

University Inclusion: strategies for an equal academic achievement.

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In the last decades the new visually handicapped generations have been breaking up traditional model in the education system. When they finish school they want to continue their professional life in a variety of professional options, universities are a real and practical option, creating and promoting a different way of teaching and learning.

Year by year, the state universities have been accepting new student population in their classes, as a reaction of the new educational paradigms. These visually handicapped students have opened new opportunities for the ones that are coming behind, so the right to have education doesn't submit just for a few.

The University of Costa Rica has been applying different educational strategies that have been achieved at the different scholar departments. Their efforts are an important support for the inclusive educational strategies. The visually impairment handicapped students, generate some needs, different than the rest of the common students. That's the reason to offer the service or programs to orient a guide them, and therefore their professors, to offer the opportunity to face an equal university environment, and to share the same conditions with their classmates.

Integration has been applied in our educational system for twenty five years, even though there is much to do, the efforts has been given more opportunities to the visually handicapped population, and even more given the space to continue their educational achievement in superior schools.

Actually, the support services estimate that the 87% of visually handicapped students are alphabetized (Censo2000), if we compare that percentage with the 95.2% of the general population in Costa Rica alphabetized at national level, we obtain a different margin that gives a point to continue the work into the education access. The inclusion is then; the correct answer to the needs for our students, is one of the many options, and therefore is a right that allows the educational services to include new alternatives and supports to the students that require assistant.

In the last decades, the visually handicapped students have been breaking up attitude barriers, creating and developing different ways to teach and learn. Year by year, the University has been receiving students with special needs, whose achievements have allowed to respect their rights to have education in equal conditions as theirs pairs.

The goal of inclusion is a reality en Costa Rican's students, it came to stay, to change stereotypes , to enrich the sense of living in a fair society, respecting the diversity and the differences that allows us to identify with ourselves, and join us in an answer in the quest for the equal of opportunities.

Actually, the academic and professional goals for the visually impair students represent a growing need in developing countries. Certainly we have different kinds of needs in the educational field. There are many geographic areas where the basic academics needs are not accomplished, but it is a reflection the same situation for those who don't have specific educational needs.

We see a "parallel" situation: the urban areas have better conditions, access to school, professional support, institutional assistance, access to literacy, material, resources, etc. In rural areas we find the opposite: a lack of services, materials and professional support. Economical and political priorities don't give the opportunities to develop continue and consistent programs to sustain their demands, even though their needs increase year by year, in order to change old educational paradigms.

Integration and inclusive strategies have changed the priorities of the daily educative concerns, local representatives have identified several problems in the educational field that are very similar among disabled students and those that don't have special educational needs, which provides a reference frame that guides and focus on educational basic needs.

These economical differences between geographic areas in a developing country demand a political compromise to improve their quality life conditions. It's not anymore a matter of assistance, is a matter of achieving substantial efforts to assure new ways to aboard educational programs for the visually impair students.

Developing countries have an urgency to support the future initiatives to provide more educational access, work opportunities, academic and professional achievement, that emphasizes in their rights as the rest of the society.

The visually handicapped student and the educational Universities' access.

The school's principles in and for the diversity have made it clear that the incorporation of the visually handicapped students is actually a practice, that as a result has become an efficient alternative, that also provokes challenges of accessibility and implies important changes in the matter of personal perspectives, social and familiar. At first, a handicapped person has needs just as the rest of the population, nevertheless these generate specific demands that also determine a profile in which the specialists and support teams create and precise the actions that favour the inclusive strategies throughout the educational process: school-high school-technical education-superior education.

Considering that the handicapped population that accesses education is in continuous growth, it's expected that they can keep on assuming better educational options. It's become evident that every day, the handicapped student looks for other possibilities of autonomy and improvement, which not necessarily go towards the technical-professional level. A gradual increase in university options has been observed, as a decision this population has been assuming, this is a product of the inclusive principles, which have been incorporated little by little in the educational practices in every level.

Support Service: adjustment in the university curriculum.

In the process of inclusion of visually handicapped student, particular aspects of intervention have been taken into consideration, depending in their individual needs and demands: Information and communication (strategies: low vision aids, use of technology, student assistant). Mobility: in the University campus (support and coordination with orientation and mobility specialist). Evaluation and Learning Curriculum adjustment (Braille, oral exams etc.). These effort has been use an example of a inclusion model to the others universities in the country. It is crucial to fortify the inclusion and the idea that academic achievement is a real and challenging goal. Even in a development country, the possibilities of having a professional career is an effort that just working together, students and teachers, supporting the individual needs of each component this goal will be for each and everyone of the visually handicapped students, that believe in their capacity to change and facilitate an effective inclusion in the universities classes.

Inclusion Process:

To guarantee an inclusion process according to the needs of the handicapped student, there exist certain regulations of the Academic Regime, in which it explains the procedure that is required to do the adjustments of the university curriculum and the responsibility of the university as an educational being. It is important to strengths this

strategies, so the inclusive process is not anymore a special process, instead is a routine task, part of the daily programme at the university.

This way when a handicapped student applies to do the Academic Aptitude Test there are available a series of strategies that guarantee the adaptation for the test, and therefore allow the students to perform in equal conditions:

First, the student presents the documents that prove his situation, support by an specialist in the field. Also a letter to demand the academic adaptations, to access to the test, as the current students, they accomplish the same guidelines with their specific request. Since the beginning of the process we can see the importance of a dynamic interrelation, is the visually impair students with a growing autonomy that enhance the equality of the scholar system, asking and suggesting the better way to interact and performance as their pairs.

Then, an interview takes place between the student and a visual specialist, this is to establish the visual and other types of adaptations, needed for the test, requested and explained it in a personal a professional way.

It is important for the university's staff to guarantee their rights, to explain in details the process that they are about to start, for that reason it is necessary to arrange a talk with the university staff, it takes place to clear the doubts regarding the test and other matters, in the university precinct, with a professional team.

Once approved the adaptations, they have 5 days to appeal, in case the student isn't satisfied, he can suggest changes or aspects that were not included, to have a better adaptation of the test, in their terms.

Finally at the day of the test, the student has his test, in the requested format (audio, CD, Braille, large print, reader), to achieve an equal conditions the instructional process.

Adaptations for the Academic Aptitude Test (AAT), for handicapped students:

The adaptations foreseen for the AAT (Academic Aptitude Test), is a test where the verbal skills (analogies, complete sentences, reading comprehension), and math are measured, it's not about knowledge, is more about how they accomplish different cognitive skills, crucial for their future achievements. In the proposal of the adaptations the content of the test is not modified at all, and its about minimising "the impact of the test attributes". Thus the adjustments that are realized make a reference to the following aspects:

- Size and letter style, they need in print presentation for their test, so they have the same conditions as their pairs.

- Braille test, for blind students.
- Test with the Reader that reads and marks the answer, in case they are in a period of transition of their access educational needs, and they still don't use Braille.
- Use of proper light (natural, fluorescent, table lamp), to enhance the ambient conditions of the classroom, where the test take place, as they indicate in a preview interview.
- Test in the modality of Tape Recorded, in case they want to complement any option with the audible modality.
- Use of magnifying glass, it is suggested they bring the one they usually use.
- Time measurement, because it is known that visually impair students need more time to read and answer the test.

ATT's theme is the beginning of a university academic process, which at the same time reflects the inclusive, political and economic achievements that a responsible society must acquire.

The University of Costa Rica proposes a model that changes constantly; it is a dynamic model, supported by a process that gives the right for an education. This way the adjustments are made in the daily academic practice, in the students and in the teachers. The achievements are prioritized considering the needs of the student, with a profile that transforms through the needs and achievements.

The support of the university staff has been important in the inclusive process, because, first, it tends to insure new ways to aboard educational matters for the visually impaired students, second, for the professors that still have doubts of the ability of the students to achieve academic goals.

Other component that is crucial in this kind of approach is that it has to be continues to accomplish any good results, so the compromise has to be serious and responsible, not just because it gives creditable to their efforts, because it also improve the educational system.

This way, the needs that the student tells in the university classrooms can be focused in the next levels:

1. Information and Communication: all this implies having the material updated: texts, talks, magisterial sessions, support material. There are several strategies that can be done:

- * Use of optical help (magnifying glass, screen magnifier, bright reducers, proper light).
- * Use of technology (diskette, audio programs, accessible library, Braille printer)

* Readers and assistants (tapes)

The visually impair students in coordination with the support Educational Services look for the different adjustment that can be made, to full fill their needs. It is important they make a statement of their situation, difficulties and personal suggestions to the university's staff, so they can assist in a better way.

2. Mobility: this refers to the relative need regarding the university campus, classroom location, buildings, bus stops, etc... At the beginning of school year students are gathered to receive instructions and orientation in the University Campus, with a specialist in Orientation and Mobility. Strategies to achieve this component:

- Support for the student through permanent spaces of social action and student life.
- Coordinate the support with a specialist in orientation and mobility, at the university's campus.
- Changes in the architectonic environment, if is needed.

3. Process of learning/evaluation: it refers to the immediate accessibility in the curricular validation processes. Perhaps the most central and critical guideline emphasized in this article is our fundamental belief the most promising way for improving the education for the visually impaired students is through the staff that interact with them, specialist, volunteers, family, the expectations that are recognize in the academic programs, confirm and confront not just the problems issues in the field, even more the urgent needs in the area the capacity of work of the university's professors, and the continues efforts are critically needed to establish and built a well-being and support staff and improved services to students.

It is important for the students to acknowledge the different possibilities that can be done, so as a strategy, in this matter:

- Adequate adaptations to the needs of the student (Braille, letter enhancement, tapes, DVD, CD, disquette), to have an equal educational opportunity a learning conditions.

The process of support and adjustment in the different academic situations stated by the needs of the handicapped students, have been achieved throughout certain guidelines:

- Adjustments to the educational intervention (the curriculum) to the needs of the student, through strategies, material resorts and humans that are facilitators in the process. Here it's not only about using the technical adaptations, but to use the mechanisms that allow the student to be a part of the decision taking process (choosing the adaptations)

- Support to the didactic process through innovate resources, such as the new technologies, that allow to access and process the information in the moment that it's given (JAWS, screen amplifier)
- Dynamism in the didactic support red, this means to create spaces in which the teachers, involved specialists, and the student share the criteria, analyze situations and decisions, search for new and better strategies of inclusion (team meetings, intervention from CASE (Asses Centre for the Students))

The University of Costa Rica has been and institution of superior education, a pioneer in the challenge of accessibility, and throughout the years it has accomplished to sensitize, make the university community aware, and teach that “each persons difference is what makes them special, each one of us have special skills, and that’s why we have to fight for the respect, and achieve a social educational system, that is fairer for all our students”.