I have to worry about them not meeting the requirements and becoming stuck because of the emotional intensity of the situation. […] To avoid failing them, bluntly speaking [P8].

The reluctance of some participants to engage in training on accessibility and inclusion may seem an unexpected result, given that all participants voluntarily took part in the focus group and were aware that the activity was conducted within the framework of a project aimed at promoting inclusion. In this context, it is worth noting that a defining feature of focus groups as a qualitative research instrument is that some participants may dominate the discussion and influence the opinions of others (Morgan, 1997). Although the facilitators sought balanced participation from the different interviewees to mitigate this risk, positive (focus group 1) and negative (focus group 2) forms of participant influence were observed. Structural ableism was, therefore, more patent in the second focus group. The participants of the first focus group acknowledged that their students see their own invisible work as a normal occurrence, something that they are used to. Quotes such as "you can tell that she is used to it" or "at first I could not tell her additional effort, as she lived her visual disability completely naturally" were frequent in the focus group.

As pointed out above, ableism is perceived by persons with disabilities at universities, as reported by disabled people organisations. We understand this as one of the causes for students with disabilities not willing to disclose disability to inclusion units and/or lecturers, one of the specific challenges identified in this analysis (4.4.1). Ableism was also noticeable in the proposals made to redesign university courses to cater for diverse students' needs (see Section 4.4.3).

4.3. Theme 3: The medical model of disability still in effect in higher education

The medical model of disability views disability primarily as a problem within the individual, caused by physical, mental, or sensory impairments. As described by Heery and Noon (2008), among others, according to this model, disability is seen as a medical condition or deficit that needs to be treated, cured, or managed (typically, by healthcare professionals). The focus is on the person's limitations and how to restore or improve "normal" functioning through medical intervention or rehabilitation. It often implies that the solution lies in changing the individual, not in altering society or the environment.

The medical model underlies current practices in higher education and in our view partly explains the lack of a systematic (affecting the whole higher education system/society) approach to accessibility. As reported below, most focus group participants acknowledged that the initial reports they receive about students with disabilities from the inclusion unit primarily contain medical information, offering little practical guidance on how to provide reasonable accommodations or implement universal design strategies. Likewise, the focus on the individual with disability in the case-by-case approach described above is coherent with the medical model of disability.

As a positive note, the participants stated that the reports they receive from inclusion units about students with disabilities have improved over the past few years. P6 gives an example of a more detailed report with specific recommendations that she received when she had a hard-of-hearing BA student, which focuses more on the adaptations needed and less on the medical diagnosis of the student:

> To allow the student to sit in the front row; to allow the student to use their smartphone so that the lecturers can use it as a microphone; to provide the student with course materials in advance, such as the course bibliography and presentations; to check that the displayed videos in class have subtitles or, alternatively, to provide the student with a transcript of the most important themes of a video; to allow for lip-reading both in terms of classroom lighting and sitting arrangement (for instance, in a circle for group projects); to accommodate evaluation criteria [P6].

4.4. Theme 4: Specific challenges from the lecturers' perspective

4.4.1. Subtheme: Disability disclosure

According to the participants, following the typical journey of lecturers being informed of the needs of a student (typically a BA student), the first line of communication is with the university's inclusion unit. The experience summarised by P4 is generally shared by all participants of the focus groups:

> [They] let us know that there will be a student with a disability, they send us an email […] and with it comes a report which discloses the disability status, but it does not go into detail. If it is a person with a visual disability [the report] does state that we need to adapt our materials, that we can send the materials beforehand so that they can have them in braille, and they give us guidelines [to adapt] the exams. […] They offer us some advice to adapt the materials: not to use PDF but Word documents, and they let us know that we need to give [the students] more time during the exams [P4].

Some general concerns from the focus groups regarding this first line of communication include that this report sometimes comes too late (in the case of one participant, when the course is already finished) and that it is too vague: reporting the student's disability is not enough and specific recommendations regarding adaptations are more useful. In the literature, the disclosure of disabilities (sometimes in great detail) to student support units is also a problem in itself (Pearson & Boskovich, 2019), as students may want to avoid perceived discrimination and stigma or they do not identify with the "disabled" label (Kendall, 2018, p. 4). In this regard, P6 remarks that:

> Our inclusion unit requires the student to sign some paperwork to communicate their needs [to faculty]. If that student does not sign it, even if they have enrolled in July, you [as a lecturer] don't receive that information […]. I believe that this is relevant because I received the report on September 9 and we started the classes on September 13. I believe it is impossible for me to manage everything in those 4 days [P6].

The challenge in finding a balance between guaranteeing the students' right to not disclose diagnosis or disability (and rather, to disclose only their accommodation needs and preferences) and the lecturers' time needed to adapt their materials and evaluation methods could be tackled through the systematic application of universal design principles and universal design for learning (see, for instance, Dell et al., 2015). However, at present, the practical application of this proposal may be challenging because of the lack of training opportunities for lecturers in Spanish universities, a topic that is discussed at length in Section 4.2.

Alternatively, at times, the disclosure of a disability or accommodation needs does not come from the inclusion unit or disability office, but rather from the students themselves, particularly at MA and PhD level. P7 recounts their experience in this regard:

> In my case, the student did not reach the inclusion unit […], she contacted the masters' lecturers to explain that she read lips and that she needed to sit in the front row, and asked the lecturers not to use the blackboard with their back turned to the students. That was it. […] She was more than able to communicate her needs and therefore the inclusion unit was not needed [P7].

The balance between advocating for one's needs and an excessive amount of invisible work and emotional labour linked to repeatedly informing and reminding lecturers of reasonable adjustments can be burdensome for students. This topic is discussed at length in Hermosa-Ramírez and Arias-Badia (2024).

4.4.2. Subtheme: Perceived incapability to meet the students' needs and expectations due to a lack of competence in accessibility

One of the biggest concerns that was repeatedly mentioned and discussed during the focus groups and diary is the lack of training. As put by P8, higher education institutions in Spain do not train lecturers in terms of pedagogy. P6 shared how a disabled student told them that

> he was missing some general training among lecturers. […] He noticed that his fellow students, his classmates, knew more about his disability, how to deal with it, how to treat him, so much so that he devoted his BA thesis to this topic [P6].

All full-time lecturers in Spain have teaching, research and administrative duties, and research-only or teaching-only contracts are not the norm in this country's universities. This leads lecturers to feel unprepared to cater for the needs of students with disabilities, and thus, vulnerable when it comes to handle their expectations as university students. This type of concern is illustrated by P11's notes on their interpretation and audiovisual translation lectures:

> I find it very difficult to explain and talk about the importance of non-verbal language in liaison interpreting when I have a blind student in the class [P11].
> We are working on audiovisual translation, so my blind student has a harder time than the others. I'm not sure if this counts as "adapting" the material, but when we are watching the scene we are going to translate, I describe what appears on screen to her — in other words, I provide a kind of "live audio description" so that she has the same context as the rest of the class [P11].

In the first focus group, the consensus was on the participants' complete willingness to participate in training courses on sensory accessibility targeted at university lecturers. Though some of the participants acknowledged that their institutions offered them some (disability awareness and accessibility) training, they deemed it insufficient because there is no consistent training (it may be offered some years, but not others), at times there are not enough spots available or they are not available for non-tenured faculty, and the training does not include practical information on how to implement accessibility practices.
Some participants of the second focus group were critical of the "excessive demands" of their students with sensory disabilities, something that has also been documented extensively in the literature. As per van Jaarsveldt and Ndeya-Ndereya (2015, p. 2018):

> The fact that many lecturers perceived students with disabilities to be a minority demanding extraordinary measures to ensure their academic success could be attributed to a lack of anticipation. A number of participants never made provision for having students with different learning needs and were not mindful about their learning.

According to P8, a key issue is the fact that students with disabilities need to handle the expectation to have "the same pedagogical and didactic support that they have had in primary and secondary school". Such support varies greatly across different autonomous communities in Spain, as has been observed in focus groups with students in the framework of the UnivAc project, with the Basque Country showing the best scenario for disabled students. P9 further reflected on the idea of expectation:

> My student kept demanding. And my experience was bad because he made me feel like "how come you do not know that? How come you do not know that I cannot read that? How come you do not know what JAWS is?" Of course, if you have [just received] the information [that you will have to adapt your class materials], it is impossible [P9].

The rhetoric about excessive demands has already been put forward in the literature, albeit criticising its ableist nature: the "excessively demanding student" is a caricature that highlights the unreasonable expectations universities [are] being held to by opportunistic students and the unfair challenges administrators and teachers [face] in responding to their mandate to accommodate disability. His [the caricature's creator] argument was, basically, that these students were milking the system and probably didn't belong in university at all if they couldn't play by the "normal" rules (Dolmage, 2017, p. 102).

4.4.3. Subtheme: Perceived lack of institutional support or recognition

Having stated that accessibility training is not frequent nor sufficient according to most participants, lecturers from the first focus group refer to the fact that they do not receive enough support from inclusion units, who work with students and not with them, and that they do not have the tools or the information to react to mental health issues, for instance, as highlighted by P3. This lack of support or knowledge results in them having to make an additional effort, which, they argue, should be recognised by universities.

Both in the diary and in the focus groups lecturers raised the need to have the information about students with disabilities in their classroom in advance. Sometimes they find out that they have a new course to teach (and, in this case, make accessible) with little prior notice and they juggle that with the constant pressure to publish papers, do administrative work, etc. In this sense the current productivist logic[9] in higher education (Lau, 2019) affects both the lecturers and the students. The diary entries showed that access provision is a constant for lecturers who teach students with disabilities—P11 reported having adapted materials in most of the diary entries.

A specific case raised in the second focus group is worth mentioning. Section 4.2 has reported about a lecturer feeling that their institution had put them in an 'impossible situation' when asking them to teach a deaf student. To the participant's mind, the systemic issue to be tackled here had been access in the sense of entry to the system. The lecturer portrayed themself as vulnerable to decisions made that are beyond their control.

The need to adapt the planned learning outcomes of university courses for diverse student profiles was raised by this and other participants in connection with this case. P7 expressed the difficulty entailed in speaking about the topic—perhaps aware of the social attitudinal inaccessibility entailed in their discourse—and suggested having specific universities with adapted skill cards and learning outcomes in each autonomous community in Spain:

> Universities should reconsider the competence profile of our degree programmes, because at the national level it may be necessary for some universities to introduce adaptations to the competence profiles of certain degrees while others may not. I am thinking, for instance, of the case of a student who was blind and wanted to study audiovisual translation. […] How can you expect to graduate here prepared to do audiovisual translation if you cannot see? […] It is hard to have to put it this way. […] The adaptation of the competence profile should not fall on the individual lecturer; it should fall on the degree programme itself. However, this should not necessarily apply to all degree programmes across Spain. […] Perhaps what is needed is an adaptation of competence profiles by degree programme at the level of each autonomous community [P7].

Previous works exploring how faculty members approach students with disabilities at university from a qualitative perspective have further proposed solutions to the present lack of resources, such as the design of collaborative platforms devoted to sharing best practices to promote inclusion in higher education (Svendby, 2020).

5. Final remarks

Within the framework of the UnivAc project, this paper has explored access provision in higher education, with particular emphasis on the role of lecturers as key stakeholders in the process. Our study is limited in scope, as it relies on a small sample of participants. However, their insights help bridge the gap between existing quantitative reports on the situation of students with disabilities, previous specialised literature, and lived experiences. Likewise, our results are in line with the literature, where we could find three types of institutional barriers preventing lecturers from being trained on accessibility or designing accessible materials: lack of time and resources (Guilbaud et al., 2021; Lowenthal &

[9] Following Lau (2019, p. 11), the growing corporatisation of higher education "has perpetuated a long-standing academic culture of hyper-productivity—one that privileges speed, efficiency and results". According to the author, this is reflected in the "publish or perish" motto, for instance.

Lomellini, 2023), lack of motivation and interest from the academic teaching staff (Lowenthal & Lomellini, 2023; Singleton et al., 2019), and the lack of a clear policy on who is responsible for inclusive instruction (Lowenthal & Lomellini, 2023; Singleton et al., 2019).

In this paper, accessibility is viewed as the means to reach true inclusion and equal opportunities in university classrooms. As highlighted, this goal is not without its costs, both for its primary beneficiaries, namely persons with disabilities, and for its providers. The university lecturers involved in this study are calling for more effective communication channels with student support units, for specialised training and practical guidance on how to make teaching and learning materials accessible. Their working conditions—most notably, time constraints—often hinder the adequate preparation of courses to be followed by students with disabilities. Furthermore, several feel that the additional effort required to make materials accessible is not acknowledged by their institutions. In some cases, their negative perception of the "burden" entailed in access provision is closely linked to a view of students with disabilities as overly demanding.

Our results highlight the need for universities to systematize and strategically plan accessibility in order to achieve better outcomes. Lecturers are a relevant part of the picture, but they are not the only stakeholders in access provision. Students with disabilities have lecturers as a direct interlocutor, but their journey through university involves many different agents. Seale (2006) proposed six main stakeholder groups in her model of accessibility practice in the field of Education, which mainly focused on online higher education programmes: students with disabilities, faculty, learning technologists, student support services, staff developers and senior managers. In a more recent contribution, Seale et al. (2020: 20) add procurement services, centralised services such as legal departments, governing bodies, communication teams, peer experts, students without disabilities, students who do not disclose their disability, and staff with disabilities, among others. Future research projects should focus on these previously overlooked stakeholders, whose efforts remain largely invisible, to develop sustainable solutions that foster genuine institutional accessibility and move beyond a case-by-case approach to meeting individual users' needs.

Acknowledgements

This paper is part of the UnivAc project (ref. TED2021-130926A-I00), funded by the Spanish Ministry Science and Innovation and the Spanish Research Agency/10.13039/501100011033 and the European Union "NextGenerationEU"/PRTR. The authors are members of TRADILEX, a research group recognised by the Catalan Government (2021SGR00952). Irene Hermosa-Ramírez's participation in this research has been financially supported by the Spanish State Research Agency, in the framework of the postdoctoral scholarship program Juan de la Cierva (JDC2022-049546-I).

Disclosure statement

The authors confirm no conflict of interest exists.

References

Aguirre, A., Carballo, R., & Lopez-Gavira, R. (2021). Improving the academic experience of students with disabilities in higher education: faculty members of Social Sciences and Law speak out. *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*, *34*(3), 305–320. https://doi.org/10.1080/13511610.2020.1828047

Aranda Redruello, R., Rodríguez Quesada, A., Aguilera, J. L., & de Andrés Viloria, C. (2015). La formación del profesorado universitario: Mejora de los procesos de enseñanza-aprendizaje del alumnado con discapacidad [University teaching faculty training: Improvement of the disabled students' teaching-learning processes]. *Tendencias Pedagógicas*, *23*, 271–300.Arias-Badia, B. (2023). La accesibilidad en los estudios de traducción e interpretación: Experiencias docentes con estudiantes con ceguera y baja visión. *International Journal for 21st Century Education*, *10*(1), 3–14. https://doi.org/10.21071/ij21ce.v10i1.16695

Arias-Badia, B., Bestard-Bou, J. J., & Hermosa-Ramírez, I. (2022). Designing, making, and validating accessible products and services: An updated account of users' perspectives. *Journal of Audiovisual Translation*, *5*(2), 57–75. https://doi.org/10.47476/jat.v5i2.2022.229

Arias-Badia, B., Hermosa-Ramírez, I., Ogea, M., Oliver, M., Segura, D., Tamayo, A., & Torner, S. (2023). The UNIVAC project: Implementing the user journey approach in accessibility research at university. In J. Domenech, D. MenéndezÁlvarez-Hevia, A. Martínez-Varea, R. M. Llácer-Iglesias, & D. Brunetto (Eds.), *9th International Conference on Higher Education Advances (HEAd'23)* (pp. 1459–1465). Editorial Universitat Politècnica de València.. https://doi.org/10.4995/HEAd23.2023.16333

Bessaha, M., Reed, R., Donlon, A. J., Mathews, W., Bell, A. C., & Merolla, D. (2020). Creating a more inclusive environment for students with disabilities: Findings from participatory action research. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, *40*(3). https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v40i3.7094

Bong, W. K., & Chen, W. (2021). Increasing faculty's competence in digital accessibility for inclusive education: A systematic literature review. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2021.1937344

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper (Ed.), *APA Handbook of Research Methods in Psychology, Vol. 2: Research Designs* (pp. 57–71). APA books.

Brown, N., & Leigh, J. (2018). Ableism in academia: Where are the disabled and ill academics? *Disability & Society, 33*(6), 985–989. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2018.1455627

Bruce, C., & Aylward, M. L. (2021). Accommodating disability at university. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, *41*(2).

Bryman, A. (2012). *Social research methods* (4ª ed.). Oxford University Press.

Cao, X., & Henderson, E. F. (2021). *Exploring diary methods in higher education research*. Routledge.

Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2017). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research.* Sage Publications.

CRUE. (2021-2022). *La universidad española en cifras* [Spanish university in numbers]. CRUE Universidades Españolas.

Dell, C.A., Dell, T.F., & Blackwell, T.L. (2015). Applying universal design for learning in online courses: Pedagogical and practical considerations. *Journal of Educators Online*, *12*(2), 166–192.

Dolmage, J. T. (2017). *Academic ableism: Disability and higher education*. University of Michigan Press.

Fundación Universia (2023). *VI Estudio sobre el grado de inclusión del sistema universitario español respecto de la realidad de las personas con discapacidad.* [6th study on the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the Spanish university system]. Universia.

Garabal-Barbeira, J., Pousada García, T., Espinosa Breen, P. C., & Saleta Canosa, J. L. (2018). Las actitudes como factor clave en la inclusión universitaria [Attitudes as a key factor in university inclusion]. *Revista Española De Discapacidad*, *6*(1), 181–198. https://www.cedid.es/redis/index.php/redis/article/view/401

Guilbaud, T. C., Martin, F., & Newton, X. (2021). Faculty perception on accessibility in online learning: Knowledge, practice and professional development. *Online Learning*, *25*(2), 6–35. https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v25i2.2233

Greco, G. M. (2018). The nature of accessibility studies. *Journal of Audiovisual Translation*, *1*(1), 205–232. https://doi.org/10.47476/jat.v1i1.51

Griffin, P., Peters, M. L., & Smith, R. M. (2007). Abelism curricular design. In M. Adams, & L. A. Anne (Eds.), *Teaching for diversity and social justice* (2nd ed.) (pp. 335–358). Routledge.

Heery, E., & Noon, M. (2008). *A dictionary of human resource management* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.Hermosa-Ramírez, I., & Arias-Badia, B. (2024). Accessibility as a means to realising social justice in higher education: Interviews with user organisations and service-providers. *Linguistica Antverpiensia, New Series – Themes in Translation Studies*, 23. https://doi.org/10.52034/lans-tts.v23i.783

Hermosa-Ramírez, I., & Tamayo, A. (forthcoming). . How media accessibility can help remove barriers in higher education: Insights from a systematic literature review.

JISC. (2006). *TechDis senior management briefing 2: accessibility in the mainstream- roles and responsibilities*. www.jisctechdis.ac.uk/assets/Documents/learnersmatter/SMT2.pdf [link unavailable: 3 April 2025; indirect citation as signalled in text].

Kendall, L. (2018). Supporting students with disabilities within a UK university: Lecturer perspectives. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, *55*(6), 694–703. https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2017.1299630

Kendall, L., & Tarman, B. (2016). Higher education and disability: Exploring student experiences. *Cogent Education*, *3*(1). https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2016.1256142

Kitzinger, J. (2004). The methodology of focus groups: The importance of interaction between research participants. In A. Reader, & C. Seale (Eds.), *Social research methods: A reader* (pp. 269–272). Routledge.

Lamela, S. & Macrea, C-I. (forthcoming). La voz de los servicios de inclusión: La gestión de la diversidad en las universidades. In B. Arias-Badia (Ed.), *La accesibilidad comunicativa en la educación superior: necesidades actuales y soluciones para el futuro.* Comares.

Lau T. C. W. (2019). Slowness, disability and academic productivity: the need to rethink academic culture. In C. McMaster & B. Whitburn (Eds.), *Disability and the university: A disabled students' manifesto* (pp. 11–19). Peter Lang.

Los Santos, D., Bain, S., Kupczynski, L., & Mundy, M. A. (2019). Determining academic success in students with disabilities in higher education. *International Journal of Higher Education*, *8*(2), 16–38.

Lowenthal, P. R., & Lomellini, A. (2023) Accessible online learning: A preliminary investigation of educational technologists' and faculty members' knowledge and skills. *TechTrends*, *67*, 384–392. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-022-00790-1

Morgan, D. L. (1997). *Focus groups as qualitative research*. Sage Publications.

Moriña, A., & Orozco, I. (2020). Spanish faculty members speak out: Barriers and aids for students with disabilities at university. *Disability & Society*, *36*(2), 159–178, https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2020.1723495

Murray, C., Wren, C. T., & Keys, C. B. (2008). University faculty perceptions of students with learning disabilities: Correlates and group differences. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, *31*(3), 95–113. https://doi.org/10.2307/25474642

Pearson, H., & Boskovich, L. (2019). Problematizing disability disclosure in higher education: Shifting towards a liberating humanizing intersectional framework. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, *39*(1). https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v39i1.6001

Rodríguez-Martín, A., & Álvarez- Arregui, E. (2014). Estudiantes con discapacidad en la Universidad. Un estudio sobre su inclusión. *Revista Complutense de Educación*, *25*(2), 457–479.

Seale, J. (2006). *E-learning and disability in higher education: Accessibility theory and practice*. Routledge.

Seale, J., King, L., Jorgensen, M., Havel, A., Asuncion, J., & Fichten, C. (2020). Engaging ignored stakeholders of higher education accessibility practice: analysing the experiences of an international network of practitioners and researchers. *Journal of Enabling Technologies*, *14*(1), 15–29. https://doi.org/10.1108/JET-08-2019-0040

Sniatecki, J. L., Perry, H. B., & Snell, L. H. (2015). Faculty attitudes and knowledge regarding college students with disabilities. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, *28*(3), 259–275.Singleton, K., Evmenova, A., Jerome, M. K., & Clark, K. (2019). Integrating UDL strategies into the online course development process: Instructional designers' perspectives. *Online Learning Journal*, *23*(1), 206–235.

Svendby, R. (2020). Lecturers' teaching experiences with invisibly disabled students in higher education: Connecting and aiming at inclusion. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, *22*(1), 275–284. https://doi.org/10.16993/sjdr.712

United Nations (2006). *Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities*. https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-persons-disabilities

van Jaarsveldt, D. E., & Ndeya-Ndereya, C. N. (2015). 'It's not my problem': Exploring lecturers' distancing behaviour towards students with disabilities. *Disability & Society*, *30*(2), 199–212. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2014.99470

Annex: Guiding questions used in the focus groups and in the diary

Note that the activities took place in Spanish. The questions have been translated for the purposes of this article.

a) Focus groups

1. How is the teaching staff informed that a student requiring some form of accommodation has enrolled in a course or program? [Are there established protocols?]
2. What is your opinion about the guidelines provided to faculty by university disability support services? [Are they sufficient? Is their quality adequate?]
3. Have you received training on accessibility and universal design as applied to university teaching/administration? Would you be interested in receiving such training?
4. What measures do you take to ensure accessibility in your courses/in your supervision of student work?
5. Does the institution offer any resources for this? What is your opinion about them?
6. When you use materials that are not accessible (please provide examples), what is the reason? [Lack of resources, time, knowledge…]
7. Have you received feedback from students with disabilities or from your department colleagues regarding your teaching/support? [At what stages of the process do complaints/positive comments usually arise?]
8. Do you have a designated contact person to discuss accessibility issues?

b) Diary

1. In the past three weeks, have you used any content that was specifically accessible in your teaching activities?

Options: Yes. / No.

2. Which of the following options best describes the situation? You may select more than one option.

Options: I have created new material with accessibility features. / I have added accessibility features to an existing material (my own or someone else's). / Other (please specify).

3. Why did you create the material? You may select more than one option.

Options: It was explicitly requested by a student. / The university's inclusion unit instructed me to create the material for a specific student. / I created the material on my own initiative. / Other (please specify).

4. If you created the material on your own initiative, please indicate the reasons here.
5. In the past three weeks, are you aware of having used any inaccessible content or materials in the courses you teach?

Options: Yes. / No.

5.1. If yes, please indicate the type of material involved. You may select more than one option.

Options: Inaccessible text documents (e.g. scanned PDFs, text documents without image descriptions). / Videos without accessibility options (subtitles, transcripts, audio descriptions, etc.). / Materials available only in physical format. / Other (please specify).

5.2. If yes, why did you use the material knowing it was inaccessible? You may select more than one option.

Options: Because I did not consider it to be essential. / Due to lack of time. / Due to lack of resources (e.g., making the material accessible required a professional service, and there was no budget to hire it). / Due to lack of knowledge, that is, I did not know how to make it accessible. / Other (please specify).

6. In the past three weeks, have you adapted any activity that was inaccessible during a face-to-face class?

Options: Yes. / No.

6.1. If yes, please indicate the type of activity involved. You may select more than one option.
Options: Group work. / Discussions or active participation in the classroom. / Readings. / Activities involving watching a video. / Activities involving listening to audio content. / Other (please specify).
6.2. If yes, briefly summarize the experience.

7. In the past three weeks, have you been in contact with your university's inclusion service?

Options: Yes. / No.

7.1. If yes, briefly summarize the experience: why did the contact occur? How useful did you find it, etc.?

8. Would you like to add any comments? Use this space to share any experiences related to accessibility in your work over the past three weeks that you have not mentioned in the previous questions.