

Accessibility Course: Training Higher Education academics in the University of Porto

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Abstract: Universities face new challenges as they have to deal with an increasing number of disabled students attending their curricula. In Portugal, Higher Education Institutions (HEI) are still not prepared, as teaching and non-teaching staff face serious difficulties interpreting accessibility guidelines, and are not aware of their important role for providing accommodations. This paper presents the findings of the first national initiative on a HEI to help implementing an inclusive curriculum. We developed a course on accessibility and observed that staff had little or no training on how to deal with disabled students, although they were willing to learn how to adapt their curricula to this new reality. In conclusion, new courses and workshops on accessibility will have to be developed within the U.Porto to reach a larger and more diverse audience and thus contributing to build a barrier free community where all students can feel included.

Introduction

The universal access to higher education, in addition of being a constitutional right, is equally a privileged way for all citizens including disabled persons to achieve better social and professional integration and self accomplishment.

Due to efforts made by the State to follow a policy of inclusion of disabled pupils in regular schools, the last decade has registered an increased number of people with special education needs enrolling in University courses. The latter adds to a set of changes that HEI today in all EU countries are being forced to undertake, thus forcing HE to rethink itself and consequently also its inclusion policies and practices.

In Portugal, there is no legislation that requires HEI to anticipate and address within policies and practices the entitlements of disabled students, as well as respond to their individual requirements as necessary. Therefore each HEI in Portugal has its own policy and practices regarding the inclusion of students with special education needs. In an effort to achieve a common action towards those students nationwide, disability services from different Universities formed a *community of practice* (Weger,1998)¹ - *GTAEDES (Grupo de Trabalho de Apoio a Estudantes com Deficiência no Ensino Superior)*, where ideas, practices and projects are being discussed and developed.

The inclusion of students with special education needs is something very new in Portuguese HEI and one of the main difficulties we face is how to make the academic community know more about the needs of these students and how we can work with it to make it more aware, sensitive and more able to deal efficiently with different ways of learning and studying.

In this paper we will try to describe an experience in U.Porto regarding the training of teachers to work with students with special education needs in a classroom setting.

Since 2008, the U.Porto publicly committed itself with accessibility issues by approving its Students

1 Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: learning, meaning and identity* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

with Special Education Needs Regulation, even though well before 2008 a lot of work had already been done. In 2000, the Disabled Students Service was created as it is today, and in 2003, the U.Porto started using e-learning platforms and the New Technologies in Education Office was created. In the same year, SIGARRA², an information system being developed at the Faculty of Engineering of U.Porto since 1996, was implemented in all faculties of the University. Students and staff now had platforms for both academic and administrative information and materials. Both tools have been improving its accessibility levels since then.

The Students with Special Education Needs Regulation provided the academic community with a set of procedures on how to address the individual requirements of those students, thus assuring a policy of equal opportunities for learning and their effective and successful inclusion. But, it is not only policies that matters, practices are key issues here to achieve effective inclusion and, as we have mentioned previously, one of our main concerns was the ability of our teaching staff to deal with “different” students, especially in classroom learning situations.

Today, Teachers are what some authors call learning technologists³, having to concentrate on both classroom and online settings. What usually happens is that teachers and tech staff know very little about Portuguese legislation regarding accessibility issues. They also face serious difficulties when interpreting accessibility guidelines, and feel lost when they realise that a deaf or a blind student is actually on their classroom. With the aim of helping this group and based on some experiences we could find on foreign HEI websites (mainly in the US and the UK) we went forward with a course on “Accessibility in classroom setting” using Moodle.

The Study

It is important to understand the reasons that made us choose e-learning instead of a taught course. The training of teachers on accessibility issues and inclusion in Portugal at a University level is, to our knowledge simply not done. The universe of students with special needs enrolled at a University level is still very small. A national inquiry made in 2007 reported 816 students with special needs in a universe of 376 917⁴ students in the same year. These numbers are one of the reasons why the training of HEI teachers and staff on those subjects is neglected.

Besides the latter, there were other problems that made us decide for a e-learning course instead of a taught one: firstly the University of Porto’s large campus scattered through the city of Porto and secondly, the fact that training on these subjects is not valued in a HE Teachers Career here in Portugal - Institutions and teachers still don’t find accessibility training as important as training on other areas - so teachers simply cannot find time to enrol and attend these training courses.

Since in Portugal research done on Inclusive Higher Education is still scarce, we turned to what was being done on foreign institutions such as the University of Arkansas at Little Rock⁵ and at the Brazilian Institute of Study and Research AMANKAY⁶. Materials and information were also collected from the Centre for Applied Special Technology (CAST), namely information available on Universal Design for Learning, and used as course contents, while others were pointed out for further study and additional information.

Furthermore, we needed to produce some of the materials, mainly videos, such as recorded statements of students and teachers of the U.Porto that agreed to talk about their particular situations, difficulties and needs. This was a way of engaging the community in the project and making the most of research that was being done, namely related to deaf and hard of hearing students.

These materials were organized on an online course that lasted for three weeks and was divided into a

2 More information on SIGARRA: <http://sigarra.up.pt/up_uk/WEB_BASE.GERA_PAGINA?P_pagina=2418>.

3 Seale, J. (2004). The development of accessibility practices in e-learning: an exploration of communities of practice. *Association for Learning Technology Journal*, 12 (1). pp. 51-63. ISSN 0968-7769.

4 Instituto Nacional de Estatística, based on data from Ministério da Ciência Tecnologia e Ensino Superior, viewed 7 April 2011 <http://www.ine.pt/xportal/xmain?xpid=INE&xpgid=ine_indicadores&indOcorrCod=0002739&contexto=bd&selTab=tab2>.

5 University of Arkansas at Little Rock (2003). Make a difference [Electronic resource]: Tools for Enabling Faculty to Teach Students with Disabilities, Arkansas: Project PACE, University of Arkansas at Little Rock. 5 DVD-ROM + 4 Handbooks.

6 Gil, Marta (2007). Vida em movimento [electronic resource]: Esporte Adaptado [S.l.]: Laramara-Associação Brasileira de Assistência ao Deficiente Visual, 4 DVD-ROM + 1 leaflet.

set of seven modules, each one with a specific subject. Apart from the topics on disabilities, we also included a topic on general accessibility for context, and one about U.Porto's policies on accessibility and inclusion. The closing topic allowed participants to organize the information of previous modules, and made them realise that this process of including students with special needs involves different people with different roles within the academic community, all equally important to the process. The modules were the following:

1. Introduction Module
2. University of Porto's Policy on accessibility and inclusion;
3. Visual impairment
4. Hearing impairment
5. Cerebral Palsy
6. Learning disabilities
7. Sum up

Each module followed the same structure and had one mandatory activity and one optional. Mandatory activities were based on one or more videos either of testimonials or specific situations involving teachers or students. After reflecting on the video, trainees would have to comment real life situations that occurred in a given point in time at the U.Porto, presented on a forum for that purpose - all identities were concealed and only the problem and the situation were described. Optional activities were created with the intent of promoting participation on related topics, such as web accessibility and general accessibility techniques, tips and tools that could be used in a classroom situation to overcome basic problems when dealing with students with special needs.

Materials and subjects were then created and chosen based on our initial assumptions that teachers are still not aware of their importance and role in providing accommodations for their students with special needs. These assumptions resulted from our experience of more than a decade of working with teachers, students with special needs and tech staff. The focus of the course was then on the student and how staff should address their problems and provide proper accommodations.

This was the first initiative of its kind in Portugal that took place on a HEI. Although simple it was very important since we can build up a lot from this first experience.

Findings

Results proved to be much more interesting than we anticipated. We had only ten enrolled participants, not a big number considering the universe of teachers in our University⁷, but quite an interesting number considering our two previous attempts of implementing similar training: two enrolled on the first attempt and none on the second.

Teachers that participated in this course proved to be sensitive and eager to learn how to properly accommodate students with disabilities, but like in the article presented by Burgsthaler they demonstrated

“little experience teaching students with disabilities and little or no specific training in effective strategies for making curricula accessible to students with disabilities”(Burgsthaler, 2007).

During the course we observed that teachers sometimes mistook the provision of certain accommodations with an unfair advantage to students with disabilities. They also began to realise that their teaching strategies have a especially strong influence on academic success of students with special needs, but on the other hand they were afraid to make changes thinking that they might compromise their taught disciplines and courses integrity, a concern already described on existing literature (Burgsthaler, 2007). We also realised that some of them still had a medical model of disability⁸, thinking that doctors should also be responsible for suggesting proper accommodations for students, which proves their insecurity and inexperience regarding this subject.

This course also revealed that teachers were not even aware of University's policy regarding the inclusion of students with special needs and did not know nor used the resources available, like staff working to

⁷ See also: Universidade do Porto - About U.Porto - University of Porto in Figures, viewed 8 April 2011 <http://sigarra.up.pt/up_uk/WEB_BASE.GERA_PAGINA?p_pagina=122350>.

⁸ As opposed to the social model of disability.

support students with special needs in each of the 14 Faculties that make up U.Porto. Having a topic on legislation and U.Porto policies proved to be very important as many of the participants confessed ignorant both of national legislation and internal regulations on the subject: some of them neither knew there was such internal regulation. The latter is in agreement with literature, which validates our results, when it refers that:

“Postsecondary faculty and academic administrators have expressed a need for instruction regarding legal issues, disability-related accommodations, communication with students who have disabilities, and resources (...)” (Burgstahler, 2007);

Our initial assumptions about materials and the focus of the course proved to be slightly different from what our trainees were expecting. Our participants stated that materials were sometimes perhaps too simple and information somewhat close to common sense. As this was the first edition, we didn't know what to expect from our trainees, what they knew and their difficulties. In part, the former can be explained by the fact that all of the staff enrolled was in a situation where they had to work with a specific problem concerning students with special needs: they were either teachers of students with special needs, researchers working on inclusion and/or accessibility issues or tech staff working in accessibility projects or helping teachers addressing certain technical accessibility issues. Future editions of this course should overcome these problems.

Again, in an attempt to follow our trainees suggestions, future editions should also have more materials produced by us, focused on specific concerns of U.Porto and should reflect the experience and specific problems of our Teachers, Tech staff and Students with special needs in working their way through in order to achieve a more inclusive University. Also, results of an inquiry and a suggestions' forum showed that materials perspective should shift from Student centred to Universal Design for learning (UDL). Teachers proved to be eager for information and not only to know how to address certain difficulties in dealing with a given disability. They were also expecting to learn to work with broader concepts like UDL.

Finally, some of the teachers that took this course declared their intentions of changing some of their practices as they proved to be incorrect or not well adapted. For the first time we could understand, based on experience, what teachers and tech staff needed in order to provide them with basic tools and techniques as well as broader and in depth information (that was not necessarily directly related with the course itself).

Conclusions

Today, Teachers and Tech staff have to deal with much more than just transmitting information or helping to convey that information. Facing new challenges, it is required a broader knowledge and understanding of what it is changing in HEI and the new paradigm of teaching/learning that HE is almost being forced to adapt. Information Technologies (IT) are on the core of those changes - even in a classroom situation - and we believe that without proper training on accessibility, students with special needs might be forced to abandon University and to give up on their studies. Inclusive curriculum and practices is then an entire new ground to break.

One of the most positive aspects of this initiative was the use of e-learning technologies. Being entirely e-learning it gave participants the chance to:

- manage their time and to work through the proposed tasks where and when they could;
- have permanent access to course material during the entire course and after, being even able to use and view those materials as many times as they wanted and even show it to others;
- have access to other participants work, which made all more aware of the different perspectives on the subject (there were a lot of posts during the course - 155 posts on forums - and the chat room was full during the first session).

Moodle was an essential tool for bringing people closer together, sharing their perspectives, points of view and opinions, thus allowing the development of a small but very enthusiast community of practice on these issues within the University.

As we mentioned before, this was only the first step for the development of training University staff on these subjects, thus working for a barrier-free environment, promoting the inclusion of students with disabilities, particularly those with the so called “invisible” disabilities, but also helping all those students that HEI are not accustomed to work with, like mobility students or older students, just to name a few. More initiatives already

undergoing: for the first time, this year, our Continuous Education Programme includes courses on both inclusion and accessibility issues and so far 43 people have already showed interest in participating.

At a national level, efforts are also being done aiming at promoting the rights and quality of life of people with disabilities. We are referring to the ENDEF⁹ - Estratégia Nacional para a Deficiência - National strategy for disability, which includes 133 actions. From these actions we consider especially relevant those that refer directly to HE, namely:

Action 36: aims at the creation of legislation that will define accommodations to students with disabilities in HEI

Action 61: creation of a guide to include UD in the curricula of both public and private HEI;

Action 62: Structuring training courses for both HEI teachers, administrative and Tech. staff on the rights of people with disabilities;

It is our opinion that, our although small experience can work as a stepping stone to what is being planned nationwide and that we are now therefore more able to contribute to that effort and process.

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⁹ See also: Conselho de Ministros (2010). ENDEF- Estratégia Nacional para a Deficiência 2011-2013, viewed 4 April 2011

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