More than
97%
of education institutions have in place a **support centre for students with disabilities.**

Only
55% of
students with disabilities rate these services from **adequately effective to very effective.**

A **Massive Open Online Course on disability** for higher education teachers and VET trainers would improve the efficiency of these services.

Scope to harness human and technological capital for better inclusion of students with disabilities in education institutions

What's at stake?

While most higher education and vocational training institutions have incorporated support centres for students with disabilities, the efficiency and satisfaction ratings of these services could be improved. An online course to train university professors and vocational teachers on disability issues would enhance services offered by these support centers.

What did we find?

These findings emerge from the study conducted within the framework of the ALdia project, co-funded by Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union, to identify the needs of students with disabilities in the education sector. The ALdia project bridges theory and practice regarding equal access to education for persons with disabilities. As such, the main project task aims to develop an innovative and online training framework encapsulated in a Massive Open Online Course on disability, building up crucial skills for inclusive education among the professionals who teach students with disabilities.

The ALdia needs assessment analysis focused on the project target groups, inquiring students with disabilities, vocational trainers (VET) and university professors. The research process achieved a very significant success, collecting 583 surveys and organising four design meetings analysis in the three participant countries of the project (Spain, Italy and Greece). The scale of these figures allows for a meaningful transposition and generalisation to all EU countries.

Across the ALdia needs assessment resonates the absolute certainty, shared among students and teachers, that education institutions must provide services and support structures for students with

disabilities. As such, on average more than 80% of the students with disabilities and professors (Fig.1) agreed on the responsibility of the institution to guarantee the right of persons with disabilities to education, realizing it *"without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity",* along the lines of the art. 24 CRPD (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006).

Figure 1
EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS MUST PROVIDE SUPPORT ESTRUCTURES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES
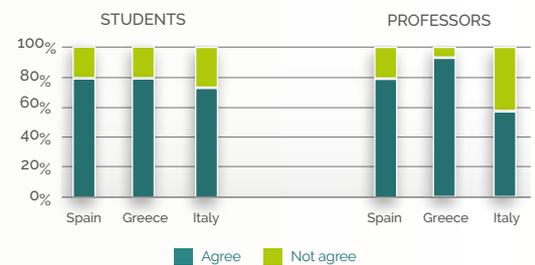
In fact, more than 97% of education institutions make use of student support or adaptation services for students with disabilities (Fig. 2). However, this extended practice among universities and vocational training institutions yields mediocre results in terms of satisfaction an efficiency with the services provided.

Figure 2
DISABILITY SUPPORT CENTER
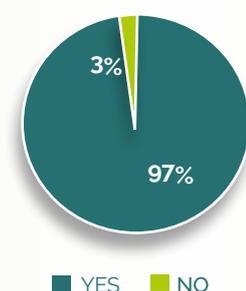
In fact, only 55% of the students with disabilities rated these student support centers from adequately effective to very effective. While these rates vary between the participant countries, evidence collected during the designs meetings confirms the findings (Fig.3). As such, a university professor from Spain illustrated how higher education institutions *"are not sensitive to the functional diversity of our students"* (ALdia, 2016, p. 98). Hence, in countries like Spain barely 54% of the students with disabilities recognise their education institutions as a supportive environment, which facilitates their inclusion and participation.

Figure 3
SATISFACTION WITH DISABILITY SUPPORT CENTER

OVERALL — 54,56%
ITALY — 40%
GREECE — 75%
SPAIN — 48,60%

Nevertheless, this rather unsatisfactory picture of the students with disabilities' situation in our education institutions contrasts with the widespread and shared willingness among students and professors to endeavour to reverse the current state of affairs. Thus, for example, in Greece 100% of the professors agreed on the importance of giving daily advice and specific support to students with disabilities. In Spain, almost 60% of the education professionals acknowledged that they should become more aware of the particular students with disabilities' needs. Furthermore, almost 81% of the interviewed professors voiced a positive interest in taking courses to increase their knowledge and skills on disability, implementing new tools on their teaching methodology and taking into account students with disabilities' needs.

Therefore, the Aldia project needs analysis has identified plenty of room for growth regarding the dynamics of inclusion in our education institutions,. However, as aforementioned in this policy brief, the Aldia study has also tapped into the great potential within our education institutions to include students with disabilities, in terms of technological and human capital resources.

Why is this important?

This scope for improvement on inclusion and the resources already in place in the education system point out towards an innovative tool to educate and train higher education and VET communities on disability issues, adjoining efforts with the European Disability Strategy 2010-2020 *"to widen access and participation in higher education"* (EACEA, 2013). As such, the ALdia project pioneers a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) on disability in higher education and VET, becoming a clear opportunity to capitalize this stock on human and technological resources and mobilize learning, training and education towards a more effective inclusion of students with disabilities in this environment.

Furthermore, the Sustainable Development Goals agenda pledges a collective commitment that *"no one will be left behind"*, by promoting *"the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability(…)"* (UNITED NATIONS, 2015). Therefore, the dissemination of the ALdia MOOC course among university professors and vocational trainers will empower students with disabilities, enabling them to fulfill their right to engage on equal basis with their peers on higher and vocational education. Thus, the ALdia project aims to reduce the burden described by a student with disabilities during the design meetings, explaining that in order to complete their education, *"you have to push yourself twice because of your disability"* (ALdia, 2016, p. 96).
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Implications for Policymakers

To disseminate and promote the ALdia MOOC course will have an impact on:

◗ Harnessing human and technological resources in higher education and VET institutions to fully include students with disabilities.

◗ Awareness raising of student with disabilities needs during their education process.

◗ Increasing action scope of disability support centers in education institutions by enhancing their engagement with teachers and students.

Further Reading

ALdia R2.2 Supporting students with disability in HE and VET – A needs analysis: http://aldia-project.eu/2016/12/15/aldia-r2-2-supporting-students-with-disability-in-he-and-vet-a-needs-analysis/

Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, A/RES/61/106 (United Nations General Assembly December 6, 2006)..

EACEA. (2013). *Education and Training in Europe 2020: Responses.* Brussels: Eurydice.

UNITED NATIONS. (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.* A/RES/70/1.