Disability Services addressing Learning Disabilities:
taking students' voices into account

Roberta Garbo   Andrea Mangiatordi   Silvia Negri

University of Milano Bicocca, Italy

Abstract

This preliminary report focuses on a survey administered to students who accessed the Disability Services of the University of Milano Bicocca in the academic year 2011-2012 and offers a baseline overview of their needs and expectations. A representative sample of such students was interviewed personally about the services they were actually using, in order to understand how their experience as university students could be improved.

This study is work in progress and reflects the first steps of a larger action research project.

1. Introduction

In 2011 the Disability Services at the University of Milano Bicocca, Italy, entered an inter-university project called 'Campus Tools for Students' (CATS). The project, funded by the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR), aims at supporting students with hearing impairments and Learning Disabilities (LD), during classes, individual study, and fruition of administrative, ICT based services [1]. According to the official definition provided by the World Health Organisation [3], Dyslexia can be defined as *"a disorder manifested by difficulty in learning to read, despite conventional instruction, adequate intelligence and sociocultural opportunity. It is dependent upon fundamental cognitive disabilities which are frequently of constitutional origin"*.

This preliminary report focuses on a survey administered to students who accessed the Disability Service in the academic year 2011-2012 and offers a baseline overview of their needs and expectations. A representative sample of such students was interviewed personally about the services they were actually using.

Different models can be adopted in order to predict the quality of Disability Services [2]. Italian universities only started addressing the needs of LD students since academic year 2010-2011, after law 170/2010 stated that every Italian educational institution should adopt effective measures for their inclusion. The main objective of this work is to give voice to LD students, through the discussion of the first act of an action-research project.

2. Sample description

A structured interview was administered to n=36 students (17 male, 19 female) of the University of Milano Bicocca. All of them had previously contacted the Disability Service at the same university. The total number of students who accessed the service in 2012 was 79, so the sample represents 45.57% of them. The sample was stratified by department and the age range of the participants was between 19 and 37 (mean 22, median 20, SD 4.05).

The group was composed by 13 people with Learning Disabilities, one student who had both hearing and visual impairment, 20 mobility impaired students, 2 low vision students. Participants came from six different departments: Psychology, Education, Economics, Law, Sciences, Sociology. Gender and disability distributions appeared to be homogeneous between departments (chi-square *p* >0,60 and >0,11 respectively).

The sub-group composed by 13 LD students (3 male, 10 female) included students from all departments, except Law, Statistics and Medicine. The relative majority of this sub-group comes from the Education department (5 cases). More than half of them (8 students) is made of first-year students, while the others are attending their second-year (3 students) or are out-of-course (2 cases). All except one had their first access to the Disability Services during academic year 2011/2012. The age range of the LD students was between 19 and 29 (mean 20.76, median 20, SD 2.83). They can be considered representative of the whole population of certified LD students, which at the time of the survey was of 26.

The survey included questions about the use of different services, the opinions that students had about them, the relationship between needs and availability, the suggestions and the desired additional services. Information was collected about the kind of services that students used while at high school and about their specific needs in both attending lectures and studying individually. The services offered by the Disability Services of the University of Milano Bicocca at the time the study began were: a) notebook reservation; b) sign language interpreting; c) lectures recording; d)

support in individual study; e) tutoring (both generic or specific for some subjects); f) support during lectures (for note taking); g) support during exams h) photocopy service in the library; i) adaptation of textbooks for low vision students; j) transcription of textbooks for blind students; k) accessible computers (available in labs and at the Disability Services room); l) assistive software; m) mobility support by van; n) support in accessing public transportation; o) support in attending consulting hours with teachers; p) support for physical needs; q) support at lunchtime; r) support at library; s) support in interacting with administrative services; t) support in accessing the external post office; u) support in accessing book shops.

3. Preliminary results

The sub-group composed by LD students mainly expressed preference towards tutoring services, both specialized and generic. The second most common preference among them was towards support during exams, during lectures and in personal study.

The possibility to use specific software tools and to record lectures obtained non primary, yet interesting preferences. Recording lectures was associated to greater autonomy: one of the participants declared he had bought a personal digital recorder exactly in order to be more independent and to call on the disability services less often.

In many cases the tutoring service was considered important even though it was not actually being used by respondents: they were mainly thinking about using that specific service in the future (next semster or next academic year).

Among the interviewees, 9 were used to being supported by various assistive resources at high school time, before entering the university programme. They mainly used computers during lectures (even though one of the participants remarked that she preferred using pen and paper, in order to look less different from her classmates) and enjoyed of time-limit extensions in tests. One student highlighted the lack of resources at his high school, which led him to contacting an external support organization. Three of the LD students were supported by a special needs teacher at least in high school: as the Italian education system does not grant the availability of a special needs teacher for students with Dyslexia, they were actually enjoying of the presence of special needs teachers who were in charge of supporting other students in the same class. Two students also remarked that not all teachers recognized their difficulties and accepted to dispense them from the tasks they found difficult to absolve.

In 7 cases there was complete coincidence between the services that students felt they needed and services actually being provided by the disability service. In the other cases, differences between requested and accorded services were mainly due to tutoring being suggested (and thus assigned without request) and for which there was no suitable tutor.

The overall opinion about the quality of services is good, with some important notes: one of the participants remarked that he had difficulties in accessing the online services of the university (such as exam application procedures), while another expressed his hope about a better organised lecture recording service. Another critical point was the difficulty in sustaining first-year English tests, which are present in all curricula: they pose serious difficulties to Italian speaking LD students, mainly due to the phonetic differences between the two languages.

When asked about their specific needs in lecture and laboratory contexts, students with LD did not express particular unattended needs; some of them remarked that teachers were not always open for dialogue, and that timetables needed better organization.

The personal study needs that emerged were mainly linked to specialized tutoring and to support in organizing time and materials.

4. Conclusions and future work

The data collected so far offers a first, general overview of the needs and expectations that LD students have in a university context. They show overall good independence, which was acquired by students in lower education levels. They already have personal strategies for overcoming their difficulties and do not seem to count too much on an inclusive environment. Yet problems persist, specifically in their relationship with the environment: intervention is needed in order to improve the inclusive potential of their learning contexts. The CATS project individuated various areas for intervention, on which subsequent research will focus. Those areas are specifically note-taking, individual study and personalized tutoring.

5. References

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