

When Disability Becomes Ability to Navigate the Transition to Higher Education:

A Comparison of Students With and Without Disabilities

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Abstract

Students with disabilities are enrolling increasingly in higher education (HE). Yet little is known about the specific challenges these students have to overcome in order to navigate this transition. This qualitative study tried to ascertain the transition-related needs of students with disabilities by comparing their experiences with those of students without disabilities. Two focus groups were formed, respectively composed of five special needs students and five traditional ones. Semi-structured interviews were analysed through interpretative phenomenological analyses. Five super-ordinate themes emerged from the data: the transition as a roller coaster, taming a new freedom, discovering oneself, overcoming obstacles and perceiving university as a supportive or a threatening environment. Similarities and differences were observed among the two groups that mainly showed that students with disabilities clearly enhanced their experience at university and expressed more positive emotions than traditional students did. In a way, it appeared that the lifetime management of their disabilities better prepared them to face the challenges of the transition to higher education. These findings were discussed with regard to transition theories and led to some recommendations for improving higher education transition for students with disabilities.

Keywords: inclusion, higher education, disability, focus group, IPA

Introduction

Current European policies emphasize that access, participation and completion rates in higher education (HE) should reflect the diversity of society (Bologna Process 2007). This has reinforced concerns about study success in general and the successful transition to HE in particular for all kind of students (Wolter 2013). Several authors underline the challenge for educational literature to reflect this diversity in a comprehensive way (Coertjens et al. 2017; Kyndt et al. 2017). More precisely, as more and more students with disabilities are considering HE in Europe (Moriña 2017a), their specific experience of the transition deserves further consideration in the educational literature (Shaw and Dukes 2013). Yet the question of the specificity of the transition to HE for students with disabilities is still understudied (Reed, Kennett and Emond 2015), making it difficult to ascertain the specificity of their experience. With regard to this limitation, the current study sought to inform our understanding of the transition-related needs of students with disabilities by comparing their experiences with those of students without disabilities.

The Difficulties of the Transition to HE

Transitioning to HE is a challenging period for many students, punctuated by fundamental changes (Kovač 2015). In order to cope with this transition, students have to face a significant number of challenges: building a new social network, dealing with heightened academic demands, developing autonomous learning or coping with unfamiliar administrative tasks (Perry et al. 2001). Recent studies (Bosse and Trautwein 2014; Trautwein and Bosse 2017) attempted to provide a comprehensive depiction of freshman obstacles that constitute fundamental challenges to transition.

Through a mixed approach, four main categories of obstacles were identified: social, personal, content-related and organizational (Trautwein and Bosse 2017). Social obstacles

pertain to the difficulties of building a new social network, of dealing with the learning climate and of interacting with faculty members. Personal obstacles encompass the challenge of balancing university and social life, arranging housing, coping with pressure and finding an effective learning strategy. Content-related obstacles include the difficulties of meeting curricular demands and pace as well as clarifying the choice of and interest in subjects for study. Finally, organizational obstacles involve the necessity of dealing with limited institutional resources and of effectively using information and support services.

According to Trautwein and Bosse (2017), the obstacles depicted above are core challenges shared by all students in transition. This comes close to the assertion of several authors (Collins, Azmat and Rentschler 2019; Moriña, Cortés-Vega and Molina 2015) that many obstacles identified for students with disabilities (heavy workload, heightened level of assessment, etc.) concern all students, regardless of having a disability.

Nevertheless, some barriers appear specific to students with disabilities. First, content-related difficulties are reported by students with disabilities, such as ill-adapted teaching practices, materials and assessments that impaired their learning (Hewett et al. 2018; Kendall 2016; Moriña et al. 2015). Second, organizational and architectural barriers are also identified such as lack of appropriate facilities in the lecture halls and classrooms (Garrison-Wade 2012; Moriña and Morgado 2018). Students lack information about disability services and accommodations can be ill-adapted to their personal needs (Garrison-Wade 2012). Although disability services are mainly reported as supportive (Berry and Domene 2015; Hong 2015), relatively few students with disabilities request their support (Dong and Lucas 2016). Third, some students perceive social barriers such as a negative attitude from academic staff who are unwilling to provide them with the necessary adaptations (Kendall 2016; Vickerman and Blundell 2010).

Some of these barriers directly pertain to some specific disabilities. Students with visual impairments struggle with the heavy reading requirement in university and to get independently to and from lectures and their work group (Hewett et al. 2018; Reed and Curtis 2012); students with hearing impairments report some difficulties in using the phone and working in groups (Punch 2005); students with mobility impairments experience clear issues about campus accessibility (Wessel et al. 2015).

Comparing Students With and Without Disabilities

On the one hand, literature on the transition to HE has highlighted several core obstacles (Trautwein and Bosse 2017) lending credence to a conception of transition as a widely shared experience (Collins et al. 2019). On the other hand, research on students with disabilities has put forward specific difficulties experienced across the transition (Moriña 2017a). However, these studies only rely on interviews from students with disabilities. Like most research in this area, the findings are not contrasted with students without disabilities (Madriaga et al. 2010). Such a limitation impedes the identification of obstacles typical of students with disabilities as opposed to those shared by all students.

According to Chambers, Rabren and Dunn (2009), comparing the findings of students with disabilities to their non-disabled peers would fully capture the particularities of each group. In this perspective, a handful of recent quantitative studies have provided a first insight. Chambers et al. (2009) observed that students with and without disabilities reported similar barriers after leaving high school. Vickerman and Blundell (2010) observed that students with disabilities reported a stronger perception that teachers' assessments did not cater for their needs. Madriaga et al. (2010) observed that students with disabilities expressed greater difficulties in specific tasks (taking notes, having enough time to read course materials, hearing their lecturers, gaining physical access into university buildings, etc.) than students without

disabilities. However, these authors also demonstrated that all students shared similar feelings about teaching practices and the support they received from lecturers. They also reported similar ratings on workload perceptions, on the amount of time available to complete coursework and about the perception of some teaching staff as uncooperative (Madriaga et al. 2010).

Aim of the Study

This study pursued two complementary goals. First, following the work of Bosse and Trautwein (2017), this study attempted to explore obstacles that constitute fundamental challenges to the transition to HE. Second, the study sought to further investigate the role of diversity in students' backgrounds and in their experiences of the transition to HE, highlighted as an important area for exploration in HE literature by Winstone and Hulme (2019). This is an initial attempt at a comparison between students with and without disabilities: to our knowledge, no qualitative comparative studies have been undertaken on this topic so far. Therefore we aim to examine the transition from high school to HE of students with and without disabilities using a qualitative approach. Beyond a descriptive comparison, we are interested in understanding the students' experience using a phenomenological approach. In highlighting the sense they are making of this challenging experience, we aim to understand more deeply and in a nuanced manner how the experience of students with and without disabilities can differ and be alike. The general research question leading our analysis is: *How does the transition to higher education of students with disabilities differ from those of their non-disabled peers?*

Method

To ascertain the transition experience of students with and without disabilities, a focus group design was chosen. Focus groups are ‘carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment’ (Krueger and Casey 2000, 5). They constitute a relevant frame of investigation as: ‘it is through consideration of our experiences in relation to those of others that we make sense of the world’ (Lamb and Cogan 2016, 477). The number of participants in each focus group and the composition of groups need to be carefully thought out. First, the number of participants, between four and eight, tends to provide an ideal condition to freely share their respective experience and to nuance each other’s opinion (Willig 2013; Haegel and Duchesne 2013). Second, homogeneous groups tend to foster a reassuring climate and shared opinion. The group’s homogeneity is, in turn, expected to enhance the richness and the authenticity of the discussion (Smith et al. 2009). This design provides the opportunity to make the researchers less influential in the data collection procedure (Krueger and Casey 2000).

Participants

The present study involved ten volunteer participants aged from 20 to 24 from a French speaking Belgian university. They were divided into two focus groups.

The first group was composed of five students with disabilities (three women and two men) from Bachelor programmes in the Human Science sector. These students were all officially recognized by the university as having special needs and could ask for some adaptations depending on their needs (extra time during exams, exams held in another room, etc.). We decided to include only students with motor or sensorial disabilities in our sample, in order to increase the homogeneity of the group. These five students represented 20% of the

population of students with motor and sensorial disabilities who asked for adaptations from the support service in the Bachelor's programme of the university.

The second group was composed of five students with no special needs. It included participants who shared similar characteristics in terms of gender, study programme and age with the members of the first group in order to optimize the comparison of their respective experiences (Smith et al. 2009).

Insert Table 1 about here

Procedure

The data collection took place in March 2018. The students with disabilities were approached through the disability service of the university. The students without disabilities were contacted during lectures. Before each interview, participants were reminded of the purposes of the study, the confidential nature of collected data and the freedom to leave the focus group at any time. They were also asked to confirm their agreement to the current study by signing a consent document. The two focus groups lasted approximately 90 minutes each and were recorded from beginning to end.

Three main questions made up the semi-structured group interview:

- (1) How do you feel in your current Bachelor's programme?
- (2) How did you experience the transition from secondary education to university?
- (3) How would you describe this journey?

These questions were deliberately open and non-directive in order to gain the best understanding of individual experiences as related by the participants (Antoine and Smith 2017). Projective materials, in the form of card games entitled 'The language of emotions' and 'The expression of needs', were available to help participants express themselves.

Two researchers were present for each focus group. One conducted the interview while the other observed and took notes: this was designed to facilitate the discussion between the participants (Haegel and Duchesne 2013).

Analytical Approach

The two focus groups were fully transcribed. The transcripts were analysed through the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis [IPA] approach (Smith et al., 2009). This approach is particularly relevant to understand life transition experiences (Smith et al. 2009) and to analyse data collected from focus groups (Lamb and Cogan 2016).

The IPA is a phenomenological and interpretative approach. The researcher personally engages in the analysis trying to understand and clarify the individual experience of the participants (Smith et al., 2009). IPA therefore involves a double hermeneutic by ‘taking into account at the same time the commitment of the participant to access and make sense of his personal experience and the researcher's commitment to analyse the participant's approach’ (Antoine and Smith 2017, 375). IPA is also idiographic: it underlines the importance of analysing the particular case. A detailed and deeper analysis of a few particular cases is preferred to a more superficial analysis of multiple cases.

In practice, the material is first analysed and annotated sentence after sentence. Initial noting, based on the participant's speech, can be of three kinds: descriptive, linguistic or conceptual. Second, from the initial noting, emergent themes are identified (Smith et al. 2009). Third, the emergent themes are brought together, transformed or subdivided to reveal a final array of super-ordinate themes reporting ‘groupings, convergences and divergences in the data and the density of the phenomena experienced by the participants’ (Antoine and Smith 2017, 380) (see Table 2 for an extract from the Table of Themes).

In this study, investigator triangulation was employed. Four researchers first analysed each focus group, following the IPA guidelines. Then, they compared and discussed the results

for each group in order to reveal the five final themes emerging for both groups. Throughout the analysis process, they discussed their interpretations critically to enhance the trustworthiness of their data analysis.

Insert Table 2 about here

Results

Five super-ordinate themes emerged from the data:

The transition from high school to HE is experienced like a ‘roller coaster’ (1), where students need to tame a new freedom (2). During this transition, they discovered themselves (3) while overcoming obstacles (4). The perception of university support affects the way they experience this transition (5).

Interestingly, even though many similarities could be found between the two focus groups, two different dynamics came out. Students with disabilities clearly enhanced their experience at university and expressed many positive emotions while describing it. Difficulties were mentioned, but in a less negative emotional way. In the group of students without disabilities, a more critical dynamic about their experience emerged. They focused more on their difficulties and the positive appraisals only emerged at the end of the discussion.

The Transition Like a Roller Coaster

In both groups, students experienced ups and downs. They were related to their social integration, to their interests for courses, to their grades compared to their work investment and to administrative issues.

Elizabeth: *‘My year in university is like a roller coaster. From the beginning, it was really positive, then very down, then very positive...’*

Students valued their new social network as an important part of their positive experience of university, especially in the group of students with disabilities.

For example, Garry reported: *‘Today, my experience, I live it as a human adventure.’*

The extent to which students were interested by their major and minor courses was also a main issue in their experience. In both groups, students reported being either passionate about their studies or disinterested in them. However, the way students invested and performed in their studies seems to be the most influential part of how they felt about their experience. They assumed university was highly demanding and required hard work. When students' work was rewarded with high grades or success, they felt valued and expressed relief, pride and joy. In contrast, when they worked hard and difficulties persisted, their self-confidence was affected and they felt pressure and fear.

Finally, administration was also highlighted as another issue students had to face. For students with disabilities, if they wanted to be recognized as having some special needs and benefit from official adaptations, they had to complete administrative tasks which were time-consuming and not always well understood. On the other hand, for students without disabilities, administrative issues were also mentioned. They were shuffled around the administrative services and reported lots of difficulty in getting relevant answers to their questions. They experienced high levels of stress due to the ambiguity of the system and were left with uncertainties and doubts.

Coleen: *'What is really stressful, it's that the system is quite vague. Even when I go to the administration office or see the professors, they don't know.'*

Taming a New Freedom

For all students, the transition to HE meant much more than discovering a new academic setting. The transition was also depicted as a way of becoming adult and autonomous in all the different spheres of life. Students had to distance themselves from their parents and learn to handle things on their own such as medical appointments, shopping, courses and social life.

The transition was therefore both looked forward to and feared. On one hand, students were willing to live their own lives and enjoy their new sense of freedom. On the other, they felt dropped into a new universe they weren't familiar with and felt alone in having to handle some things they were not used to before.

Frank: *'I arrived at university quite happy to be finally with "the oldest", to have more freedom and everything. But, this freedom was paired with... Well, you're dropped into a universe you don't know, in an adult universe, just because you're 18.'*

For students with disabilities, becoming autonomous and learning to tame this new freedom went through acknowledgment of their disabilities in order to ask for the appropriate help. They stated they really had to learn to ask for some help and to get over the fear of disturbing others or being stigmatized.

Marty: *'I have always found it hard to ask for help... and to say, "Well, I need some help and so on." At the beginning, I found it a bit hard to adapt. There is a great deal of autonomy and we need to make a first step, to acknowledge, well, I need this, I need that.'*

For all students, there was also a real challenge to find the right balance between work and free time. We observed different dynamics in the different groups. Students with disabilities strongly doubted their ability to succeed. During their first months they therefore worked as hard as possible to see if they could eventually succeed in HE. Once they found they managed to pass some exams, they allowed themselves to release some of the pressure and find a better balance with their free time.

Sarah: *'I worked a lot during the first few months, to be sure to do my very best, to see, to assess if I was able to succeed with university studies'.*

Conversely, most students without disabilities invested the major part of their first months in social life and did not work hard for their courses as they thought they would easily

manage to pass their exams. After the feedback of the first exam session, they became more aware of finding a better balance between their social life and their studies.

Violet: *'It's because of this I failed finally... When I arrived, I didn't think at all about my studies at first. [...] I was only with new people and so we went out a lot.'*

Discovering Oneself

Students from both groups stated they were lucky to discover themselves. Compared to high school, most of them felt more self-fulfilled at university. They found that people were more open-minded and expressed less judgment towards them which allowed them to feel more self-confident and develop a sense of belonging toward the university community.

Frank: *'One important point, I feel totally different and I discovered myself. I really feel good in this city, you feel less judged.'*

Violet: *'I agree with you [feeling more self-fulfilled] but, above all, I felt grown up. I even surprised myself in a way.'*

Students with disabilities clearly mentioned that people were more considerate of their disabilities. Compared to high school, they had the feeling they could finally discover their strengths and not only their weaknesses or needs.

Garry: *'We are lucky because people here, beyond being more open-minded, they understand better that we are not different. We are less exposed to this fear of difference.'*

Students with disabilities valued their training which eases the development of their citizenship. Being part of the university made them feel integrated in society. However, students from the group without disabilities were more future-oriented. University was conceived as the only way to develop their future life project and to find the right place in society. This perception increased their worries regarding their vocational guidance. Uncertainty could be seen as threatening and stressful or as a full set of opportunities.

Owen: *'It's not easy to wake up every day with this feeling "Are you really made for this? Are you...?"'*

Frank: *'I see lots of possibilities which are open to me, and it's really interesting to have all... all these small goals.'*

Overcoming Obstacles

While both groups of students had obstacles to overcome, the meanings attributed to these difficulties were different. Students with disabilities reported that, in high school, they really had to work hard: this taught them persistence and a sense of effort. The academic difficulties they encountered made them more aware of their weaknesses and strengths. It taught them to develop an effective working method. It also influenced the way they perceived failure and success. They felt proud and privileged to begin HE. Every obstacle was experienced as a personal challenge.

Rachel: *'I got used to working a lot in high school. I think I worked even more than now, because I found my way of studying before. I had all kinds of difficulties, problems to get to work, of tempo, of schedules, of organization... All this, I had it before. And thus, in a way, I was ready for university, maybe more than someone who'd never had to deal with this before...'*

Despite some difficulties experienced in high school, students without disabilities were not so much used to working or prepared to work as much as required in the HE system. During their first year, they realized they had to adjust their work methods in the light of university demands. While students with disabilities were already used to dealing with important obstacles, this group of students without disabilities seemed still to be learning to do so. Failure impeded their self-confidence which either gave them a decisive push to change their mindset and start over or induced them to drop out.

Violet: *‘The first semester, I didn’t work at all. As I had never, never failed anything in my life before. When I got my results, I was, “Ok, now, pull yourself together, because it’s not going well!”’*

Rose: *‘I passed only two exams out of seven. [...] I felt so demoralized that I didn’t really work hard during the second semester, thinking that, anyway, working or not working, would be the same.’*

The Perception of University as a Supportive or a Threatening Environment

This theme is really different from one group to the other. The group of students with disabilities felt supported by the university. They mentioned that the support service was efficient and helped them to succeed in their studies. Compared to high school, they felt their disability was better recognized by the institution: the structure was more adapted to their needs. Thanks to the adaptations provided, they could fully take on a role as a student as most of the demands regarding their disabilities were met.

Garry: *‘We are offered a frame/structure which enables us to be autonomous, we can receive some help from our education counsellor, which allows us to say, “Ok, live your student life.” [...] We have a much clearer structure which allows us to be serene for plenty of things.’*

Students with disabilities felt reassured by knowing a support service existed in case they encountered difficulties. They particularly highlighted the kindness of the education counsellors which developed their feeling of security and care during the academic year and exams. It is interesting to point out that they did not ask for many adaptations during the courses, but did so more for the exams in order to feel reassured they had the best conditions for success.

Moreover, even though all students with disabilities agreed that adaptations were useful, they felt somehow ambivalent about them as they were stigmatizing, in a way. They stated that

they had to learn to go through these feelings in order to fully benefit from the adaptation offered to them.

Marty: *‘At the beginning, I was a bit hung up about going in the room for students with special needs during exams, because I felt put aside, [...] But finally, I realized... It really helped a lot... We shouldn’t worry about that, we need to get over it. We need to take what is given to us.’*

On the contrary, students without disabilities were much more critical regarding the university environment. They had the feeling of being dropped in on their own, without help from the university. Some even perceived the university as hostile. In particular, they reported that the system was not fair regarding the assessment processes. The university would set exams which did not assess real understanding of the students and would favor those who played the system.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to ascertain the transition-related needs of students with disabilities by comparing their experiences with those of students without disabilities. A qualitative approach designed with two focus groups was used. The data highlight similarities and specificities among the two groups of students.

The Transition as a Shared Experience

Concerning the similarities, one of the main shared challenges reported by students is to succeed in finding the right balance between work and leisure time. This result echoes recent qualitative study results which highlight that this delicate balance is the cornerstone of adaptation to higher education (De Clercq et al. 2018). As illustrated in Figure 1, too much work could lead to exhaustion and a high risk of attrition, whereas not enough work induces progressive deficiency accumulation and a high risk of failure (De Clercq et al. 2018).

Insert Figure 1 around here

Both groups of students also experienced the transition to HE as challenging and fulfilling at the same time. This ambivalence is well documented in Anderson, Goodman and Schlossberg (2011). Despite all the challenges freshmen need to overcome, this period is stimulating and can enhance their development and transformation. Students really emphasized the benefits of the transition to make them develop and grow up. This result is in line with developmental conceptualization of the transition which argues that each transition is a process of becoming someone else through identity, roles and status transformation (Zittoun 2009).

All students also stressed the magnitude of change entailed by the transition that is far beyond merely changing the educational institution. This result is really in line with the work of Jenert and colleagues (2017) who maintained that transition to higher education is a full

enculturation process within which students have to deal with shock of transiting into a new life.

Building on the typology of Trautwein and Bosse (2017), all students reported social, personal, organizational and content-related obstacles to transition which support the conception of the transition as a shared challenge. However, the perception and the experience of these obstacles also differed to some extent between the groups.

The Specificity of the Transition for Students with Disabilities

Regarding the specificities of students with disabilities, a clear issue about disclosing their special needs was observed. This is line with the Vickerman and Blundell (2010) study in which 25% of students with special needs maintained they preferred not to disclose their disabilities. Different reasons are mentioned in the literature: students fear being rejected, don't want people to feel pity or dread misjudgment (Stein 2012; Vickerman and Blundell 2010). In our study, this issue came to light when students with disabilities mentioned how they struggled to ask for help, either from the support service or from their peers. First, as university is a new environment, they required some time to identify their actual needs and to dare to say who they were and what they needed. Second, as some adaptations separated them from the rest of the group (e.g. taking their exams in another room), they also needed to balance the perceived benefits of adaptation with their fear of stigmatization.

Moreover, as far as their needs are concerned, students with disabilities feel fully supported by the university. This perception strongly diverges from their non-disabled peers. On the one hand, students with disabilities feel the system and the adaptations they receive offer them good working conditions in which to succeed (Dong and Lucas, 2016). On the other hand, non-disabled students considered the university as deliberately unsupportive and unfair.

Disability as an Ability?

While we might have thought that students with disabilities experienced a more challenging transition compared to their peers without disabilities (Madriaga et al. 2010), the opposite turned out to be the case. Students without disabilities felt more disconcerted when having to face difficulties. They experienced more negative emotions and their failures seemed to impact their self-efficacy more. They were still discovering their strengths and weaknesses and were still learning to deal with them. Regarding these results, we can say that students with disabilities clearly enhanced their experience at university and expressed more positive emotions than non-disabled students did.

In a way, for students with disabilities, the transition to HE was experienced as just another challenge among others. The lifetime management of their disabilities better prepared them to face the challenges of the transition to HE. In this case, having a disability was considered as a strength for our participants. This result lends credence to the premises of the life design approach (Saviskas et al. 2009). This vocational guidance approach emphasizes the opportunities provided by students' abilities (courage, adaptability, etc.) rather than constraints induced by disabilities. This growing strength-based awareness reveals the bright side of disability and sheds light on a new perception of students with disabilities.

Another way of reading these results is that the sample of students with disabilities we interviewed is only made up of high achievers. Despite the recent increase in students with disabilities in HE, pupils with special needs are still less likely to engage in HE (Ebersold 2010) due to some specific career planning difficulties (Test et al. 2009). For example, Kortering, Braziel and McClannon (2010) observed that young people with disabilities were unsure about their career plans and barely considered post-secondary education as an option. We may thus be dealing with a self-selection bias: only students with disabilities with particularly high motivation and self-determination may consider HE (Kirkeboen, Leuven and Mogstad 2016). In a qualitative study, students with disabilities engaged in HE considered even themselves as

‘survivors’ (Moriña 2017b). To fully understand and enhance the inclusion of students with special needs, it would therefore be relevant to consider how students with special needs consider HE during high school and the influence of their disabilities on the vocational guidance they receive.

Limits

This study has several limits. First, there were only two focus groups. Even though the IPA approach does not require many interviews to analyse the data (Smith et al. 2009), it would have been interesting to look at other focus groups with students with different profiles, either non-disabled students or students with special needs: this would have enabled us to capture the specificities of each group more precisely. Yet it is worth mentioning that there were only a few students with motor and sensory disabilities in the institution under study. The students interviewed therefore were a good sample of Bachelor’s students with motor and sensory disabilities in our specific context.

Another limitation of this study is related to the design of the focus group. In our two groups, two different dynamics clearly appeared: traditional students expressed more the challenges they encountered, while students with disabilities focused more on the benefits. It is possible that these results were exacerbated due to the group dynamic. The focus group design is useful as the researcher is less influential in the data collection but, as the researcher has less control on the interview, the group norms and the atmosphere have more influence in the final results (Krueger and Casey 2000).

Future Perspectives and Implications

According to the limits of this study, having more focus groups and completing our research with individual interviews would deepen our understanding of transition to HE. Moreover, as we observed that the experience in high school influenced the way students underwent the transition to HE, a longitudinal design from the end of high school to the entrance

into HE with non-disabled students and students with disabilities would give us an insight into the process of the transition at the present time.

From our results, students who disclosed their disabilities and received help from the support service experienced a positive transition to HE. This encouraging result may suggest that inclusion is enhanced thanks to the adaptations provided. In different studies, requesting support and adaptations from the disability service was indeed positively correlated to academic performance (Dong and Lucas 2016), participation in student experience, satisfaction with participation and appraisal of the institution as a facilitating environment (Schreuer & Sachs, 2014).

It would therefore be interesting (1) to broadly inform pupils with disabilities about these support services and their rights to benefit from reasonable adaptations and (2) to avoid a potential self-selection effect, to enhance the consideration of vocational guidance during high school. As already mentioned, life design (Savickas et al. 2009) intervention is particularly convenient for pupils with disabilities (Nota et al. 2014). It aims to enhance positive abilities regarding the future and considers the importance of integrating different life roles into an individual's identity. This approach could help pupils to reflect upon their abilities rather than their disabilities and consider how their disability influences their self-concept.

In this study, non-disabled students also reported many challenges transitioning to HE. As Madriaga and colleagues (2010) suggest, all students could be considered as having special needs. To fully enhance inclusion, it would therefore be relevant to develop supportive practices for all students, not only for those who have a recognized disability (Collins et al. 2019; Hewett et al. 2018; Moriña et al. 2015). For example, educational practices and cultures promoting diverse learning (statement of clear objectives, material given in advance, feedback provided, etc.) could benefit all students and diminish the segregating effects of specific adaptations only offered to students with disabilities (Gibson 2012; Hewett et al. 2018).

Finally, in analysing in this study more deeply the perception of adaptations received, we observed that the attitude of the staff was more valued than the adaptations themselves. Students with disabilities felt welcomed and reassured by kind people who wished them to succeed. This is in line with Vickerman and Blundell (2010) and Gibson (2012) who argued that individual variables, more than policies, adaptations or material issues, are a priority to sustain the educational experience of students with disabilities. Therefore, before investing in adaptations and material conditions, enhancing inclusive attitudes among the staff and students through training and awareness campaigns seems more relevant. An open-minded climate that values diversity would benefit students with special needs as much as traditional students.

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