

TERESA PADILLA-CARMONA – JOSÉ GONZÁLEZ-MONTEAGUDO –
MARÍA A. TENORIO-RODRÍGUEZ

Lights and Shadows: The Inclusion of Invisible Students in Spanish Universities

Invisible students at Spanish universities

Spanish universities in the 21st century are a far cry from institutions prior to the 1970s, which were characterized by strong social homogeneity where only students who had to study did. In this elitist context, there was a direct correlation between social class and the education system (GARCÍA DE LEÓN & GARCÍA DE CORTÁZAR, 1992). In recent decades, universities have grown to become more inclusive instead of only serving privileged members of society. This has led to a situation in which university students do not respond to univocal models. However, this plurality of student profiles does not imply that institutions have adapted their requirements and programs to meet the diverse characteristics and needs of students.

Different terms have been used to describe this new audience accessing universities: *non-traditional student* (JOHNSTON, 2011), *disadvantaged student* (OECD, 2012), *post-traditional student* (WATT & WAGER, 2016), and *under-represented student* (MCDANIEL et al., 2020), to name a few. In all cases, we refer to a heterogeneous group of students that includes mature students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, with family burdens and special educational needs, and belonging to other ethnicities, cultures, and nationalities (CROSLING et al., 2008). This way the intention is to focus on students with the greatest inequalities and difficulties, and whose participation and progress at university are constrained by structural factors (FIELD & MORGAN-KLEIN, 2012).

To date, there is no demographic or statistical study that allows us to know precisely what percentage of Spanish university students might belong to one or more of these groups. This is due to the impossibility of compulsorily requesting self-identification in the categories described, especially when considering certain socio-economic and cultural variables. However, there are several reports (ARIÑO et al., 2014; ARIÑO & LLOPIS, 2011; FUNDACIÓN UNIVERSIA, 2018; MINISTERIO DE UNIVERSIDADES, 2021) that allow us to obtain partial estimates about university students in Spain:

- 23% are over 25 years old.
- 1.5% have a disability.
- 7.2% have dependent children.
- 5.8 % come from abroad and are enrolled in bachelor's degrees.
- 15% attribute a low social position to their families.
- 25% come from families with a low level of education.

According to these figures, at least a third of Spanish students present characteristics different from the usual or majority pattern, which constitutes what McNair (1998) calls an “invisible majority” both for policy makers and managers, as well as for those who research in the field. Research in Spain has done little to explore the needs that these groups experience during their time at university. Among the limited number of studies, certain groups have received greater attention. Such is the case of mature and disabled students.

In the case of mature students, an analysis of the Spanish university system in MECED (2016) shows that they have bigger difficulties in completing their higher education studies. The work of Bermejo, Camacho, Fernández-Batanero and García-Lázaro (2011) points to the combination of work and studies as difficulties in students’ academic progress, as well as the lack of habit and the perception of a lower level of competences compared to younger colleagues. In general, adult students seem to have a more responsible attitude towards studying, and they know better what they want and how to achieve it. However, they complain that teachers often do not recognize their presence in class and, therefore, their previous experience can rarely be used (ADIEGO et al., 2004).

Regarding the particular needs of students with disabilities, some research (MORIÑA, 2017; SÁNCHEZ PALOMINO, 2009) has found that they perceive teachers as the main barrier to their academic progress, mainly due to the inflexibility and lack of inclusive methodologies used in the classroom, which highlights their lack of specific training to work with these types of students. Other aspects, such as socio-economic background, have not been studied thoroughly. The common assumption is that once these students enter university, there is equality among students despite the diversity of their cultural and family backgrounds, and many believe that support through a system of scholarships compensates for such differences (GONZÁLEZ-MONTEAGUDO & BALLESTEROS, 2011). Even fewer studies focus on immigrant students or students of other ethnicities. The work of Pérez-Serrano and Sarrate (2013) provides information on student profiles and other factors that favor and hinder the social inclusion of immigrant university students. In turn, Padilla-Carmona, González-Monteaquedo and Soria-Vilchez (2017) have investigated the factors associated with the academic success of Roma students at university.

Policies for widening participation in universities

Since 1971, Spanish universities have had special access to students over 25 years of age who meet the university entrance requirements. A quota of 2% of places is reserved for these students. Just over a decade ago, important legislative advances were made to improve access, participation, and progress in academic life for those groups that until now had had little presence in higher education. With regards to access, Royal Decrees 1892/2008 and 558/2010 establish positive discrimination measures to favour the inclusion of disadvantaged groups in universities. Among other issues, two new access routes are available with an established percentage of reserved places (between 1–3%). One is for students over 40 years of age who can demonstrate professional experience related to the degree they wish to study, and another is for students over 45 years of age who pass an adapted test. There are also quotas for students with disabilities (5%) and for high-performance athletes (between 1–3%).

The improvement in equal opportunities must also incorporate measures aimed at ensuring greater integration and participation of these new audiences into university institutions. Therefore, an important milestone is the development of the University Student Statute (ROYAL DECREE 1791/2010), which provides for improvements in services offered by the university to non-traditional groups, facilitates the integration of guidance activities in

coordinated tutorial systems and the compatibility of study with work, and adopts measures to ensure adaptation to the needs of all students.

Prior to their appearance, many Spanish universities had their own regulations and services in which different support measures were defined: welcome programs, guidance and mentoring, job placement services, and training courses in basic academic skills (languages, information technologies, etc.). Although these services exist in practically all universities, the type of intervention they carry out is clearly extracurricular, aimed at solving the problem of students who demand services but with little impact on the context that may be contributing to creating such problems or needs.

As a result, there is a framework that aims to regulate possible situations arising from the increase in university classrooms of minority groups. However, we find that we still lack sufficient information about these students and the possible difficulties they experience on a day-to-day basis during their time at university. What needs do they have? Are these needs like those of their traditional peers? What is their relationship with their teachers? What do they demand from the university? It seems as if these students were invisible to the institution, and their peculiar characteristics are diluted in a homogenizing university student body that does not consider all the disadvantages such diversity can entail.

Inclusion at universities from the perspective of invisible students

In this section we intend to present the perspectives of some students who have differential characteristics and whose testimonies reveal their “invisibility” in academic institutions. Without generalizing or describing the methodological procedure used in detail, the authors utilize the results of their previous studies carried out with in-depth biographical interviews. These are four research projects in which 50 disadvantaged students were interviewed about various aspects ranging from their access to institutions, academic life, and experiences in the world of work. Their testimonies are taken out of the context of the respective studies to illustrate their day-to-day experiences at university.

One of the statements that appears quickly and frequently in the stories refers to the great effort they put into university compared to their peers (Pseudonyms are used to respect the confidentiality of the participants):

Being a bit sensible, you have to contribute more to achieve the same thing. You have to do twice as much to achieve the same thing. That's my conclusion from a non-traditional student (Man).

Whether because they work, have family responsibilities, or have a disability, these students must maintain a very high level of motivation to compensate for the sacrifices and adjustments they have to make in their daily lives across a wide spectrum of behaviours and strategies:

- Endless days.
I wake up around six in the morning every day, and I end my working day at the campus about 9 p.m. (Isabel)
- Family reorganizations that allow them to achieve their goals and which, on occasions, may involve breaking with established models and situations.
(...) because I have had to organize a lot..., I have had to hire someone to take the girls to school, to do the housework. And I said to myself: what needs do I have? I am neglecting my

family, because I am here, and I asked myself: is it worth it? Because the girls also criticize me for being on the computer all day... so of course, it hurts you and you say, is it worth it? (Emma).

- Adaptations can sometimes involve a physical effort for a person in a wheelchair:
Because now they have changed the buttons on the lifts, but they have put them back at the top, too high for me. (Yria); More than once I said it at the information office (...) to suggest that they at least renew the hearing equipment of the microphones (...), that is to follow behind people and it tires me a lot, it is with one person and with another (Alvaritocrack).
- They even disguise or hide their ethnic identity to avoid conflict with peers and teachers.
Declared as a Gypsy? (...) I simply don't speak about it... I have told my close friends I'm Roma because I don't have any problem with saying "I'm Gitano"... because they are my friends, and I never heard any derogatory comment from them regarding Roma... But, when it comes to anyone in the classroom, somebody that I just see once or twice a week, one hour, or from whom I have heard negative things about Roma (Refre).

These testimonies show an effort to adapt to the institution (its rules, its values, its times) and to a univocal model of being a student (white, without family responsibilities, without a wheelchair, studying full-time). The predominant teaching model can also be considered univocal as transmissive teaching prevails based on PowerPoint presentations. That shows the teaching practice's inability to incorporate their knowledge and conditions, let alone their needs:

A typical day at university is going to class, taking notes, and listening to the teacher. Only 2 or 3 teachers use a different class dynamic, and we are the ones talking, but in general we are still in a school, with the teacher giving the lesson (Lidia).

Regarding the teachers, in general they are fine, although there is a fairly large proportion of them who, for one reason or another, give rather poor classes (Carlos).

In this context, students describe their teachers' treatment of them using the term "normal". However, a more critical look at relations with teachers leads us to understand that both students and teachers have internalized an "egalitarian" pedagogical model in which there is no room for equity and diversity of interests and conditions:

I go unnoticed in class (...) I don't need special support or special treatment because this is a somewhat difficult circumstance and I prefer to leave it aside (Magister).

This is the default treatment given to learners when the circumstances that may lead to disadvantages are not directly visible (i.e., learners from disadvantaged backgrounds or certain ethnicities if their physical features are not prominent, with disabilities that are not obvious). But it is also how students are treated when differences are visible (i.e. adult learners and learners with certain disabilities, etc.) and, when this way of being treated is expected by learners themselves:

Most of them [teachers] understand and appreciate my situation, but logically they cannot demand less from me than what is demanded from the rest of my colleagues (MJ).

It is quite possible that this point of view is a consequence of common assumptions in university culture, which stress the idea that requirements should be the same for everyone and that it is the student who must adapt to them without exception. Only two of the participants go more deeply into the issue of positive discrimination, questioning the difference between equity and equality:

They, of course, are aware of my disability because it is obvious, but none of them usually approach me to ask me if I need something special or anything else. They treat me like they treat the rest of the pupils and that has two aspects: the positive one, which is because that's how I feel, like the others and not special at all, and the negative one, which is that maybe I would like them to worry a bit about me sometimes (...). I don't mean negative discrimination per se... but rather that they treat me... normally, like everyone else. And in certain aspects, sometimes, being treated normally in your situation is a disadvantage and you feel a bit discriminated against (Yria).

So the teacher (...) is talking about justice, he thinks that if he passes or fails to pass, he is not doing justice. He is comparing me, 59 years old, with an 18-year-old boy... (Nasser).

The failure to recognize the special circumstances of some students is undoubtedly an obstacle to the personalization of the teaching-learning process. There is a teaching model to which all students must adapt. On the rare occasions when adaptations are made for students, they affect peripheral and non-substantial aspects of the learning process:

There are some occasions when the teachers make every effort and do everything in their power to be able to change some hours of tutorials, and things like that, although not all of them are as flexible as possible (...) But in general, they are usually flexible in tutorials and in more informal matters. When it comes to other issues such as internships, exams..., they are not flexible (Hernán).

Transformations needed for truly inclusive universities

Although there are adequate measures to diversify access to university and to facilitate the entry of diverse student populations, there are still pending challenges in the Spanish university system in terms of academic progress, completion, and successful transition to the labour market. This paper illustrates a range of situations that some students experience, leading to them remaining invisible in university institutions.

On the one hand, the teaching model is basically traditional with a predominance of theoretical classes that are not adapted to the needs and interests of all students. This lack of recognition of the existing diversity in the classroom, in favour of a supposed equality of treatment, not only implies neglecting special needs but also prevents the teaching-learning process from benefiting from the contributions of diverse students, such as their tendency to be more participative, their greater motivation to learn, and in many cases their more expansive life and professional experiences. In this sense, adapting programs and teaching practices to the characteristics of the entire student population is imperative. This teaching model must evolve and make difference, flexibility, and inclusion one of its hallmarks (PADILLA-CARMONA et al., 2020).

On the other hand, student support services have a fundamental role to play in ensuring students' progress in higher education, but they are not solely responsible for success and retention. Although most universities currently offer some kind of support service, it

is important to bear in mind that their advice must be contextualized and seen as easily accessible to students (GONZÁLEZ-MONTEAGUDO et al., 2017). Thus, areas where the university institution can positively influence the academic progress of disadvantaged students include support with personal tutoring, directed study, and social and academic integration (COTTON et al., 2017). The continued questioning of traditional hierarchies and the deficit model of student underachievement are part of an important cultural shift that is necessary to make the university environment more welcoming to non-traditional students.

Furthermore, the pathways of non-traditional students are more diverse and unpredictable than those of their peers (WONG, 2018). Their experiences as well as the difficulties and obstacles they have had to overcome must be the benchmark if retention and completion rates in higher education are to be increased for these groups (FINNEGAN et al., 2014). In this context, any improvement of this institution for inclusion is more likely to work if students are listened to, giving voice to their experiences, expectations, and needs (FIELD & KURANTOWICZ, 2014).

Nowadays, although access to university is possible for previously excluded groups, the process is still inconsistent and uneven, and it requires a holistic approach (QUINN, 2013). Much remains to be done in Spanish universities and in European universities in general if these institutions are to become inclusive institutions that respond to the diverse needs of their students. As Arató et al. (2015) show, it is necessary to advance theoretical frameworks, processes, programs, and collaborative work in a more systematic and comprehensive way, to deepen the inclusive dimension of universities.

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