

Determinants of Satisfaction in Online Higher Education: The Role of the Instructor and the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

Taking the model proposed by Izquierdo-Yusta et al. (2018) as a reference, this study pursues a dual objective: (1) to identify the determinants of satisfaction among undergraduate students enrolled in online programs, and (2) to examine whether there are significant differences in the importance of these factors depending on whether students report having a disability.

Based on a sample of 1,709 students and using PLS-SEM modeling, the analysis confirms the relevance of the instructor, course design, and assessment model in explaining student satisfaction with the course. In contrast, no significant effect is found regarding learning resources. Furthermore, the findings highlight the instructor's central role as the agent responsible for designing the course and planning the learning experience through the development of resources and assessment methods. This confirms both the direct and moderate effect of the instructor on course satisfaction. Finally, the MGA analysis reveals significant differences in the importance of these factors depending on whether students report having a disability, with the instructor's role showing particularly marked differences.

From an empirical standpoint, the results underscore the need to rethink online course planning through a more inclusive and adaptive approach. Institutions should prioritize training for instructors in inclusive instructional design, emphasizing the dual pedagogical and emotional impact their role can have—especially for students with disabilities. Additionally, assessment systems should be revised to ensure flexibility and accessibility without compromising academic rigor. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how the digital classroom can either level the playing field—or deepen inequalities—depending on the intentionality behind its design.

Keywords: Online higher education, Student satisfaction, Inclusive education, Instructor role, Disability and accessibility