

## Filling the Gap: Students with Disabilities and Their Perceptions About Higher Education Accommodations in Greece

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### ABSTRACT

The integration of students with disabilities has arisen in the discussion since the beginning of the 18th century making it an issue for international educational politics. The present paper reflects on the views about obstacles and facilitators of academic success faced by students with a variety of disabilities in Greek postsecondary education. Participants communicate their experiences through an electronic form with open ended questions. Their remarks are evaluated according to the method of Content Thematic Analysis and indicated that for the majority of the participants, attempts to fully engage and access knowledge within Higher Education has been confronted by a great lack of support in terms of environmental access, academic barriers, policy adaptations, discrimination and encouragement of independence.

*Keywords: accessibility, content thematic analysis, disability, Greece, higher education*

### INTRODUCTION

Various factors have affected the development of education of people with disabilities such as the recognition of Human Rights since 1950, the promotion of social model of disability, the mandatory nature of education at the beginning of the 20th century, the introduction of special education along with the humanistic philosophy focusing on “inclusion” and “integration” etc. Due to historical, political and social reasons, some countries have been more in line than others, with the philosophy of equality embodied in the provision of equal rights and opportunities. As noted by Karellou (2019) although many countries, have signed and ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) of 2006, most of them, have failed in actually implementing the right to equal education for students with disabilities according to inclusive standards stated in the UNCRPD.

Although students with disabilities have often been considered as a whole group, they are in fact a remarkably diverse population. The concept of disability includes a great range of variation in the ways that people experience and relate themselves to the world, from visual and hearing impairments to

cognitive processing issues, mobility restrictions and psychological conditions. Furthermore, individuals with similar medical diagnosis might vary markedly in the extent to which they consider their disability a salient part of their sense of self or in the way their disability presents itself in a given context (Kimball, Friedensen, & Silva, 2017).

From that perspective, any investigation into the lives of students with disabilities warrants an intra-categorical approach which will provide new information about their actual experiences, critical in addressing the significant gap in the equity of HE outcomes for persons with disabilities.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The integration of students with disabilities has arisen in the discussion around the world since the 18th century making it an issue for educational politics in many countries. From that period on, legislators in many countries adopted the concept of full inclusion which means creating an educational system that services equally all the students regardless of their differences (Onaga & Martoccio, 2008). According to UNESCO (2005) inclusion pertains to: “the process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education”.

However, inclusion will be only a slogan if there are inadequate resources for inclusion programmes. Inclusion is not a matter of placing children with disabilities in regular schools but providing adequate resources in the form of funds for itinerant teaching service, teaching/learning materials, making schools more accessible and inclusive. Aside from allocation of

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resources, societal negative attitude however can also contribute to the exclusion of children with disabilities. For example, most people tend to perceive those with disabilities as liabilities and do not treat them with respect or give them their right due in society (Frank, 2017).

Access to Higher Education (HE) is usually a fundamental goal stage in the life of any individual. The development in terms of knowledge, skills, abilities and personality that students gain from their HE experience can leave an eternal positive impression and impact. Thus, the task of choosing the appropriate institution is not an easy one for those who wish to further their education according to their interests and future aspirations (Veloutsou, Lewis, & Paton, 2004). When students with disabilities are about to choose a HE institution however, the task becomes even more difficult because of the parameters they have to take into account. Massie, Chair of the Disability Rights Commission (DRC), argues that students with disabilities have to find a university that can meet their needs, and then determine if there is an appropriate course available. Consequently, students with disabilities are presented with fewer choices as they need to discover where they will be best supported (Parker, 2003).

Despite the fact that the rate of college participation among students with disabilities is increasing (NCES, 2014), students with disabilities still do not graduate from college at the same rates as their peers (DaDeppo, 2009). At the same time, universities around the world report great increases in the requests for supporting services by students with disabilities. The range of requests has broadened, ranging from disabilities that are apparent to those that are invisible, and from disabilities that are basically physical in nature to those related to mental health or psychological dysfunction. A better understanding of who students with disabilities are and what sort of experiences they have will provide those working on college campuses with necessary information to construct evidence-based practices.

## METHODOLOGY

### Context of the study

The primary and secondary education in Greece is highly centralised. Policy, resource distribution, curricula and teachers' employment are all manipulated centrally by the Ministry of Education. Furthermore, the higher the education level gets the more exclusive the system becomes. Entry into university is determined by national assessment, through the annual 'Pan-Hellenic' examination. Once students succeed in their examination, they can declare their preferences on an application form. Students' acceptance to a HE institution is determined by correlating their scores with the available places and other candidates' preferences. Thus, competition for entering university is extremely high with candidates often securing a study place to study not what they wish to, but rather what they are allowed to.

With respect to education of people with disabilities Greek legislation tries to reflect the internationally

recognized principle 'a school for all' along with the principles on inclusion and equal opportunities. Towards this direction enrolment procedures of HE institutions in Greece advocate that 5% of all places are reserved for disabled students. Therefore, any university department in Greece can potentially register disabled students. However, each department can set its own requirements for its curricula based on the minimum abilities that a candidate must possess. Furthermore, legislation gives to all of them the flexibility to decide what kind of support is able and willing to offer. It does not clearly identify policies but rather gives general guidelines the legal basis of which are targeting two main areas: Accessibility in the built environment - according to the law 2831/2000 all public buildings must follow the guidelines for accessibility; Study Support-Law 3549/2007 specifies there must be support and counselling services for all students.

All postsecondary education institutions in Greece are public and there are no fees required for graduate studies. At the time of conducting the research Higher Education was undergoing through some structural changes resulting in some mergers of Technological Institutions with Universities.

### Participants

Neither the Greek HE institutions nor the Ministry of Education has any official data regarding the enrolment of students with disabilities. Individual faculties across Greece were also reluctant to report number of students with disabilities already registered. The target population of the present research project was students with a variety of disabilities enrolled in any public postsecondary educational institution based in Greece. Although it was the researcher's intention to include a representative of all categories of disabilities sample, in the absence of official statistics that was not feasible. Therefore, convenience sampling was used as the main sampling procedure resulting in the final sample of 38 postsecondary students with disabilities (21 females and 17 males). Nineteen (51.4%) participants were 18-25 years old, eight (21.6%) 26-30, three (8.1%) 31-35 and seven (18.9%) over 35.

Participants originated from nine different HE institutions of Greece. The majority of the participants (27/38) were enrolled in or earlier than 2013. Eleven participants were students with physical/motor disabilities; ten with learning difficulties, three students were deaf or hard of hearing whereas another three identified themselves as having visual disabilities. One participant had attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and each one of the rest some serious neurological or blood related health issues.

### Materials

Using a qualitative method design, a combination of a questionnaire with a series of open-ended questions along with personal semi structure interviews was applied in order for broader features of participants' experiences to be identified and

examined. Both the questionnaire and the interview schedule were constructed by the researcher based on the literature review and her work experience as a social worker in primary and secondary special education (for students with disabilities).

#### **Procedure**

An electronic letter addressed to potential participants was sent to the secretaries of all departments in nineteen institutions of HE in Greece. Along with the letter there was a request prompting personnel to forward the letter to all students with disabilities enrolled to each department without providing any personal and sensitive information to the researcher. The letter included a detail presentation of the purposes and the methods of the study so that participants would have the chance to be adequately informed and make an educated choice about their participation. Should they wish to be involved in the study, they were directed through a link to a Google electronic form which included the open-ended questions as well as a series of demographic questions. Students were assured that their responses would be anonymous and that no attempt would be made to identify any respondent.

Personal face to face or teleconference interviews were conducted with three additional participants: one with physical disabilities and two visually impaired. All interviews lasted approximately from 35 to 50 minutes.

#### **Ethical considerations**

Research ethics refer to the rules and limitations that a researcher needs to take into account when investigating a topic, i.e. are the common denominator for researchers' relations with respondents and colleagues. Researchers are themselves responsible for the ethical conduct of their research. They have to take care of all the ethical issues at every stage of the research process (Parveen & Showkat, 2017).

The most common areas of ethical consideration in research involving human participants include debriefing, consent, confidentiality and privacy, deception, stress and discomfort, voluntary participation, withdrawal from the investigation, protection of participants, and publication and access to data (Kimmel, 1996).

In the present study information about the purposes and the methodology was provided through an electronic letter addressed to potential participants. In that way, participants would have had the choice to be informed and subsequently take part in the study should they wish to do so. The letter includes a link directing any potential participant to an electronic form with all the open-ended questions of the study as well as their demographic characteristics.

The privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of the participants and data must be given due consideration (Jensen, 2002). The concept of confidentiality is closely related to that of privacy, and in particular to the aspect of privacy concerning the protection of personal information. Confidentiality means that research subjects are protected by remaining unidentifiable. Their names may not be used in any written material concerning the research or in discussions of the research project, and all

interview materials are stored in a safe place that no one save the researchers can access (Hesse-Biber, 2016). In other words, confidentiality is a duty that arises when someone has been granted access to information that would otherwise be kept secret. In such circumstances maintaining confidentiality protects the subject's interest in maintaining control over their personal information. It is basically about respecting and keeping promises given (perhaps implicitly) to providers of information about how that information will be used or disclosed. As with any form of promise-keeping, it involves acting in accordance with expectations that have been created in another person. Even in the absence of an explicit undertaking, informers may have reasonable expectations that their information will be kept confidential, which researchers, as recipients of that information, should respect (Directorate-General for Research, 2010).

The fundamental meaning of confidentiality and privacy is that information provided should not reveal the identity of any participant. A participant is deemed anonymous if no one can identify him from the information provided. Therefore, those who complete a questionnaire with no personal indications – name, address, employment notices or codes – have their anonymity guaranteed (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2008).

In the present study there is no information provided by the participants with disabilities which could compromise issues of privacy and confidentiality (e.g., e-mail address). Furthermore, according to the procedure the sample is informed about the purposes and the methodology of the research, included reassurance of anonymity, through a document, which is forwarded to them through authorized personnel already eligible to deal with personal and confidential information. Having read the letter and the information included, any participant who decides to complete the form gives his/her consent to participation.

On the other hand, a person who consents to be interviewed should not expect anonymity. Rather, the researcher could promise confidentiality which means that while the researcher is aware of the participant's identity there is no disclosure of it. Following the above guidelines, interviews included in the methodology of the present study aiming at further exploring the relevant issues, are been conducted in a way that reassure confidentiality and anonymity to all except the researcher herself.

Taking the abovementioned considerations into account ethical approval for the present study was obtained from Ethical Committee of Ionian University.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

A content thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2012) was used for the analysis of the data. Thematic analysis is a process of encoding qualitative information by identifying key themes depicting participants' social reality in a subjective, but scientific, manner (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009) and seeks to reveal the themes salient in the text at different levels (Attride-

Stirling, 2001). Depending on the goals of the study, content analysis may be more flexible or more standardized. Generally, it concerns preparing and coding the data, developing categories, assessing coding consistency, interpreting, and presenting the findings (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). The analytic approach chosen for this study was the data-driven inductive method of Boyatzis (1998). The main idea of the procedure is to formulate a criterion of definition and work through the data, where categories are tentative and deduced step-by-step (Mayring, 2000).

### Findings

Preliminary analysis of participants' responses resulted in a number of basic themes. Subsequently, an effort was made to organize basic themes into clusters of similar issues, revealing the main organizing themes. The final outcome of further refining the analysis was a thematic network, illustrated in Figure 1, with the following seven global themes: (a) environmental access, (b) academic barriers, (c) support for independence and mentoring, (d) discrimination, and (e) policy modifications/adaptations.

#### A. Environmental Access

There were a lot of issues surrounding accessibility, both in terms of mobility and in terms of appropriate indications in all university spaces. More specifically, analysis revealed the main categories on which Environmental access was anchored: a) Physical access both inside and around universities and b) Indications and warning signs that can be perceived by people with different types of difficulties.

##### Physical access

A main concern around accessibility was physical access of classrooms, auditoriums, students' halls, libraries and any other place around university area. Students indicated a great deviation from the international guidelines of infrastructure that could facilitate mobility. As noted by participants with physical disabilities, moving around using a wheelchair is exceptionally difficult and, on many occasions, impossible, even dangerous: "I had problems with accessibility in a lab class which was delivered in the basement and the access was only by stairs".

Additionally, participants have witnessed difficulties related to physical access in many university areas:

"There are not access ramps in the sidewalks around universities, there are no rooms for people using a wheelchair in the halls according to the international standards, and there are no appropriate elevators [for the physical disabled]".

Impediments in physical access can lead to great barriers to academic fulfilment of students with mobility difficulties who strive to find their way between staircases, narrow corridors and classes with no room for wheelchairs:

"If lectures were given in accessible classes it would be better. One semester I did not take a module because of the stairs I had to use to go to class".

##### Appropriate indications

Physical access is not limited to stairs and elevators but refers also to sufficient lighting, indications and sightlines. Suitable

signs inside and around university area can make the difference to the equal access of students with disabilities. For example, students with visual impairments will struggle with their effort to read names and numbers of university rooms, let them be classes, restrooms, offices etc. As suggested by a participant: "The difficulties I have to face regarding access are: (a) names of halls and offices because of small fonts, and (b) numbering inside the elevator due to reduced lighting". Statements like: "indication around university should be written with larger fonts and contrast" or "some teaching classes even with the lights on are dark" are indicative of the barriers imposed to students with disabilities in higher education.

#### B. Academic Barriers

The discussion of difficulties faced by students with disabilities highlighted some fundamental issues around teaching and learning in a way that prevents them from fully engaging in lectures, thus creating barriers to academic process. The thematic network (Figure 1) illustrates concisely the key categories on which Academic barriers were clustered: (a) teaching strategies, (b) provision of notes and information, (c) academic accessibility, and (d) examinations. The analysis revealed the interesting point according to which lack of specific teaching modifications impacted students' chances to fully participate in the class and ultimately benefit from that.

##### Teaching strategies

It was evident that a common issue that tended to feature as a barrier to supporting students with disabilities in accessing academic knowledge was the lack of knowledge of the appropriate approaches and methods of instruction. Lecturers' approaches to teaching shaped classrooms experiences of students with disabilities in a profound way. For example, a student mentioned that "lectures are impersonal and crowded. Lecturer should explain in more detail the material and provide more notes and in groups". Similarly, a student described his struggle to engage with material when presented in certain formats:

"When they (lecturers) show videos or pictures only few will describe them in detail... they could explain what they show and verbalize what they write".

"I use a small appliance for my therapy with oxygen which makes a noise close to my ears. That makes it difficult for me to watch a video without subtitles and to hear what a lecturer says when is standing back to back with me".

Students questioned teaching personnel's training and education related to academic instruction of students with disabilities. The way and talking speed used by educators was a factor that affected students' ability to experience learning: "the content of taught subjects is presented in speed and there is no extra materials that will help me understand it". While that may seem of no importance for the whole class—or like a personal inadequacy problem rather than a real teaching problem—it also means that the specific student is not experiencing the classroom in the same ways as his peers and losing that way his chance to equally accessing higher education.

Students wished to be successful in the class but were unable to do so because of the requiring time to complete an assignment: “in some computer labs where exercises demand typing and/or fine motor skills with both hands there is not enough time to complete the task. It would help to have group assignments and more time available”.

#### **Provision of notes and information**

The theme of being able to get class notes and all the necessary information is related to the fact that those means would enhance students' involvement in the class and facilitate their completion of module requirements. According to their comments, respondents were fighting against their difficulties of trying to comprehend the lecture and take notes at the same time. The following quotes are indicatives of those difficulties: “...I find it difficult to keep notes during the lecture....it helps if other students do it for me” or “ (difficulties) with notes mainly when lecturers do not upload the transparencies they use in the e-class for everybody's help. It would help me very much if they were uploading all the information in the e-class section”

Although there are students who do not have anticipate any problem with understanding the subject which is been taught, they lack the ability to simultaneously pay attention to the lecture and keep notes: “It would help me to be able to acquire notes because I don't have to time to write down everything is highlighted during class”. Another participant related a similar issue stating that: “Since I do not go to classes often because of time and fatigue (depending on the module, the lecturer and the amount of students present) it would help to get the relevant information and notes. Even for the classes I attend I cannot keep up taking notes of everything is said”.

#### **Academic accessibility**

Lack of special equipment both in lecture rooms and in libraries, inability to be provided with appropriate reading resources, blocks, even prevents any academic progress. Students with visual impairments have difficulties getting the appropriate information related to the lecture “mainly with transparencies in overhead projectors and notes during lectures”. Apparently, lecturers are unaware of all their students' needs during class: “I find it difficult to see what is shown in through the projector because they use small fonts and the same happens when they (professors) write in the board”.

Apart from students with visual impairments, those with hearing problems found themselves in need for help in order to take full advantage of the lectures. As stated by one student “I find it hard to participate in the lecture because of my hearing problem. I can read lips and wear hearing aids. However, lecturers are speaking fast and I don't understand anything..... There are also others students that find it difficult to understand and loose interest because of that..... and feel lonely and bored and disappointed and that is not good”.

Professors were reported to use one-size-fits-all approaches to class project and assignments with rigid guidelines: “I would say (difficulties) in large assignments. It would help a speech-writer software in the library

computers”, or “course material (provided) in not enough to adequately respond to the final examination of the course and thus we are forced to spend time looking for material than reading it”.

There is a great need for the state to be proactive in its approach to provide accommodations for students with disabilities. As explained by one participant: “the only difficulty I faced was that I had to write fast during class. There should be provision so that lectures and notes be recorded and available to all and be left for everyone to find his own personal solution”. At the same time lack of special equipment challenges academic fulfilment. A response to the question “Do you anticipate barriers to studying? What would help you?” was: “Special equipment (keyboard with large keys, screen magnification software) for library use”, or “the major difficulty is to find audio books. In my department I have created a digital library containing several digital academic books. It is very difficult to convert books in digital format fast enough”.

#### **Examinations**

The lack of knowledge related to the needs of students with disabilities expanded from teaching to testing and module assessments. Special provisions like extended testing time, accessible exam rooms, quiet testing spaces, and the use of alternative response formats better tailored for the student than hand written answers, were identified as factors that hinder inclusion of students with disabilities in Higher Education.

The lack of any differentiation in terms of applying modules assessment as well as unwillingness to make any modifications in the form, were obstacles that students had to face, as these quotations indicate:

“In oral exams (which are performed in groups) it is hard for me to look at the examiner and listed to the answers of my co-students at the same time. In written exams there are difficulties with unfamiliar words and phrasing of some questions. Help could be provided by the examiners”.

Similarly, another student stated: “Because of performed brain surgery my speech has been affected. Therefore, some times during oral examination (due to partial paralysis of upper limbs) some examiners do not have the patience to provide me enough time to respond appropriately”.

Although participants were asking for alternative form of assessments like oral exam, there were times that these requests were denied either because of ignorance or on the ground of excessive time needed.

“Several lecturers do not comprehend neither my need to be examined orally nor the procedure (or oral examination) .....

“Only a small number of examiners employ oral examination and when a student makes the relative request, they find excuses to fail him so they do not waste more time”.

### C. Support for Independence & Mentoring

Availability of supports that enable independence and fight biases was a concomitant issue for most participants. Either in terms of emotional reinforcement or in terms of assistance or scheduled classes, students with disabilities felt that navigation through the complexity of academic life was not an easy task for them. Availability of personal counselling to moderate the emotional burden, Learning Assistance Team that would help with comprehension problems and Coordination Agency for advising and intervene with faculty personnel were topics that emerged under the general theme of Support for Independence and Mentoring.

#### Counseling

Students with disabilities do not receive the same extent of support in HE as secondary education settings which makes transition from one level to the other even more troubleshooting. That means that there is a great need for encouragement, guidance and counselling in order for students to overcome the amount of stress and frustration accumulating during these overwhelming changes of their lives. As one student proposed: “there should be greater support (in higher education) to people with disabilities. I think counselling and psychological support should be nice. I was in need for that, the first time, when transition from high school to university was hard”.

Apart from the challenges of a new educational environment presenting a lot new kinds of responsibilities and demands some students need to handle additional difficulties: “(I suffer from) agoraphobia during exams. There are no psychotherapy sessions (in university). I need to go to L.... (another town) for that”.

#### Learning Assistance Teams

Postsecondary education programs include many different kinds of learners whose needs must be met. A respectful environment that adapts to difference is what would encourage students with disabilities to graduate complete their studies. For example, some help with reading comprehension: “I find it difficult to understand the questions with result to answer incorrectly during exams. And, it is hard for me, with some words that I do not know because of my hearing problem, I do not possess a great vocabulary.....”.

Assistance in order to improve comprehension both in testing and class presentations: “I need individual clarifications of the questions asked” or “(we need) reading groups”. A student with a hearing problem facing difficulties with the taught courses explained: “It is difficult for me due to my hearing problems to complete all the classes. I am a student for several years and I struggle to finish and get my degree. I major in a very difficult subject but it is what I wanted since primary school. It is my dream to”.

#### Disability Coordination

One more aspect of supporting independence and mentoring for student with disabilities in HE is a specialized unit with the goal to meet specific needs of designated students. The unit aim is to provide assistance with different

aspects of academic life like creating schedules for students, troubleshooting academic and non-academic situations, organization, etc.

Students insights included statements like: “I would like to have my classes in two days, so I do not have to travel to school every day. Additionally, during periods when the flue is increasing I have to abstain from classes out of fear of catching it. One solution would be on line classes”. Taking into consideration the individual needs of students coordinators could intervene with faculty and make the necessary arrangements for appropriate class delivery: “(faculty members) should take into account students’ with autism needs since even though they are supported in theory, in reality the infrastructures are not appropriate for attending classes eg broken windows which make a lot of noise, classes next to streets with high traffic”.

Similarly, “I spend a lot of time for my physiotherapy sessions. Unfortunately, I cannot stop those because my condition will worsen”. Proper arrangements could solve the problem of the particular student providing hence the chance to fully engage in her studies. Transportation arrangements are another assignment that could be undertaken by coordination agency: “I suffer from cancer and I have gone through a lot of surgeries. Because of the place where my department is situated and the lack of public transportation is impossible for me to attend classes. Only when co-students owing a car are willing to drive me I am able to go to classes”.

Other difficulties include arrangements for oral examination: “more subjects should be examined orally and not in writing”, or curriculum: “I find it hard to attend classes early in the morning because I have to take drugs and wait for them to work before I get ready to go”. Availability of interpretation would improve understanding for students with hearing problems: “I would like to have interpretation for all classes. Now my disability allowance is not enough but for only two hours per month and I cannot afford it myself”.

### D. Discrimination

The continued intransigence of the lecturers apparent to the theme Academic Barriers alludes to another related theme, that of Discrimination. Both educating and administrative personnel’s attitudes can be a barrier to inclusion in HE. Participants raised the issue of the attitudes and behaviour expressed by the personnel of HE institutes as being one of the main obstacles that hindered their full potential. As shown in figure 1, Discrimination was perceived as having different connotations not only related to unconstructive ways of conducting everyday business which represents Unresponsiveness, but also to acknowledgment of the fact that things are generally moving in the right direction leading to Progression.

### Unresponsiveness

Departments were reported to be inconsistent in their provisions of accommodations for students with disabilities and unwilling to consider any flexibility in their approach regardless of student need, as summed up in the following comments:

“I would like for students with disabilities to be treated equally, to be examined according to their statutory rights. Similarly, they should not get grades they do not deserve ....”.

“(lecturers) should be informed as to how should conduct an oral exam and they should be appraised and taught what means to be dyslexic”.

It seems that there is little disability sensitisation possessed by lecturers. As some students have remarked: “Although there are specific persons who are supportive, the general philosophy of the institution considers students with disabilities as “invisible” and if need arises, there is some action just for the shake of it”, or “philosophy must change! Social integration should happen in real life not in papers”.

Statements like “not underestimate us” and “they should behave rightfully towards them (students with disabilities)” illustrate the feelings of distress and injustice that some of the students with disabilities dealing with during their academic life.

Apparently students with disabilities did not believe faculties cared about their academic progress or well-being and were quite frustrated from trying hard. Responding to the question whether service provisions were supportive to academic fulfilment a student remarked “Not at all! And we are talking about the Social Work department, meaning school of defending human rights!!!”.

### Progression

Although there were a lot of comments pointing at the indifference, ignorance and lack of interest exhibited by lectures and assistive personnel, participants also felt there were people who tried to assist them fully participate in the class and facilitate their completion of module requirements.

Many students were happy with the kind of help they were getting from either individual professors or support service of some universities: “95% of department personnel are excellent people and they always prompt one (with disabilities) “if you need something let me know”. Another positive statement regarding human resources in contrast with insufficient infrastructures affirms: “Although facilities are not the best, lectures are always willing to help whatsoever” and “the help I got and the encouragement during the first period of my studies had tremendous importance for me since I learned about the choice of oral examination and other forms of accommodations” and “there is an option of oral or written examination. Personally, I do face any obstacle”.

General statements of positive assessment were also granted towards progression: “I am not aware what is going on in other departments but in ours I believe there is 90% equal access”,

“no, there are not inadequacies”, “I personally believe that facilities are great”.

Library facilities and personnel assistance was another facilitator for students with disabilities, although not for many of them: “Library is accessible for all. Students with disabilities can study and find the information needed. Personnel are ready to assist you to anticipate any problem” or “they help me to access academic material”.

The few universities that have made an effort to align with international guidelines of social and education inclusion establishing a support service for students with disabilities, seem to be acknowledged for their efforts: “...since they try to resolve any problem related to us in working together with us, the lectures and the secretary of the department employing students from all university departments”.

### E. Policy Modifications / Adaptations

There are several policy modifications for both HE institutions and the state to consider in accommodating students with disabilities and enabling inclusion. Students commented in either issues of short term adaptation of Hygiene or long term modifications of Administrative strategies.

#### Hygiene

It was apparent from participants statements that rules and legislation related to sanitary conditions are not applied in universities. Comments like “there is no proper airing of classes which makes it dangerous for me if I catch any germ” or “I would like to prohibit smoking from every building”. Similarly, “cleanliness and airing. School of ..... is using small classes for delivering lessons to much more students so I cannot go to classes out of fear of infection”.

#### Administrative (executive) strategies

Long term modifications seem to be necessary if students with disabilities are to exercise their statutory right of equal access to university studies. Apparently, according to participants there is a need for legal amendments towards improving equality and inclusion in higher education. The process of enrollment for students with disabilities through the beneficial 5% over the final school number of admitted students is not completed on time for them to make their registration and begin attend classes with the rest of the students: “I have admitted with the beneficial 5% of Pan-Hellenic exams and results were published in October (when classes had already started). I know other students too who had to miss a whole semester of studies”.

The limited number of specific faculties based only in Athens was also an issue for students who find it difficult to attend: “there should be in L.... too, not only in Athens”. Legislative adjustments to the special provisions that would improve the physical condition of some needy students also seem to add to the acknowledgment and implementation of equality: “When I sitting on the desk to study my limbs get soared and I am in pain.....may physiotherapy would help but it costs too much” or “examination of additional subject for entrance in some faculties should be disconnected from the procedure”.

Based on the present finding it appears that inclusion and equal access of students with disabilities in Greek HE is far from achieved. Although students with disabilities had been given registration access to HE through a series of legislation aiming at inclusion, in practice support for their needs remained largely the province of family and some peers. Consideration of needs in terms of physical access, teaching, learning and assessment was generally lacking apart from some scarce individual efforts based on personal disposition on behalf of some lecturers.

Relatively few students with disabilities acknowledged Greek institutions of HE as being supportive of their learning needs. The vast majority illustrated their attempts to fully engage and access knowledge within HE, as confronted by a great lack of support in terms of environmental access, academic barriers, policy adaptations, discrimination and encouragement of independence.

Physical access was ignored by institution policies and although old buildings were difficult to renovate, organizational adjustments to accommodate students' mobility needs were not considered. For example, as one Law student with visual disabilities mentioned: "I have to move from one building to another, crossing a small open place with no signs and passages in order to attend to class according to the curriculum. It is not possible to do that without a guide. So my mum has to wait outside my faculty, during lecture time, in order to help me move around".

Similar structural barriers have reported by visually impaired students enrolled in University of Thessaloniki (Koutsoklenis, Papadopoulos, Papakonstantinou, & Koustriava, 2009) who thought that infrastructures to facilitate accessibility are insufficient or inadequate to a limited extent. Furthermore, consistent with the present finding there were several malfunctions in terms of environmental accessibility such as, lack of paving tiles and of signs in Braille or large print, inappropriate lighting and moving obstacles, lack of escorts for the movement in space, no audio announcement of the lift, lack of communications in Braille or large print, long distance / dispersion and inaccessible classrooms. Architectural barriers were also identified by students in USA (Garrison-Wade, 2012) who raised concerns in relation to transportation and conveniences taken for granted by most other students like accessible classrooms and restrooms and other researchers (Kurth & Mellard, 2006). Phiri (2013) reported inaccessible infrastructure in HE institution in Zimbabwe whereas difficult environmental conditions for visually impaired students were noted in HE in Oman (Alqaryouti, 2010).

If students' needs were acknowledged and respected modifications to curriculum could be made in order to exclude mobility hazards and enhance students' accessibility to classrooms. This kind of modifications that do not require costly infrastructural alterations attest to institution's inclusion policies.

A major theme extracted from participants' answers was associated with academic barriers either in terms of the learning

component or in terms of the assessment component. According to participants the majority of lecturers were lacking the appropriate approaches and methods of instruction to students with disabilities. The way and talking speed used by educators was a factor that affected students' ability to experience learning. Taking notes and pay attention to the lecture at the same time also blocks students' experience of learning. Previous studies have reported similar impediments to learning such as lecturers talking too quickly, or removing visual material before the student had time to digest the contents, (Fuller, Healey, Bradley, & Hall, 2004; Koutsoklenis et al., 2009; Linardou & Minos, 2016) as well as students listening or watching and making notes (Otyola, Kibanja, & Mugagga, 2017) and writing on the board or showing presentation without talking about what they write or show (Phiri, 2013).

Final assessment of modules through oral examination seemed to be one of the few provisions in HE institutions reported in the present research project. This could be due the fact that the relevant legislation is effective through primary education in order to accommodate students with learning difficulties (i.e. dyslexia). However, lectures were often reluctant and unaware of applying the specific alternative type of assessment resulting in aggravation of student's stress, disappointment and even disqualification. According to one blind participant "they (lecturers) are not doing it right. They ask one question, and expect an immediate answer, without giving any time for thought and organize your answer. And if you do not reply they ask somebody else, and then ask you another question the same way and then that is it". Struggles with test performance and barriers encountered in relation to forms of assessment were reported by participants in previous studies (Alqaryouti, 2010; Fuller et al., 2004; Otyola et al., 2017).

Barriers to learning were reported in terms of special equipment and reading resources both in the present research and in previous ones (Koutsoklenis et al., 2009; Frank, 2017; Linardou & Minos, 2016; Otyola et al., 2017). No enlargements of fonts in presentations and in handouts, lack of magnifying glasses in computer screens, keyboards with large keys, or appropriate software (i.e. speech-writer) in library or computer labs, audio or digital books were hindering equal access to studying for a degree.

As reported elsewhere (Garrison-Wade, 2012; Tinklin, Riddell, & Wilson, 2005; Frank, 2017; Whitaker, 2018; Linardou & Minos, 2016) participants raised the issue of the attitudes depicted in the behaviour of teaching and other personnel. In general, lecturers were indifferent and reluctant to contemplate students' needs whereas whole departments were not aware let alone ready to accommodate those needs. There were no guidelines about recording lectures; there was no provision of supplying handouts in alternative format, even when students had to practice on a subject during lecture, and they were not aware of the students attending their class, like they were "invisible".

Notwithstanding, there were participants who felt happy with the kind of help they were getting from either individual professors or support services operating in few universities. Unfortunately, those seemed to be rather individual approaches than institutional policies. Even, institutions with an established support service for students with disabilities seemed to run ineffectively in terms of providing appropriate accommodations. One reason for that might be that those scarce offices were set up based on European funding independently from universities administration and with no qualified heading personnel. Thus, with no proper planning when the funding was over, services were getting dysfunctional and ineffective. Additionally, they operate mainly with volunteers which means they are not able to accurately provide according to students' needs. For example, one blind student who approached the service requesting a guide at the beginning of the first semester had a response from the service at the end of the second semester.

Generally, participants' comments suggested an inconsistency in the attempt of the HE system to promote inclusion for students with disabilities. Based on the identified barriers and enablers to equal university access, there is a need for greater implementation of inclusive practices both high and low cost.

First of all, an operational policy designed by each HE institution could provide the framework by which issues related to disability and accessibility could be addressed. Board policies lay the foundation from which procedures and processes may be developed and demonstrate the institutions' commitment to accessibility.

Participants stated that teaching and administrative personnel were both unaware and reluctant to accommodate their needs. Reasons for such attitudes were indifference, ignorance around disability issues, absence of appropriate guidelines, traditionally conventional teaching methods, misinformation related to rights of students with disabilities. In order to remedy such barriers HE institutions should provide opportunities for and encourage members of faculty to be educated about and sensitized to the special situation of prospective students with disabilities. Teaching personnel should also be trained on alternative teaching and assessment methods in order to be more prepared for the enrolment of students with disabilities.

Establishment of a central coordination unit with knowledgeable and experienced personnel in each institution that would gather, group, organise, manage and finally address students' needs. Such a unit could proactively attend to the appropriate arrangements for students with disabilities to participate and perform their academic duties.

Application of the existing legislation in relation to smoking inside public building as well as preserving sanitary condition could enhance academic perspectives for all students not only for those with health issues. Restructuring the curriculum according to the available space and needs of students with

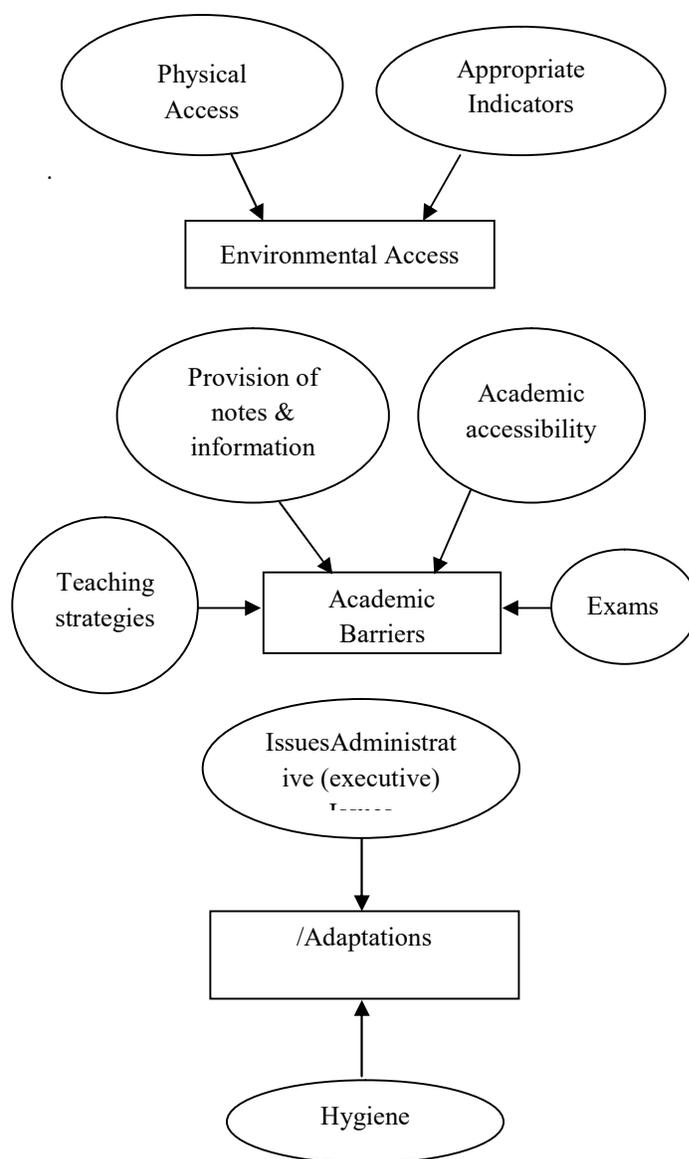
disabilities is also a costless remedy to accommodate those needs and enhance inclusion strategies.

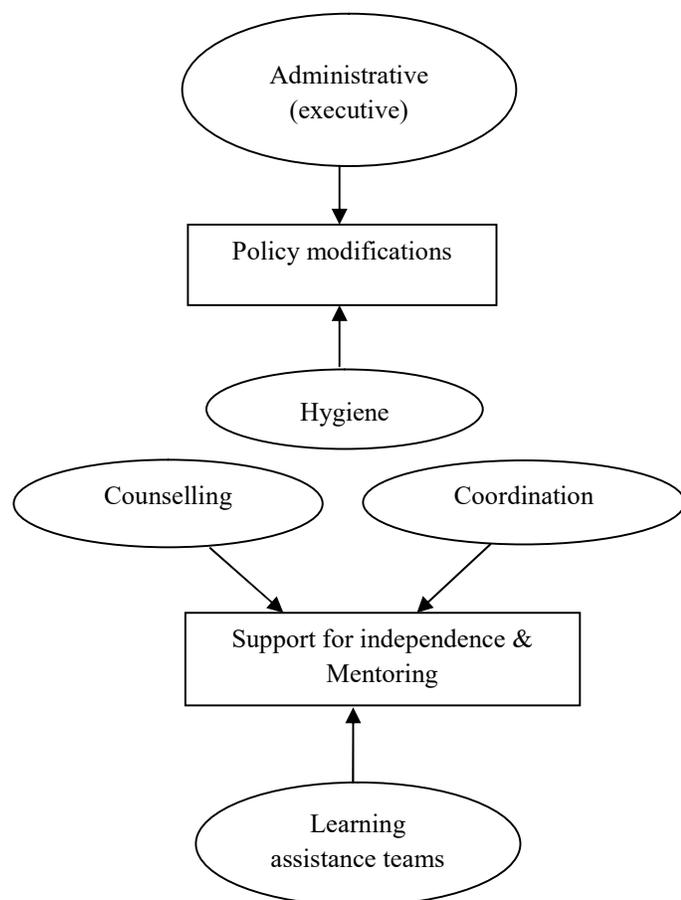
Environmental and academic accessibility although among the costliest recommendations, are deemed necessary if students with mobility and sensory impairments are to be included in higher education.

## CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that the lack of official information about the number, the type and the severity of the disability of students enrolled in higher education of Greece makes planning and embedding policy into institutional procedures a difficult task. A number of impediments revealed in the present study indicated that much further development is needed before mainstreaming is achieved.

**Figure 1**





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