

Good practices on Specific Learning Disorders by Universidade Aberta

Field of subject related to diversity and inclusion

Specific Learning Disorders

Introduction

The number of students with cognitive difficulties is relatively scarce since only a few reach higher education. Those that manage to enrol in university usually have mild or moderate levels of disorders, and a strong will to succeed. People with severe, and some with moderate levels of learning disorders often do not even try higher education, preferring more practical professional outings.

At Universidade Aberta (UAb), candidates and students with specific learning disorders follow the general protocol concerning students with special needs as defined by the University's policies: they must apply for the special needs' status (upon registration, or after), providing supporting documentation (an official medical certificate and further medical reports, when necessary). Each case is submitted to a board called the "Student Monitoring Committee". This committee is composed of the representatives from various sectors relevant to the path of the students (Academic Services; Documentation/Library Services; Virtual Campus Support; Student's Association; Pedagogical Council; and also the coordination team of the programme in which each student is enrolled), in articulation with the Accessibility Project which is the central element of support for students with special education needs (acting both at the level of research and of practical intervention in the field). It is this committee that decides what the adjustments and compensatory strategies to be implemented for each student to help his/her study process are. The decision aims at being reasonable and adequate, based on the consideration of medical reports, on the requirements and objectives of the study programme, and on the request of the student, where he/she states what kind of measures he/she considers to be adequate. This self-evaluation is crucial since it provides a more tangible perception of the student (e.g., a student may need more time to do tests and exams, not because that is necessary at the level of his/her capacities, but because it is fundamental to prevent additional anxiety that may inhibit finishing exams).

Good practices

Some issues are considered regardless of whether there is anyone who needs them or not, namely templates for documents (teaching materials, tests, and exams). UAb provides

References

Dias, Isabel Barros; Seara, Isabel Roboredo & Barros, Daniela Melaré Vieira de (2016). "Projeto Acessibilidades: Modelo de Inclusão no Ensino Superior a Distância". In Paulo Dias, Darlinda Moreira e António Quintas-Mendes (Coord.), *Práticas e Cenários de Inovação em Educação Online* (pp. 75–98). Lisboa: Universidade Aberta. <https://repositorioaberto.uab.pt/handle/10400.2/5513>

accessible pre-formatted templates (in accordance with universal design) to be used by teachers (non-experts in accessibility rules) when they produce teaching-learning materials. In addition, guidelines and examples of good practices and tips for problem solutions are provided in a document with recommendations, produced by the teachers that work in the Accessibility Project, aimed at the teaching staff, non-teaching staff, and programme coordinators. This document includes recommendations and hints for adjustments valid for various kinds of special needs. Since it is considered at UAb that every adjustment that is important for students with special needs and does not disturb other students should be put to practice, various procedures are expected to be implemented even if there are no students with special needs in that class (e.g. pdf documents created, not as image, but using OCR become accessible to screen readers, and are also better for anyone that needs to do word search).

As far as students with special learning disorders are concerned, the following recommendations (concerning web design in Moodle) are meaningful:

- Clear organization of the virtual classroom and of messages with instructions (avoid excessive complexity; large amounts of information; large number of formulae or of graphic marks such as italics, underlined, bold...);
- The structure of the virtual classroom must be as simple and clear as possible (e.g., with dates clearly stated, and with topics organized down-top so that the most recent topic appears first);
- Graphics, diagrams, mind maps... should be completed with detailed explanations to avoid reading difficulties;
- Accuracy of the provided instructions and stability of the information, avoiding changes.

Other possible adjustments are:

- Extension of home loan of books from the library;
- Deadline extensions for work delivery.

Student-directed counselling focuses on questioning the relevance of their disclosure to teachers. Students are free to consider that their cognitive difficulties are mild and that they do not need any support during their study process, and just need a time extension during exams (electronically programmed by non-teaching staff). When students consider that their situation must be reported to teachers, they can use a model of presentation, where they state their difficulties and choose from a list the kind of support that they consider adequate to his/her specific situation.

Adjustments, of pedagogical or technical nature, concerning specific students are considered in teachers' meetings with the coordination team of each study programme. In fact, a representative of the Accessibility Project is available to attend these sectorial meetings whenever there are students with special needs enrolled in that specific programme. It is intended that adjustments comply with a balance that

supports the students, without harming the scientific requirements of the study programme. The success of the adaptations aiming at levelling equal opportunities for students with specific learning disorders during the study process are closely monitored by teachers.

During exams, students with specific learning disorders have extra time. There is also the possibility of doing an oral exam, upon request. From 2020 on, because of the pandemic, UAb's exams are no longer in person. Therefore, students can take them in their own homes, with their computers (with access to orthographic correctors, and calculators).

For what concerns interaction with colleagues, the Accessibility Project has created a web space in Moodle intended for the interaction between students and former students with special needs. Apart from the dissemination of information that may be of interest for the group (special grants, internships...), this space is destined to be a dialogue environment among students and with former students, so that they can learn from each other, get to know inspiring cases of success, and strengthen their self-confidence. There are no designated mentors since the group functions as a whole, strategically addressed at the integration and support of new students, and thus preventing dropouts.