

Responding to Needs of Disabled Students in the Light of COVID 19

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered various changes in life as we know it. One of the sectors which were highly affected was Higher Education. Pandemic affected several dimensions in HE: student exchange, ways of teaching, way of examinations, ways of communication faculty- academics-students (Dermol, Marušič, Trunk Širca, Trunk, 2020; IAU & ESN 2020). The vast majority of European universities closed their campuses in March 2020 and moved to distance learning, in many HE institutions distance learning continued the academic year 2020/21 (IAU & ESN 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic is having a disproportionate impact on learners with disabilities who were already experiencing social and educational disadvantage. Several challenges of Covid 19 occur with the online didactic process, for example, quality of online lectures delivered, availability of lecture material including recorded lectures, the question of motivation of students for online learning, absence of supports that they normally received from the university's disability offices and lack of possibility of face to face communication with teachers. In addition to barriers to access technology and online learning, the disabled face several additional technological challenges, for example, sight-impaired students may need voice activation for audio access or larger onscreen images for better viewing, hearing-impaired students may require captioning, students with physical limitations may need special accessible technology to navigate their learning and connections, others may need a minimally distracting image. Several changes refer also to the physical return of students to campus: What happens to the student who experienced violent trauma when confronted by a masked person? What happens to the person with hearing loss who depends on lip-reading at a time when everyone's mouths are covered by masks?

Research conducted by Research University Consortium in the United States between May and June 2020 which involved 30.000 students from 9 larger public universities, showed that covid 19 affected students with disabilities more than their peers. Some major findings: compared to their peers they less agree that they belong back to campuses, a greater number of disabled experienced major depressive disorder that may be linked to the pandemic, compared to students without disabilities (53-70% vs 34%), disabled students more than their peers experienced financial hardship and food insecurity, students with ADHD considered home environment too distracting for them for effective work, students with major depressive disorders experienced isolations loneliness (Sutton, H. 2020). Based on results some improvements were recommended by faculties concerning teaching remotely, among them is very important to pay attention to students' mental health and well-being.

Keywords: higher education, disabled, Covid 19, online lectures, face-to face lectures