

Hermosa-Ramírez, I. & Arias-Badia, B. (2024). Accessibility as a means to realising social justice in higher education: Interviews with user organisations and service providers. *Linguistica Antverpiensia, New Series: Themes in Translation Studies*, 23, 93-115.

## **Accessibility as a means to realising social justice in higher education: Interviews with user organisations and service-providers**

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### **Abstract**

To date, media accessibility research has focused mostly on access services within the scope of cultural life at the expense of higher education, where people with sensory disabilities are still under-represented. In an attempt to assess accessibility needs and current barriers to accessibility in the context of higher education in Catalonia, this study adopted a user-centred approach to the provision of access at universities. This article therefore reports on the findings of semi-structured interviews with disabled people organisations and also with accessibility professionals. The thematic analysis of the interviews has revealed several areas of concern: a generalised need for accessibility literacy, both at a societal and at an individual level (especially on the part of university staff); the prevalence of invisible work among students and lecturers with disabilities who have to take additional steps to have their accessibility needs met; and the problematic working conditions of accessibility professionals who provide their services to higher education. The distribution of accessibility and inclusion resources, the matter of working and studying conditions and the application of user- and professional-centred methodologies are important concerns which this study identified as areas needing improvement at the intersection between social justice and media accessibility in the higher-education institutions of Catalonia.

**Keywords:** media accessibility, higher education, disabled people organisation, working conditions

## 1. Introduction

Media accessibility (MA) was originally a sub-area of the Audiovisual Translation sub-field in the field of Translation Studies; increasingly, it has become a sub-field of Accessibility Studies (Greco, 2019a). Accessibility in this context typically enquires into the tools and services that seek to ensure access to cultural life for all, as per the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006). These tools and services include the provision of subtitles, audio description, audio subtitles, sign-language interpreting, and easy-to-read materials.

This article explores sensory accessibility (specifically vision and hearing barriers) in higher-education institutions – an important issue that has been covered in the fields of Education (Shevlin et al., 2004), Disability Studies (Dolmage, 2017) and Web Accessibility (Campoverde-Molina et al., 2023), but less so from the perspective of MA. Such a perspective is about “access to media and non-media objects, services and environments through media solutions, for any person who cannot or would not be able to ... access them in their original form” (Greco, 2019a, p. 18). It is particularly relevant because of the connection it establishes between linguistic rights (including the use of sign language) and accessibility (Hirvonen & Kinnunen, 2020) and the subsequent question of service availability in both minority languages and accessible formats. It is especially important to explore higher-education settings in this regard, because they currently employ assistive technologies, human-led accessibility services, and services which include both linguistic and accessibility translation modalities. For instance, speech-to-text and text-to-speech software, closed captions or subtitles and sign-language interpreting, to name only a few (Evans et al., 2017).

This article starts from the premise that accessibility is a necessary means for social justice in all areas of life, including access to quality education, but also for gaining access to employment (including faculty and administration positions) in the higher-education context. End-users with disabilities perceive there to be a lack of accessibility as a discriminating factor, which leads to inequalities (Arias-Badia et al., 2022). Furthermore, the statistical data available regarding access to education and employment by persons with sensory disabilities point to possible accessibility gaps in higher education. In Spain, for instance, persons with disabilities' make up 1.5% of the student population at BA level; this rate reduces at Master's level (1%) and even more at PhD level (0.8%) (Fundación Universia, 2021).

These data should alert us to the existence of a serious risk to structural ableism, “a pervasive system of discrimination and exclusion of people with disabilities ... privileg[ing] temporarily able-bodied people and disadvantag[ing] people with disabilities” (Griffin et al., 2007, p. 335). This is a real risk that characterises today's higher-education institutions globally. In general, neoliberalist ideas of high productivity and competitiveness (Olsen et al., 2020), and common ableist micro-aggressions affecting performance and mental health (Lett et al., 2019) in the context of higher education have resulted in the exclusion of students, researchers and administrative staff who have one or other sensory disability. The existing literature (particularly in Disability Studies) has alerted us to the emotional labour of and the additional burden on Deaf academics who find themselves in a “constant negotiation over access costs, defending the value of [their] presence, research, and instruction, [having to cite] disability

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legislation protecting [their] rights” (Chua et al., 2022, pp. 484–485). Then there is also the arduous process that students have to navigate in order to obtain accommodation at their institutions (Dolmage, 2017). In the specific case of sign-language users, the linguistic rights of D/deaf persons are frequently violated in higher education across the world. In Europe, for instance, social policy reports have highlighted the need to secure resources for users and to launch awareness-raising campaigns to mitigate this discriminatory situation in the Council of Europe Member States (Krausneker, 2008, p. 35).

MA research onto higher education could contribute to social justice in the sense that it could alert us to the lack of a fair distribution of financial and educational resources, opportunities, and privileges in society. Furthermore, it could also urge decision-makers to improve the working conditions of accessibility professionals, including subtitlers and interpreters, who provide services in higher education. These crucial stakeholders in the provision of access have typically been overlooked in education, as is attested to by the fact that they are not included in Seale et al.’s (2020) list of more than 15 relevant accessibility stakeholders in higher education. Accordingly, this article is an attempt to redress the slender attention these professionals have traditionally received by taking into account their perspectives and knowledge. Finally, research in MA could contribute towards realising social justice methodologically. The UNIVAC project<sup>ii</sup> (TED2021-130926A-I00), within which this article is framed, adopts a user-centred approach and in so doing endorses an ontological, epistemological and methodological shift towards proactive and participatory approaches in MA (Greco, 2019b). Advocating the meaningful involvement of accessibility service users in the creation of and research on such services (Di Giovanni, 2018; Hermosa-Ramírez, 2023), user-centred approaches (and even more so participatory approaches) are very much in line with the human rights model of disability. This model focuses on the inherent dignity of human beings and “places the individual centre stage in all decisions affecting him/her and, most importantly, locates the main ‘problem’ outside the person and in society” (Quinn & Degener, 2002, p. 14). Such a demand for self-representation has been central to disability rights activism and is necessary to challenge ableist practices in higher education in Spain. This article examines users’ needs and demands in respect of their accessibility to higher education and the experiences of accessibility professionals in providing these services. It does so to gain greater insight into both the distribution of educational and financial resources and the working conditions at these institutions.

This study adopts a phenomenological approach to conducting five semi-structured interviews with representatives of disabled people organisations (DPOs) and two semi-structured interviews with accessibility professionals who work in higher-education settings. Because UNIVAC focuses on sensory accessibility, the participating representatives of the DPOs belong to associations of d/Deaf<sup>iii</sup> and hard-of-hearing users, and also associations of blind and partially sighted users. Representatives from the DPOs are particularly relevant stakeholders in this context because they are well aware of the shared experience of their members (Arias-Badia et al., 2022, p. 67); in addition, their insights typically go beyond the experiences of individual users. The interviews with the representatives of the DPOs revolved around higher-education experiences of the members of the organisations, the attitudes of the different stakeholders involved, and the DPOs’ desired influence on policy-making. Those interviews conducted with accessibility professionals were concerned with their everyday work practices

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(i.e., tasks, relationships with the students, lecturers, and university administration), working conditions and perceptions.

After describing the steps taken for the thematic analysis (section 2), the article provides an analysis of the data (section 3) and finally concludes with the main takeaways from the study, along with future avenues for research at the intersection between MA and social justice (section 4).

## 2. Methodology

Semi-structured interviews are a well-established means for data collection in qualitative approaches to educational settings, since they allow researchers to gather in-depth information and are flexible and adaptable, yet directed, research instruments (Ruslin et al., 2022). After obtaining approval of our ethical procedures from the Institutional Review Board at Universitat Pompeu Fabra, the two authors of this article conducted seven interviews and took notes. Lasting about 75 minutes, each of the interviews was video-recorded. They were conducted either in person in Barcelona or online (May and June 2023), in Spanish, and then transcribed – the quotations included in the analysis of the data were translated by the authors of the article. The interviews included 5–6 main questions, which were guided by the principles of phenomenological studies. These principles aim to enable individuals to describe the meaning that they assign to their lived experience of a given concept or phenomenon (Creswell, 2007, p. 57), which, in the case of this study, is access provision and reception in higher education.

Given the nature of the study and the profiles of the participants, we took specific accessibility measures into account to conduct the interviews. For instance, all the related documentation (informed consents, information sheets) was made accessible and readable on screen-reader devices, since some of the participants were persons with low vision or blindness who are used to this technology. One of the interviews was held using live Spanish <> Catalan Sign Language interpreting. In line with this approach, the participants were free to opt for onsite or online interviews with live subtitling to cater for their preferences.

We used the qualitative data analysis tool ATLAS.ti to conduct a reflexive thematic analysis on the transcripts of the interviews. Thematic analysis is an umbrella term encompassing different approaches to qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2017) which have been deployed in Translation Studies research (Saldanha & O'Brien, 2014). Reflexive thematic analysis, in particular, is recommended for the study of people's experiences, views and perceptions, and also to understand the social processes and factors that underpin a specific phenomenon (Clarke & Braun, 2017) – both of which were a focus of interest for the present study.

As a first step, we identified a list of initial key themes by cross-examining the notes taken during the fieldwork and the interview transcripts. After some discussion about the need to foster inter-annotation agreement, we created a final taxonomy of five group codes and 33 specific codes (including two independent codes under no group category) to annotate the transcripts manually on ATLAS.ti. The codes we used for this study are listed in Table 1.

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**Table 1.** Code categorisation

Group codes	Codes
Higher education as an action line	Higher education as an action line – Yes   Higher education as an action line – No
Specific situations	Inside the classroom   Outside the classroom   Group assignments   Thesis vivas   Exams   Adaptation to the COVID-19 pandemic   Administrative procedures   Campus mobility
Barriers	Financial resources   Communication   Training and raising awareness (of lecturers)   Training and raising awareness (of other stakeholders in the higher education community)   Involvement   Time-related (organisation, availability)   Terminological availability (Sign Languages)   Working conditions
Attitudes	Lecturers' attitudes   Students' attitudes   Governing bodies' and student support services' attitudes   Service providers' attitudes
Access services	Subtitling   Digital   Physical   Sign language interpreting   Accompanying   Combined services
Others	Profile   Influence in policy-making

The participants listed in Table 2 below provided their consent to be identified by their organisation's name for the purposes of this article. We briefly present each organisation, their aims and the services they provide in which area; any information that will become particularly important when exploring the participants' lived experiences of educational support and employment in section 3.

**Table 2.** Description of the organisations represented

Organisation	Brief description	Departments/service provision
Federation of Catalan Associations of Hard of Hearing People (ACAPPS)	With a 30-year trajectory, their initiators were families with d/Deaf children and adults with post-lingual deafness. While it originally adopted an oralist approach to children's education (an approach that focuses on spoken language and lip-reading), the organization has increasingly attracted older people with hearing loss.	Educational support Members' entry into employment Healthy ageing
Catalan Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (ADVC)	Their mission is to improve the quality of life of persons with visual impairment living in Catalonia, regardless of their low vision degree and nationality.	Psychological support Tiflotechnological support (adaptation of technology for people with visual disabilities) Basic rehabilitation Voluntary accompaniment Assistance with bureaucracy
Catalan Federation of Deaf People (FESOCA)	Their aim is to defend the rights of d/Deaf persons, to monitor the application and improvement of legislation about	Training in Catalan Sign Language

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	accessibility, and to promote Catalan Sign Language.	Socio-occupational department Interpreters Accessibility
Spanish National Organisation of the Blind (ONCE)	A social corporation governed by public law and established in 1938 whose aim is to guarantee the autonomy and full inclusion of people with severe visual impairment.	Educational support Professional training Promotion and creation of employment Cultural and social promotion
Federation of Associations of Cochlear Implant Users in Spain (AICE)	Non-profit organisation supporting hard-of-hearing people of any age with cochlear implants and their families for more than 25 years.	Educational support Health Tourism Cochlear implants and accessibility
AGILS	A private company of Catalan Sign Language interpreters for 15 years.	Management of the interpreting service in several Catalan public universities
Association of sign language interpreters and guide-interpreters of Catalonia (ACILS)	Their aim is to defend the interests of interpreters and guide-interpreters who provide services in Catalonia.	Training courses for professionals Activities to raise awareness of the importance of social recognition of interpreters

### 3. Results and discussion

In this section we present the results of the study by following the taxonomy shown in Table 1 above. Each section varies in length depending on the interviewees' engagement with the themes that guided the interviews: education as an action line (3.1); specific academic activities and administrative procedures (3.2); barriers (3.3); attitudes (3.4); access services (3.5); impact on legislation (3.6), and working conditions (3.7).

#### 3.1. Education as an action line

Under this theme, we were interested in ascertaining whether the organisations have a (higher) education action line and, if so, what their approaches and priorities regarding education are, with a view to identifying possible academic "ghettos" where students with sensory disabilities concentrate.

First, all of the DPOs except one have a dedicated line of work devoted to education. ADVC does not have a dedicated department but they do offer support and adaptation services for university students. Typically, when an ADVC member wishes to study towards a university degree, they meet with the association's job counsellor or social worker and discuss which programmes of study may be suitable and offer better job prospects.

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Second, regarding the different approaches to education among DPOs that do have education departments, ACAPPS includes education in their founding resolution and has had a network of students for almost 30 years. Their latest generation of student members has been very involved in awareness-raising and the promotion and funding of access services. This has included producing a documentary to render the lack of equal opportunities in university visible: *Apunts en blanc*, “Blank Notes” (ACAPPS, 2023).

Education at different levels is also one of AICE’s lines of work, and they vigorously disseminate a series of requirements for university students with cochlear implants: to sit at the front of the class; to be provided with note-takers and carbonless self-copying paper, among other things. In addition, AICE has helped to produce adaptation plans for specific university programmes.

On higher education specifically, FESOCA complains that with the exception of Universitat Pompeu Fabra, a public university which includes Catalan Sign Language in its curriculum, they have no lines of communication with higher-education institutions: “Whenever we have tried to get in touch with a university, they don’t reply. There has never been any reply.” [Cuando se ha intentado hacer algún tipo de gestión con las universidades, no ha habido respuesta. No ha habido ningún tipo de respuesta nunca.] This institutional attitude towards DPOs conflicts with the corporate or public image of “inclusive universities”, as exemplified further in section 3.4. In addition, FESOCA had previously managed the interpreting services of some universities, but later ceased this activity to cover other essential services. Currently, their work in this regard focuses on supporting their members in accessing relevant information and filing complaints or appeals when their communication, accessibility, and linguistic rights are violated.

The approach to higher education at ONCE is radically different: they have a strong focus on lobbying and revising new legislation, as further elaborated on in section 3.6. It devotes different types of resource to all levels of education. ONCE reports that university studies and vocational training are chosen at similar rates by their members.

Likewise, the organisations of people with low vision and blindness (ONCE and ADVC) and AGILS (the association of sign language interpreters) do not identify academic “ghettos” where students with sensory disabilities concentrate. According to ONCE, some years ago, the choice of programmes of study focused more on the Humanities and Social Sciences (particularly Law, Psychology, Social Work, and Business Administration). Although this is still an overarching trend, an increasing number of students with low vision and blindness opt for the STEM disciplines. Aside from these, Physiotherapy has traditionally been a popular degree among persons with blindness and low vision – which may have been influenced by the fact that ONCE has a joint agreement with the Autonomous University of Madrid.

In addition, AGILS reports that their d/Deaf student clients opt for Science and Humanities degrees at an approximately equal rate. Importantly, however, three organisations (FESOCA, ADVC, and ONCE) highlight the fact that there are few academic and administrative staff members with sensory disabilities. In this regard, ONCE highlights the legal requirement of

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universities to provide reasonable accommodation for academics with low vision and blindness.

### **3.2. Specific academic activities and administrative procedures: the question of deaf- and blind-obliviousness**

ONCE representatives are universally satisfied with the accessibility of university examinations, although they do describe solutions that depend on the presence of specialised staff to assist persons with disabilities for their access to their examinations, which hinders such persons' autonomy. Currently, a screen reader can be installed on a university computer or laptop and the lecturer can ensure that the computer does not contain any information or notes relevant to the examination in order to prevent cheating or plagiarism. Immediately before an examination, the lecturer shares the exam paper with the student, for instance, on a memory stick. Nonetheless, there is still a sense of extra effort among students with low vision or blindness, an aspect that touches on "invisible work", which is examined in section 3.4. For instance, students often have to arrive at the examination earlier than their peers, in case the room has changed (about which ONCE ironically states that "surprisingly for them, the day also has 24 hours" [para las personas con discapacidad visual o las personas con ceguera, sorprendentemente, el día también tiene 24 horas]), or to cater for the possibility that the memory stick may not work, etc. This leads to a heightened sense of anxiety among students, as the Disabled Students UK organisation (2023) reminds us:

the emotional labour required by students in going up against barriers time and time again in order to have agreed support implemented can be detrimental to their academic work. (p. 59)

Such manifest ableism in academia, and the subsequent invisible work, emotional labour and the resulting anxiety, we anticipate, are key factors leading to the "dropout effect" and also the reason for the small proportion of academics with disabilities who work in Catalan universities.

Still on examinations, FESOCA underlines the reality that both written and oral examinations are problematic, because certain lecturers may become suspicious of the role of the sign language interpreter in oral examinations and may also overlook the fact that written language may be challenging for d/Deaf students, regardless of their preferred communication mode – that is, spoken, spoken and signed, or signed alone (see also Antia et al., 2005). Some members of the university staff do not appear to understand that sign languages constitute the native languages of their students. as stated by Chua et al. (2022):

There is prejudice against deaf people who do not speak, or whose written language skills do not match the academic norm. This prejudice ignores that deaf people's first language and modality may be a sign language, and the written language they work in ... may not be their first language or modality. (p. 487)

Regarding training and awareness-raising among academic staff specifically, ACAPPS and FESOCA report them to be crucial. For instance, FESOCA would like lecturers to be trained on the work of the interpreter in the classroom. This idea is also raised by ACILS, who underlined that it would be good practice for universities to provide training to lecturers that explains the



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profile and tasks of a sign language interpreter, their code of ethics, and their minimum requirements (a chair to sit on, a visible spot for the student, etc.). AICE, in the same way, highlights a general lack of awareness at a societal level on the relevance of appropriate seating arrangements (away from noisier areas) and the need for subtitling or devices such as magnetic loops or FM radio transmitters. ACILS adds that the lack of awareness is pervasive:

the university system is not designed to include these persons [persons with disabilities], so it always requires an extra effort that many institutions, organisations and universities are not ready to make, hindering access to higher education.

For FESOCA, this situation amounts to “deaf-obliviousness”, that is, an environment “in which there is little or no awareness either professionally or socially of deafness, Deaf students, Deaf staff members, or Deaf academics” (Campbell et al., 2008, p. 82) – a recurring matter we return to in section 3.4. FESOCA representatives welcome current policies such as time extensions for examinations to enhance comprehension of the written language, but ultimately blame the highlighted difficulties for the high dropout rates of d/Deaf students.

A similar pattern of “blind obliviousness” arises from the interview with the ONCE representatives, as the required accommodation for the blind and visually impaired, as stipulated in the law (Spanish Royal Legislative Decree 1/2013), are sometimes overlooked. Speaking about the specific case of university lecturers with blindness and low vision in the context of examinations, they argue that

it is very important to bear in mind that blind lecturers can do everything or almost everything, but it is important to consider that there are specific circumstances where we would need specific support, either material or human, which is often not provided [by university managers].

[es muy importante que tengamos en cuenta que el profesorado, en este caso ciego, podemos hacer todo o casi todo, pero sí que es verdad que creo que tenemos que tener en cuenta también que hay momentos o circunstancias puntuales en las que necesitaríamos algún apoyo concreto, bien material o bien humano y que muchas veces no se contempla].

Regarding group assignments and activities outside the classroom, ADVC acknowledges that, at times, students’ peers display more empathy than their lecturers when working with a blind or partially sighted student. This may also be due to the fact that they have a shared goal of obtaining a good grade. In any event, they underline the reality that “the position of power ... is not the same” [la posición de poder ... no es la misma].

Regarding online learning, it has been reported to be favourable for students with disabilities with regard to accessibility, flexibility, self-paced nature, less social pressure, and the stigma of disability (Kotera et al., 2019). Nonetheless, the crisis that arose from the COVID-19 pandemic forced traditionally “physical” universities to shift swiftly to online learning. This resulted in additional barriers to human interactions worldwide. In this regard, ACAPPS conducted their own report which found that each Catalan university followed their own policies regarding platform choice for the synchronous classes and services provided to students. Whereas some universities used platforms that allowed the use of automatic

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subtitling or other specific software, others did not. According to the DPO, this therefore led to higher dropout rates during the height of the pandemic.

Face masks posed an additional challenge, as students could not lip-read and accessible masks did not arrive on time. Overall, this contributed to a general loss of autonomy for d/Deaf students who, for the first time in their lives, had to be accompanied on everyday errands. This general sense of loss of accessibility and autonomy is also shared by the ADVC and their members with low vision and it is in line with the literature on the barriers to online learning that resulted from the COVID-19 crisis, barriers that directly affected vulnerable groups such as displaced persons (Jiménez Andrés & Alemam, 2021) or persons with disabilities (Meleo-Erwin et al., 2021).

Similarly, regarding remote sign-language interpreting, the representative of AGILS highlights the fact that the adaptation to video interpreting was swift, with some platforms being friendlier than others in their embedding of the interpreter. They would normally provide the interpreting through a different video call that was not part of the university platform. This caused some problems for the d/Deaf students, who did not always accept having to use another video-conference platform in addition to the institutional one, for instance. These difficulties in ensuring an adequate display of the interpreter of the required size and placement are also pervasive in other countries (Aljedaani et al., 2023) and were confirmed by the interpreter from ACILS whom we interviewed. She also pointed to an unexpected positive result of going online during the COVID-19 crisis: the repurposing of prerecorded materials that lecturers have since provided to them ahead of each class so that they can prepare adequately. Overall, two conclusions may be drawn from the DPO's and the interpreter's experiences of online learning: (1) unplanned online learning reduces its supposed benefits for students with disabilities; and (2) barriers to accessibility result in a loss of autonomy in higher education.

Finally, matters emphasised regarding the accessibility of online learning platforms extend to administrative ones, as was stressed by the ONCE. Whereas platforms such as Moodle are becoming increasingly accessible (although this may not extend to the documents uploaded by lecturers), the administrative platforms for grade submissions and consultation or student admissions and course registration are frequently not. This results in lecturers and students with low vision or blindness having to ask others to help them to accomplish these compulsory tasks. In this vein, the FESOCA advocates that university administrations develop greater awareness of d/Deaf students and university staff across services – from the reception desk to the university library and cafeteria (recommending that staff in these facilities acquire some basic notions of Catalan Sign Language). Similarly, the ONCE calls for a “friendly environment” across the board that acknowledges people with low vision or blindness, including their participation as representatives of students or in other important areas of university life.

Ultimately, there appears to be a pressing need for *accessibility literacy* training for lecturers across areas of knowledge, administrators and policy-makers which would counter deaf- and blind-obliviousness in higher-education institutions, as indicated further in the next section.

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### 3.3. Barriers

It is worth noting that all the interviewees broadly link the physical, financial and communication barriers to a major one: the lack of awareness of the access needs of students with a disability among university decision-makers and staff. The pattern of deaf- and blind-obliviousness at both a societal and a university level, highlighted by the DPOs, extends to the design of higher-education physical spaces such as university classrooms (Morgado Camacho et al., 2017). For instance, the ONCE links inaccessible campus design to invisible work and invites non-visually impaired people to imagine the effects of being placed in the following analogous situation:

The analogy would be: we take away all of the signs in a building and also you are not able to ask anyone, because a blind or partially sighted person may have trouble finding someone to ask at a given time. ... It is forbidden to look at the signs and to ask. I challenge you to arrive on time.

[y si quitamos todos los carteles de un edificio, ¿qué pasa? Pues esto es lo mismo. A mí me gustaría que alguien se pusiera en la piel de entrar a una facultad y que absolutamente no hubiese ni un solo cartel. La idea sería si quitamos todos los carteles de un edificio y además no te dejo preguntarle a nadie porque una persona con discapacidad visual también podría tener problemas para localizar a alguien que le pueda ayudar ... Entonces está prohibido mirar los carteles y está prohibido preguntar. Y llega a tu hora].

Physical barriers are mostly discussed by those DPOs dedicated to people with low vision or blindness, which echoes the literature on the challenges they face in higher-education institutions around the world (Bualar, 2018; Wertans & Burch, 2022). The ONCE proposes to compensate physical inaccessibility (such as class relocation effects, especially when the new classroom is on the opposite side of the building or in a different area of the campus) with supportive attitudes which staff working on campus can display in order to foster a “friendly environment”. It emphasises the need for university campuses and public-service buildings to adhere to the applicable legislation: they insist on the need for podotactile pavements and routings, and banners in Braille in high contrast and a large size, and on the need to eliminate any unnecessary objects from the floor areas.

The second type of barrier acknowledged by the DPOs is financial: accessibility measures demand investment and funding. The ACAPPS advocates more funding for magnetic loops, FM transmitters or Bluetooth systems, and for both live subtitling and asynchronous subtitling of class materials. And the ACILS representative agrees that subtitles and also live subtitles are useful to their professional practice. For instance, whenever the sign language interpreter misses a word, or as support for the students, for instance to check a specialised term. The positive effects on content comprehension in classroom settings when sign-language interpreting and subtitles are combined have been shown in previous research (Beal-Alvarez & Cannon, 2014; Debevc et al., 2015; Yoon & Kim, 2011). Similarly, the AICE points to the lack of funding for such services and devices, which they regard as attesting to the need for accessibility literacy. The FESOCA calls for a commitment to sign-language interpreting budget items, which even though it is established by law, is not a reality in practice. Such violation of linguistic rights, underlined by the DPO, affects any area where sign-language interpreting is

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guaranteed, including outside of the education sphere. What is more, the demand for a greater presence of sign-language interpreting in university activities goes beyond the classroom (see Powell et al., 2014, p. 134). On a more positive note, the FESOCA acknowledges that the reduction in university registration fees for students with disabilities is to some extent an incentive.

Regarding communication, yet a third barrier identified by the interviewees, d/Deaf people organisations and service-providers highlights several challenges. The FESOCA underscores a very typical scenario in which the students have trouble taking notes in the classroom:

Blank notes, that is, one can either look at the interpreter or take notes, not both at the same time. Blank notes refers to my continuous attention being focused on the interpreter and then, later, with the materials that are available to me, the preparation my own notes.

[los apuntes en blanco, es decir, o escucho o miro al intérprete o puedo tomar apuntes, las dos cosas yo no las puedo hacer. Los apuntes en blanco indican que tengo que estar continuamente mirando al intérprete y después con el material del que puedo disponer, crear mis propios apuntes].

In this regard, recommendation 18 in the Council of Europe includes the specific need for the provision of note-taking assistants in its report on the protection and promotion of sign languages and the rights of their users:

Sign language users should be encouraged to enter universities; and sign-language interpreting, note-taking assistants, and a free choice of language during exams, counselling and support should be made available (Krausneker, 2008, p. 35).

For students, this entails devoting more time to preparing the study materials, a situation which worsens whenever lecturers refuse to share support materials or a slideshow or crucial information is displayed on screen. In this sense, the interpreter from the ACILS also points to certain materials (in video or audio format) which are uploaded to the university's virtual platform without subtitles and which are therefore inaccessible. Video materials without subtitles and transcripts lead to different outcomes for the d/Deaf students: in reality, the students then have to request the lecturer to supply them; otherwise, the university's inclusion unit must be approached to do so (emotional labour) or the students might have to face the possibility of not having their request met at all (attitudinal inaccessibility).

Both the ACILS and the AGILS emphasise that terminology is a challenge with sign-language interpreting in university settings. Most frequently in the context of this study, the interpreter and the student agree on a set of terms specific to the subject area. However, the time devoted to preparing these signs is not compensated for. A possible solution suggested by the interpreter from the ACILS is to record and keep track of the vocabulary that is created for highly specialised areas, even in cases where some interpreters have to be substituted for different reasons. In response to this problem, the ACILS has developed a mobile application called SignApp,<sup>iv</sup> where the signs needing to be used (and validated by d/Deaf users and interpreting experts and professionals) are compiled. The creation of devoted repository of

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highly specialised signs would be advisable, according to the interviewee, and it could even be shared among different universities.

### 3.4. Attitudes

Accessibility depends greatly on the attitude of lecturers (who are the persons who may either exacerbate or contribute to promoting accessibility for students), departments (here, inclusion units) and accessibility users (mostly students with sensory disabilities).

While the ACILS representative reports that, in her experience, most lecturers are willing to cooperate with the interpreter, the interviewees tended to perceive some misuse of academic freedom among faculty members. The different DPOs share their members' experiences along these lines:

If a lecturer decides not to use a microphone because they fear that the class will be recorded, or if they decide not to share notes with the deaf student because the rest of the class does not have them, they are free to do so, right? ... Students rely on the lecturers' goodwill.

[si un profesor decide no ponerse el micro porque cree que se le va a grabar la clase, o decide no avanzar los apuntes porque cree que está poniendo en ventaja al estudiante con sordera por tener unos apuntes que los otros no tienen, pues tiene todo el derecho de hacerlo, ¿no? ... Los estudiantes dependen de la buena voluntad del profesor]. [ACAPPS]

When teaching, they [lecturers] follow their own criteria, and these criteria are sometimes not accessible. Universities make efforts to foster accessibility, but sometimes the barrier is precisely the way the lecturer teaches the subject.

[a la hora de impartir clase, ellos (el profesorado) tienen sus propios criterios y estos propios criterios creo que a veces son los que no son accesibles. La universidad pone sus esfuerzos por ayudar en la accesibilidad, pero a veces la barrera es el cómo el profesor imparte esa asignatura]. [ADVC]

Accessibility professionals echo these points of view, with the AGILS highlighting the contrast between some lecturers, who supply all possible materials, and others who are reluctant to even welcome the interpreter into their classroom. Some materials typically shared with the interpreter would be PowerPoint presentations and, more generally, access to the learning platform. The management of these materials and access authorisations may be regarded as a form of invisible work connected to access provision – in this case, not being placed on the end-user's side (Bulk et al., 2023). This notion is explained further below.

The refusal to provide certain materials does not come only from the lecturer, but also from specific university departments, whose internal policies may not allow for those materials to be shared, as highlighted by the ADVC. In such cases, university inclusion or accessibility units may be able to intercede. These units could, it is felt, be more proactive in their communication with user organisations: "In the last few years, university departments of inclusion and accessibility have not reached out to us to ask for our advice or support, or reached out to us at all" [nunca han venido a pedirnos opinión]. In addition, the interviewee from the AGILS remarks that whenever a student does not pass a course, they lose the right

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to have a sign-language interpreting facility in the class they have to retake, which constitutes another discriminatory practice. On a more positive note, the interpreter from the ACILS adds that it is often easy to work with inclusion units as they understand the needs of d/Deaf students.

Regarding the attitudes of students with sensory disabilities, the ACAPPS highlights the commitment and empowerment of their young members with the production of a documentary on accessibility barriers at university that asserted their needs. The ADVC argues for a proactive approach which encourages its student members to be autonomous, promoting self-advocacy, including reaching out to inclusion units and departments at their university on their own. This is in line with the understanding of agency and autonomy as levels of accessibility: “How we can come to have a shaping role in the event or class, as well as the right to define our own identity and involvement?” (Dolmage, 2017, p. 119). We argue that a delicate balance is required to maintain autonomy and avoid invisible work.

Two attitudinal outcomes in response to ableist situations constitute a recurrent concern among the DPOs: self-imposed limitations and invisible work, which are closely related. The interviewee from the ADVC succinctly summarises the self-imposed limitations as follows: “it is true that, often, because of our disability, we impose limitations on ourselves, and we choose [academic] routes that we know will be comfortable for us” [sí que es verdad que muchas veces ya por la discapacidad nosotros mismos nos colocamos estas limitaciones y ya escoges dentro de cosas que sabes que serán cómodas para ti]. In a previous study, a representative of a DPO referred to this phenomenon as “attitudinal inaccessibility”: whenever “we, persons with disabilities, think we aren’t valid enough to participate in what is understood as normal life and refuse the challenge to fight for our rights and endeavours” (Llop, in Arias-Badia et al., 2022, p. 64). As for invisible work – originally coined by Daniels (1987) to refer to women’s unpaid labour (generally in household or voluntary settings)<sup>v</sup> – it relates to notions of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1979) and mental burden (Haicault, 1984), and proves to be a common denominator among the DPOs, as illustrated by the ONCE:

Whenever they have to start studying [for an exam], a person with visual impairment cannot do it right away. First, they have to prepare their study sources. And this preparation often does not take just two minutes. Other times you can access the materials, but only partially, because [due to formatting and optical character recognition issues] ... the screen reader does not work properly on the document.

[cuando se tiene que poner a estudiar, no puede. Primero se tiene que preparar sus fuentes de estudio. Y esa preparación en muchas ocasiones no es cuestión de dos minutos. En otras ocasiones puedes acceder a ella, pero de forma parcial, pues ... ese documento estaba hecho de tal forma que los acentos el lector de pantalla no los interpretaba].

Furthermore, the DPOs refer to d/Deafness and low vision as invisible disabilities, which has a direct effect on some students, who compensate and make an extra effort without requesting the accommodation that they would be entitled to. This can, once again, be linked to a heightened sense of anxiety and defeat, which constitutes yet another example of attitudinal inaccessibility:

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If you depart from a university setting where you have not made your disability and your needs visible, you arrive at a work setting where you try to hide them or do additional work to reach the same level. This invisibilisation, this lack of awareness, sometimes leads to work failure for different reasons.

[Si ya has partido de un entorno universitario donde tampoco has hecho visible tu discapacidad y tus necesidades, llegas al entorno laboral donde tú mismo intentas taparlas o hacer un sobreesfuerzo para llegar al mismo nivel. Esta invisibilización, esta falta de sensibilidad, es lo que hace que muchas veces haya fracaso laboral por múltiples motivos]. [ACAPPS]

As for the attitudes of students to interpreters in the classroom, the relationship between them is often good, though intense, according to the interviewees from the AGILS and the ACILS. Both interviewees highlight the need to maintain the limits of a working relationship, as the student and the interpreter spend long hours together. The interpreter sometimes also has to adjust expectations:

From the user [in this case, the Deaf student] side, if they are open to creating signs, to tell you when they have requested an hour of tutoring, whether that works for you and you schedule it together so that you can go, as you are the regular interpreter ..., synergies are established and the work of the interpreter and the user is understood as teamwork, with limits. That's the best, though sometimes you have to put some limits in place because they can be very demanding.

[Si el usuario está abierto a crear signos, a decirte cuándo ha pedido una tutoría, si a ti te va bien y poder agendarlo ya conjuntamente para que tú puedas ir, que eres la intérprete habitual, ... se crean estas sinergias y se entiende el trabajo de la intérprete y del usuario como un trabajo en equipo, con unos límites, ya que a veces tienes que poner tú los límites porque son muy demandantes]. [ACILS]

Regarding the demands of d/Deaf students, according to the AGILS, there are some who do not understand why they have to anticipate that alternative arrangements must be made with the interpreter if they are going to miss a class. One reason may be that their peers do not have to anticipate this. Again, this is linked to the notion of invisible work, which has been discussed throughout this section and which is consistent with the literature (Chua et al., 2022; Disabled Students UK, 2023).

### **3.5. Access services**

Two access services are discussed in this section: digital accessibility and sign-language interpreting. Public institutions – such as public universities – are required by law to guarantee digital accessibility, and among the linguistic rights of d/Deaf persons in Spain is the requirement that the universities guarantee sign-language interpreting in academic and extra-curricular activities. The organisations and interpreters interviewed weigh in on the current situation in this regard.

#### **3.5.1. Digital accessibility**

The general outlook that the ONCE provides regarding digital accessibility stresses the societal need to adapt to rapid technological developments:

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In higher education, the use of digitised materials and platforms for enrolment and coursework has become widespread. These platforms are not always accessible to blind or partially sighted students.

[En el campo de la educación superior se ha generalizado el uso de documentación digitalizada y de plataformas educativas para la gestión de la matriculación, el seguimiento de las clases y la entrega de ejercicios, y éstas no siempre son accesibles para el alumnado con discapacidad visual].

From this perspective, it becomes apparent to them that regulations are needed to ensure that accessibility standards are met on all educational platforms. In this context, it becomes particularly relevant to ONCE members to have a good command (even an advanced command) of IT tools. Nonetheless, if accessibility guidelines are not followed by higher-education institutions, students will not be able to pursue their education in a normalised manner, in spite of their refreshable braille displays and screen readers. All in all, digital technologies have made blind and partially blind students more autonomous, provided that these technologies are accessible.

In addition, as highlighted in section 3.4, all of those inaccessible digital and digitised materials (scanned PDFs, documents uploaded as an image, subtitled videos without audio subtitles, etc.) will require an extra effort – either monetary, if students have to pay for the transcription of these documents, or in emotional labour, if they ask a peer for help. Digital inaccessibility means the provision of invisible work for blind and partially sighted students.

The FESOCA perceives the increasing offer of online learning as an opportunity for greater accessibility in general, referring to the good digital accessibility practices at the Open University of Catalonia. There, “the materials are adapted so that Deaf students – sign language users – have an equal workload and time commitment” [un material adaptado para el alumnado sordo, usuario de la lengua de signos, equipara en el volumen de trabajo y de dedicación].

### **3.5.2. Sign-language interpreting**

This subsection is prefaced by the fact that sign-language interpreting is guaranteed in all class hours at public universities in Catalonia (unlike in vocational schools, as highlighted by FESOCA). Nonetheless, according to the ACILS and AGILS representatives, several factors limit this accessibility service. First, there is the preferential treatment of public university students in Catalonia because no funding is allocated to sign-language interpreting in private universities by UNIDISCAT (an organisation devoted to granting equal opportunities for students with disabilities at Catalan universities). Second, the interpreting service does not start on the first day of class, because of administrative and bureaucratic problems (such as budget management and approval), which means that d/Deaf students are forced to make a late start in the academic year. As pointed out by Disabled Students UK (2023, p. 45), inclusion units are underfunded and overburdened, which results in “delays, paperwork getting lost or needs being recorded incorrectly, staff not responding to emails, long wait-times and having to constantly chase in order to receive support”. Third, sign-language interpreting is, at times, not provided for practical and laboratory classes. These are key to certain (STEM) programmes



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and increasingly so in the final years. According to AGILS, this leads to the higher dropout rates among d/Deaf students.

The fourth and final challenge in university sign-language interpreting is the increasing pervasiveness of English as the medium of instruction. In Catalonia, not many interpreters are available to work from English into Catalan Sign Language. The challenge is therefore twofold: the lack of available interpreters working in this combination and a financial challenge because the combination is more expensive (it will typically be a C to B language interpreting pair). According to the ACILS interpreter, this challenge should be dealt with at a national education department level, because the alternative is to exclude the students. Finally, AICE remarks that users of cochlear implants cannot access invited lectures in English whenever transcription and interlingual subtitles are not provided.

### **3.6. Impact on legislation**

Four of the interviewed DPOs (ACAPPS, AICE, FESOCA and ONCE) highlight their active involvement in political advocacy work and, in particular, in drafting and amending legislation. They have contributed, among other things, to Catalan Sign Language recognition laws, accessibility laws and higher-education laws. For instance, ONCE's working groups have been involved in the European Directive 2019/882 on the accessibility requirements for products and services. ONCE adopts a universal design approach in which "accessibility should be considered from the beginning of all projects so that they need not be modified subsequently, with all the associated costs involved".

FESOCA claims that their institutional policy demands are not sufficiently met, including in the area of education, and most recently the accessibility policies for d/Deaf lecturers. They emphasise two explicit guarantees which they demand: sufficient commitment to budget items and due regard to the newest Spanish legislation on non-discrimination in higher education. Regarding the former,

[t]here should be fixed minimum budget items. There are laws that indicate this, but these budget lines are not being executed at all. For this reason, we cannot be confident that the required [budget] will be provided in the university area.

[debería haber partidas presupuestarias fijas, mínimas. Existen leyes que indican todo eso, pero no se ejecutan estas partidas presupuestarias. Entonces no se puede disponer de una cierta confianza y seguridad de que vaya a darse todo aquello que se necesita en el ámbito universitario]. [FESOCA]

Regarding the latter, the new Organic Law of the University System in Spain contains article 37, which guarantees non-discrimination on the grounds of disability and language. This article poses a challenge to universities as it mandates the establishment of inclusive curricula and methodologies in an effective manner, and it requires universities to facilitate the use of sign languages (in the context of Spain, Spanish Sign Language and Catalan Sign Language).

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### 3.7. Working conditions of accessibility professionals

Both AGILS and ACILS point to the need to re-evaluate certain established practices in sign-language interpreting. When asked about a typical workday in higher-education settings, both interviewees point to the high degree of variability, depending on the student. Class hours can either be concentrated or scattered throughout the day, which means that, sometimes, interpreters have to perform four straight hours of work, a hardly acceptable circumstance for non-sign-language simultaneous interpreting (AICC, 2022). The representative of AGILS suggests that, in such situations – for instance, whenever a student has more than two hours of class at a time – the ideal solution would be to hire two different interpreters. In addition, these interpreters should be “assigned” to the student throughout the entire course of their studies, for the purpose of creating work stability, but also for the sake of terminology management and of fostering a lower level of anxiety in the student. In this regard, for the oral presentation (viva) of bachelor’s/master’s/PhD theses, AGILS aims to ensure that the interpreter will be the same person who has worked with the student throughout their studies towards their degree (“at least the interpreter from their last academic year”) and that they must be entitled to include some additional hours of preparation in the billing for this job. The fact that the company which wins public tenders to provide interpreting services in Catalonia has not yet rendered interpreting services for a doctoral defence is telling of the “dropout effect”.

A clear demand from both interviewees is for their hours of preparation spent on an interpreting assignment to be included in their working hours. Thus far, only the interpreted class hours are paid for, which does not reflect the reality of the university sign-language interpreter’s workload. In preparation, they typically read through the course materials and prepare appropriate signs for the area-specific terminology. In addition, to pay for this invisible work, the interpreter from ACILS demands that their remuneration be equivalent to that of spoken language interpreters, as “the tasks that we do are the same. We work with two languages, and the fact that one of them is a sign language does not imply that our recognition should be smaller”. The fact that sign-language interpreting is a highly feminised sector, according to both interviewees, has other implications, such as, to be precise, a lower income (see Napier & Goswell, 2012).

It needs to be noted that AGILS experiences a certain degree of pressure to balance what universities are willing to pay through the tenders and what are considered to be acceptable minimum wages for the professional service-providers. The interpreter from ACILS believes that it would be a sound idea to stop outsourcing these services, because this arrangement causes public administrations to select the contender with the lowest fees.

An additional proposal discussed by the two interviewees is inspired by the practice of one of the universities in Catalonia. It consists of guaranteeing the presence of an interpreter “on call” on the premises so that students can count on them for any outside-of-class activity, such as working in group for a project, for instance.

## 4. Conclusions

This article explores the ways in which disabled people organisations and accessibility professionals perceive the situation of (a lack of) accessibility in higher education, in particular in Catalonia. The topic is observed through the lens of social justice and equal opportunities applied to MA provision and reception, with a focus on three dimensions: the distribution of resources in the area of accessibility and inclusion, the working conditions of MA practitioners, and the application of a user-centred methodology.

In this regard, studies in MA have much to gain, we argue, if we involve the disabled people organisations in our research (Arias-Badia et al., 2022) through phenomenological enquiry and other approaches, such as community-based participatory research (Hermosa-Ramírez, 2023). Those organisations involved in this study include higher education as one of their priorities and they are willing and able to take an active role in improving accessibility and inclusion in university. This is possible only if they are invited to the decision-making table – which, as this study has highlighted, is not always the case. Likewise, the authors invite accessibility professionals who have hitherto been excluded from discussions on higher-education accessibility (Seale et al., 2020) to share their work experience in their daily provision of access services at universities.

The insights gained from the interviews on the lived experiences of accessibility (or the lack of it) in higher education confirm that there is a pervasive risk of ableism, “deaf- and blind-obliviousness”, and attitudinal inaccessibility. That is, not only do university buildings, physical materials and digital infrastructures need to be accessible, but the university staff and governing bodies’ attitudes need to foster an accessible environment, in particular for those academics and students with visual and hearing disabilities. In short, there is a need for accessibility literacy at all levels, because relying on the goodwill of individuals (which is the current status quo) is not a reliable or sustainable solution. Second, the unwarranted invisible work and emotional labour which students with sight and hearing loss have to undertake to ensure that they have access to learning opportunities, examinations and defences, has adverse consequences for their educational experience: unequal treatment, high levels of anxiety, dropping out, etc. Invisible work is also a reality for other stakeholders involved, as illustrated by the interpreters’ lack of earnings for terminology preparation ahead of interpreting assignments and for their being expected to adjust to last-minute changes in their schedules.

Our study shows that the conceptual apparatus developed in neighbouring fields, such as Disability Studies, is useful to take into account the phenomena of MA (ableism, deaf- and blind-obliviousness, accessibility literacy, invisible work). Such apparatus is highly relevant in education settings because of the multiple barriers that hinder accessibility in this context. As this conceptual apparatus provides a reliable roadmap with which to explore media accessibility from the perspective of social justice, it may well also prove productive in other regional and national education contexts, including those outside of higher education.

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## Acknowledgments

This paper is part of the UnivAc project (ref. TED2021-130926A-I00), funded by the Spanish Ministry Science and Innovation and the Spanish Research Agency/10.13039/501100011033 and the European Union “NextGenerationEU”/PRTR. The authors are members of TRADILEX, a research group recognised by the Catalan Government (2021SGR00952). Irene Hermosa-Ramírez’s participation in this research has been financially supported by the Spanish State Research Agency, in the framework of the postdoctoral scholarship program Juan de la Cierva (JDC2022-049546-I).

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<sup>i</sup> As in Hughes (2023, n.p.), in this article we use “disabled people” and “persons/people with disabilities” interchangeably to “acknowledge disability as a significant personal identity and to communicate respect for the personhood of people labeled with disabilities”. We use the coined term “disabled people organisation” (DPO) throughout the article.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.upf.edu/web/univac> [accessed 3.09.2023]

<sup>iii</sup> Conventionally, the term “d/Deaf” is used to acknowledge the ways in which d/Deafness is perceived by the community. The lowercase “d” typically refers to users of spoken language and the upper case “D” refers to sign language users (Young & Hunt, 2011).

<sup>iv</sup> See <https://llengua.gencat.cat/es/detalls/article/cercaapps-signapp> [accessed 27.03.2024]

<sup>v</sup> The notion of invisible work has been applied to d/Deaf people's encounters with hearing medical professionals (DeVault, 2014) and to blind and partially sighted people identifying and solving accessibility issues in the workplace (Branham & Kane, 2015), among other things (Grue, 2023).