

Manual on Institutional Change

for International Exchange of Students with Disabilities



Authors: Senior lecturer Mihai Predescu, Department of Education Sciences Andra-Mirona Dragotesc, Department of International Relations

West University of Timişoara, Romania













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In an intensively globalized academic world, higher education institutions should constantly strive to achieve authentic and real equal access to opportunities offered by internationalization, for all students. A consortium of four universities working together under the umbrella of a project financed through the EEA Grants Financial Mechanism 2009-2014 for Romania, have, in this context, decided to do more and also offer support to other colleagues in regards to one particular issue situated at the intersection of internationalization activities and equal access to educational opportunities: international mobilities for students with disabilities

The project: Institutional Change for International Exchange of Students with Disabilities

The universities: West University of Timisoara (Romania, coordinator), in partnership with University of Agder (Norway), University of A Coruna (Spain) and University of Szeged (Hungary). The reason: Too many e-mails have begun "floating around" in between higher education institutions regarding possibilities to "send abroad" or "take in" students with disabilities wishing to pursue an international academic experience. While some HEIs are more advanced, others are lagging behind, and other are finding solutions as they go through the processes. This project does not aim to offer exhaustive solutions, but rather to offer the grounds for HEIs to leave behind the fear of supporting outgoing or incoming international mobilities for all students with disabilities, by taking up actions that could eventually engender a much needed constant institutional change for all students, not only internationally mobile, not only with disabilities.

The input: The project aims to offer knowledge in order for HEIs administrative and academic staff, as well as students, to educate themselves in regards to the issue at stake, by combining state of the art work at University of Szeged concerning support for students with disabilities, extensive experience at University of Agder in regards to international mobilities, as well as special needs student services, University of A Coruna's high potential in research concerning the European context to which we all firstly measure our actions for institutional development at higher



education level and West University of Timisoara's new, but highly creative approach to internationalization and institutional development for all education level and West University of Timisoara's new, but highly creative approach to internationalization and institutional development for all.

The objective: Advancing social and economical empowerment of students with disabilities, by creating an institutional environment/framework to equally access opportunities for personal and professional development as a result of participating in international mobilities for studies.

The actions: Tackling institutional development and benchmarking in the higher education sector with regard to access to and support of international mobilities for studies in the case of students with disabilities can be a marker of real, beyond paper, equal access to education and we should all contribute to that if we are involved in processes related to this matter. To this end, it is important to ensure the constant adaptation and development of Higher Education Institutions' services and overall support offered to students with disabilities who wish to pursue an international mobility for studies, by creating the framework for evaluating and developing institutional culture and strategy, services and logistics, in the sense of including, understanding and meeting all students' needs.







Introduction

Disability is a universal condition. It is transcending cultures, gender, social or economic status, and ages. Because of the pervasiveness of it, we consider disability as another face of diversity. However, the main trait of disability is that is limiting a person in fully adjusting to the environmental or cultural criteria. In this respect, universities, as well as other institution, are faced with the challenge to transform in order to provide the necessary support for the full participation of disabled persons in its life. No matter the theoretical position on disability or the way we understand it, the reality of the barriers that disabled persons are facing in universities is a reality as well as their right to have access to barrier-free institutions.

This manual aims to provide a practical step by step approach of transforming universities into inclusive spaces for students with disabilities, especially for those students that are involved in international exchange, both outgoing and incoming. For those students, the difficulties are even higher because they have to face a new institution in a short and intense process of adaptation.

The manual is designed for the use of international officers in international relations departments from universities, as well as other support departments/offices and other policy makers and stakeholders in the area of exchange of students. The language is not strictly scientifically and we didn't intend to make an extensive theoretical introduction. Our aim, also, is to emphasize a policy making aspect instead, focused on individual support for students with disabilities, because the main challenge of students with disabilities that are travelling abroad in an international exchange program isn't the lack of support departments in their host institutions, but a lack of a systematic approach of their inclusion due to the lack of policies in the field.

You could use this manual as a roadmap with checkpoints, which are institutional decisions. At the beginning of each section we will highlight the decision that is the most important and suggest solutions for it. Obviously, the manual does not limit itself to the Erasmus+ programme, but practitioners will recognize some specific connections to it, as all universities/countries involved in this project are mainly utilizing it for international mobility of students.





EU position on education and disabilities

Universities across Europe are very diverse. We must remember that universities are some of the oldest institution and they were often the centre of developing national cultures and identities. So, they are reflecting strong national and local values and cultures which are diverse. The last decades were important for unifying approaches of universities programmes (i.e. Bologna Declaration) or of educating students with disabilities (UN convention on disability¹ rights and EU strategy for disability²). The UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities clearly states that the denial of reasonable accommodation for disabled persons is a form of discrimination. In respect to tertiary education, it is also stated that: "States Parties shall ensure that persons with disabilities are able to access general tertiary education. vocational training, adult education and lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis with others. To this end. States Parties shall ensure that reasonable accommodation is provided to persons with disabilities." EU's disability strategy 2010-2020 raises awareness about the barriers that are hindering the participation of disabled persons to different areas. In the strategy there are eight action areas, one of them being education and training were it states that we must raise the inclusion of students with disabilities in lifelong learning.

From these documents we have a common ground to make decisions that are compliant to the goal of improving the quality of access in universities for students with disabilities. The 2012 EHEA (European Higher Education Area) mobility strategy³ that is aiming to improve the mobility of students across European universities recognizes that there still are barriers in students' mobility. Therefore they set an objective of dismantling existing obstacles to mobility and to give extra attention and opportunities to under-represented groups to be mobile and to recognize the importance of adequate student support services to this end.

¹ http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/convention.shtml

² http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2010:0636:FIN:en:PDF

³ http://www.ehea.info/uploads/(1)/2012%20ehea%20mobility%20strategy.pdf



Our approach on international exchange of students with disabilities

The students with disabilities have the right to equal access to all types of academic experiences, including mobility. The reason for reduced mobility of students with disabilities falls in two main categories:

- **1.** General obstacles for mobility. As several studies revealed⁴, there are some common barriers to mobility. The most commons are finances, recognition of the study programmes, the level of international language proficiency and barriers at university level. All these barriers are affecting not only students with disabilities, but regular students as well. We will not focus on this kind of obstacles since they require a more comprehensive approach from the point of view of educational systems and universities and more and more higher education institutions have resolved at least some of them in recent years due to their continuously increasing experience in this field.
- **2.** Specific obstacles for students with disabilities. This kind of obstacles are more specific and need a more focused approach. Some of those obstacles are the lack of services for students with disabilities, lack of accessible information and support, lack of reasonable accommodation and lack of services for disabled students. Our manual focuses on this type of barriers to participation.

Our approach is quite straightforward. The universities have to narrow and focus their approach from general condition to individualized actions. But, this needs human resources and other types of resources in order to engender high quality international mobilities for students with disabilities, both from a professional and personal development experience.

Scaffolding the actions, they could be represented on several layers.

1. In order to host incoming and outgoing students with disabilities, universities have to set proper policies framework.

⁴ http://www.tjsr.org/v1/n1/TJSR201404a.pdf, http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/ESIB_study_mobiity.pdf, http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=URISERV:c11033&from

Unless the university is not acknowledging the needs of students with disabilities and until it is not setting the normative framework for inclusion of them, the mobility of students with disabilities is not effective.

- **2.** Universities need to deliver study programmes that are not only relevant, but also accessible from a disabled person point's of view. Accessibility of a study programme, as well as the equal access to mobility projects/programmes, could take different forms, from making the support courses accessible to physical access to access to information.
- **3.** Physical accessibility of universities is still a critical issue. Even though there are national regulations regarding accessibility of buildings, the reality shows that the physical access is still an important issue. The main reason is that there are large differences in imposing accessibility rules between countries and that a lot of universities are functioning in historical buildings that were not designed for accommodating students with disabilities. This contributes to an institutional culture that could be negative towards disabled students.
- **4.** The living conditions of students with disabilities is another critical issue because is a necessary precondition for a successful mobility. Financial aspects can enter the equation, as well as specific necessary support. Some of these can be resolved with proper training through specific funding available in mobility programmes for additional support concerning students with disabilities.
- **5.** Finally, an international mobility is not only an academic experience, but a life experience. The needs for social life and informal learning should be one of the main concerns of universities. A successful mobility means a quick inclusion of students in a different social group/environment. The need to integrate in social and learning groups is a major stress factor and universities must find effective way of reducing that stress. For students with disabilities, the support group is even more important.

All this issues will be detailed in the first section of this manual. The second section will focus on communication and public dissemination of information for students with disabilities. The third section of the manual will focus on student exchange programmes implementation for the specific group of students with disabilities.



Pathways to inclusion of students with disabilities in international exchange programmes

There are different levels of services for disabled students across European universities. Some of the universities have developed specialised services (mainly in comprehensive universities), and are constantly monitoring the social and academic inclusion of their students with disabilities. Others have no services and/or procedures concerning disabled students.

Our manual should be a tool for those universities that are lacking the expertise to establish disable student services, but are willing to do so. For the universities that are more advanced in this respect, the manual is an alternative approach and could be used as a way of assessing their services and to improve them if necessary.

Most of the universities, like West University of Timisoara, are in the middle of the road, so they are perfecting their services in order to become a fully accessible and inclusive space of learning. For those universities, the manual offers ideas and tips to advance their performances.

What we need to acknowledge is that our approach is not unique in the sense that it is based on the experiences of different universities that developed services for students with disabilities. Also, our approach is just one of the many possible alternatives in developing services.

Is your university "able" and "willing" to send/receive students with disabilities on a mobility?

This is the most important question at the beginning of this manual and it has only two answers.

1. One is yes, and in that case you should see if there are any barriers in accommodating international students with disabilities in your university or if there is enough information and human resources available to support incoming and outgoing mobilities. Are any previous experiences? What you have learned from an institutional point of view?



2. The second answer is no. There could be many reasons for this answer, including the lack of experience in working with disabled students (which can be linked to problematic institutional policies and culture, perceived lack of resources (which is unrealistic, as all mobility programmes offer additional funding in this case) or avoiding new decisions and extra-work (in applying for extra-funding, for example0. In this case you must realize that your university is actively discriminating students and fails to fulfill its mission as a space of liberty, tolerance and excellence. The real question is to find if the benefits of developing such services are not higher than preserving the actual state.







1. Making University Accessible

Any university that aims to accommodate international students with disability has to be accessible and informed/informative, from various perspectives. Any university that aims to offer equal access to opportunities offered by international mobilities to all of its students has to be accessible and informed/informative, from various perspectives. International conventions and agreements stress that not having an accessible university is a form of discriminating students with disabilities. The discrimination functions not only against international students, but also against its own students with disabilities. Even if a university doesn't have registered students with disability, if it is not accessible it is still discriminating prospective students. The natural conclusion is that a university has to be accessible in order to comply with its mission.

The steps that are necessary in order to make universities accessible require effort, time and resources. Some of the accommodations are straightforward and visible, or "hard", others are "soft" accommodation, and are procedures or decisions to regulate the field of services for students.

As we stated in the introduction, we will focus on developing the institutional framework for inclusion of students with disabilities, on developing accessible teaching programmes, on enhancing physical environment and living conditions, and ways to stimulate the social life of international students with disabilities, outgoing and incoming, before, during and after mobility.

How do I know if the university is accessible?

There are two ways to determine if your university is accessible. One is to check legal requirements and international guidelines. The other one is to ask students with disability or representative NGOs to assess it in daily activities.

You could find that the university is not accessible, partial accessible or fully accessible. In the first two cases you will have an indication on your weaknesses in the field and targets to attain. In the last situation you should stress this in your academic offer for international students.

In all cases be aware that accessibility isn't just about physical access and not just for physically impaired students. Visible and invisible disabilities need to be taken into consideration.



a. Creating a framework for inclusion of students with disabilities

In order to build structured approaches to services for students with disabilities, we need a solid foundation. The foundation is the legal or normative framework that allows the building of services and the developing of effective procedures. The framework is a normative document that states the relations between university and the students with disability. In the annex you have the example of the framework of inclusion from West University of Timisoara which was adapted after the one of St. Rose College from Albany, New York, US. We will use it to exemplify the minimum issues that have to address.

The first section describes the legal bases of the framework. The legal bases could be drawn from international regulation, antidiscrimination laws, educational laws and national regulations. Also this first section describes the assumed principle of university.

The second section defines the main terms that are used in the framework. One of the interesting terms is that of reasonable accommodation that means that the university is doing any accommodation that is not disproportionate or is not affecting academic standards. The key issue is that students and staff, academic and non-academic, understand that the inclusion is about creating condition for equal access, not a changing in requirements or standards of assessment for students with disability. Another term, not included in the presented framework, but there is a custom in most universities, is that accessibility measures are made on demand. In this case, even if the university doesn't have a facility it shows the willingness to invest and make it when it will be needed and required.

The third section states the objectives of the framework. The objectives could be different for different universities. In this specific case the objectives focuses not on developing an existing service, but to start one. This section also states that it is compulsory for each member of the academic community to know the rights of students with disability and to actively act accordingly.

One key issue is the procedure of registering students with disability and of preserving the confidentiality of information.



The registering is made only on voluntary basis, when students declare their condition. The process of registering is a key one because we cannot offer services if there is no request for it. Also it helps universities to have an evidence of the number of students and their type of disabilities. From our experience, the students will not declare their condition if there is no services available for them or if they don't have enough information about it. Students will not declare themselves as person with specific disability if they don't trust that their personal data are not treated properly. For this reason, we recommend that you design a specific procedure for the evidence of the students. Related to this is the procedure of complaint in situation when students feel that their rights weren't respected.

The last important section defines the areas where this framework should be applied. Basically, the framework should be involved in admission procedure (that must be non-discriminatory), in teaching, in quality assurance measures and in information flows (including access to public information and to alternative learning environments).

In designing a framework for inclusion it will be useful to:

- Declare your commitment to respect the rights of students with disability;
- To provide your understanding and definition of disability, access and reasonable accommodations;
- To describe clearly the procedure to be applied when a student with disability needs assistance;
 - To encourage declaration of disability;
- To provide confidentiality and a fair treatment of personal information;
 - To describe areas where the framework is applicable;
 - To provide opportunities for feedback and complaints;
 - To assign responsibilities.

Institutional change perspective

Creating a framework for inclusion of students with a disability is the main institutional change because it allows specific measures and procedures to be developed and implemented. Such a change requires a commitment, not only from a support group or a department, but from the universities' managers and regulatory bodies, and this is, by extension, a commitment of all

academic community. Even if it is a difficult decision, it will trigger an institutional change that is more significant than individual measures. There are several key points to keep in mind. The framework must be developed in collaboration with the university's management. They have to make an informed decision and their commitment has to be authentic. There must be some way to assess its implementation and to offer feedback for those who apply it. There must be a university wide dissemination of it and we must show our support for those who are reluctant to implement it. Most of the resistances came from the feeling that working with disabled students is a new and difficult task.







b. Developing tailored teaching programmes

Contemporary universities have multiple roles, but generally they fall in three categories: teaching/training, research and social responsibilities. The international students' exchanges are part of the teaching/training activities because they are connected to specific study programmes, but they also address higher education institutions' social role

Unfortunately, not all study programmes are accessible for international students with disabilities. The main difficulties in attending international programmes fall again in two different categories:

- General difficulties
- o The language. There are two types of situations. The course could be offered in the home country's language. In this situation the student level of understanding is limited. The course is in an international language (for example in English) and then is the levels of understanding depend on the proficiency in that language of both staff and student.
- o The academic culture. In different countries there are different values and practices of teaching, different relations between teachers and students, different requirements. Usually, the student must have a peer tutor to introduce him/her in the learning culture.
- Specific difficulties that could include: access to learning materials, need for differentiated assessment, the need to translate material et al.

Usually, we don't design courses having in mind a student with disability, an international student or an international disabled student. Hence we establish our overall objectives of the course independently from the students. The course should develop competences in students and we are already taking into consideration the assessment procedures. Then we establish the main didactical approach, we select learning materials and instruments. Although the designing stage seems a non-contextual one, it is actually not the case. When we are designing a course we should start from the assumption that we will have diverse students (some of them might be students with disability). So we have to start with question like this:



- Is there the possibility that a student could prove his/hers competences in more than one way?
- Could I design alternative assessments that are equivalent but focused on different learning styles or abilities?
 - Are my materials accessible for different students?
- Is there a possibility for the student to learn independently if it cannot participate to all activities?
- My strategies of teaching are adapted to different learning styles?

As anyone can see, the questions are not yet focused on a specific disability. The philosophy of designing universally accessible courses shadows the philosophy of universal design, so every change is for the benefit of all students not of an exclusively limited category. Each question gives the answer to a specific situation.

- **1.** Competences are generally understood as a set of specific knowledge, skills and attitudes. A course covers different parts of that set, but usually does not develop a complete set. Students with disabilities have their learning characteristics and ways of expressing themselves. It is important to offer alternatives for students with disabilities to prove their knowledge and understanding of a topic or to prove their skills.
- **2.** In most of the cases, there is a need to change the standard assessment. For example, most low vision students need large printed forms and additional time in order to complete a task. For a blind student or a student with a neurological disorder, you could allow the use of a computer or other assistive devices. For some students written exam are a major obstacle, so it could be necessary to assess the students orally.
- **3.** Different students need different study materials. Visually impaired students might need all materials in a specific format in order to convert them in audio format. A hearing impaired student might need the course materials in advance in order to learn new words.
- **4.** Most courses require that students must be present for all face to face activities. In the case of students with chronic illness there is a possibility of extend leave periods so there must be alternative for learning in that specific case.



5. Learning at university level is influenced by prior learning activities. We should expect that not all of our students benefit equally from the same strategy of teaching so we must be prepared to be flexible in our approach of teaching.

Developing tailored programmes isn't a process of reinventing curricula or higher education teaching methods. It is more an enhancement of the existing courses in order to fulfil the expectations of diverse students. Like physical accessibility, teaching and learning accessibilities follow the concept of universal design which means that they must suits everybody. In fact, it is an enhancement for regular students as well. More than that, developing adapted programmes means to comply with the latest requirements for teaching in higher education.

From an institutional change perspective, the steps to follow are:

- The syllabus format that is used by universities should have a footnote that states the availability of change in the case that a student needs it.
- The designing of the course, including learning objectives and assessment procedures should be done according to the students' needs following a procedure of consultation with them.
- The resources should be available in multiple formats, including electronic formats. For specific formats like daisy audio format or printable braille versions, there are specific software available free of charge (i.e RoboBraille from www.robobraille.com).
 - Some students may require support courses in advance.
- Tutoring activities and peer learning activities should be available.
- The condition regarding attendance to the course and alternative assessment (prolonged time, different format of evaluation et al.) should be negotiable if the student has a recommendation for it. We must note that this doesn't mean a lowering of criteria for passing the exam.
- Student feedback is valuable for future development. Designing tailored courses has the main benefit of enhancing quality of teaching and a better relation to students. As with universal design, the main benefit is for the nondisabled students, but also for those students with disabilities. The incoming student should have the information about the adapted courses that are



available as well as the institutional procedure to develop on demand course adaptation. Also, the home university needs to offer the host university the exact list of specific needs of the disabled student prior to mobility, in order to ensure a high quality of the mobility outcomes. Maybe the most important information is about the "language" accessibility of the course and teaching materials

c. Enhancing physical accessibility

REAL physical accessibility is still an issue in European universities. Although there are specific regulations regarding the accessibility, they are mostly applied for new constructed building. Even for them, the regulations are usually taking into account only physical accessibility for persons with mobility restrictions that are using a wheelchair or for a blind that uses a cane.

Physical accessibility is important because is a precondition for attending teaching activities and we should make the arrangement in order to assure the equal access to those activities. The example in the annex shows criteria of accessibilities under American ADA regulations, but they are the same for Europe too.

Most physical accessibility issues are:

- **1.** For physical impaired students:
- a. Ramps to entrance if there are stairs or obstacles (and handrails if the elevation is high);
- b. Specific parking lot;
- c. Accessible doors (both wide and easy to push from a wheelchair);
- d. Elevators or steppers if the class is in an upper floor;
- e. Access to halls (eventually a special place that could accommodate a wheelchairs);
- f. Accessible toilets;
- g. A restroom;
- h. Barriers free floors;
- i. Access to plugging for laptops and access to internet and intranet;
- j. Lower desk (especially in administrative areas);
- k. Help in library if the bookshelves are to high.





- 2. For visually impaired students
- a. Specific places for low vision students
- b. Possibilities to change lightning condition
- c. Barriers free floors and pathways
- d. Barrier free halls (especially for upper body area)
- e. A system of guidance for blind (using tactile map, electronic guidance, beacons et.al)
- f. Tactile surfaces when needed
- g. Embossed or Braille signalling at halls entrance, offices etc.
- h. Non-academic staff that could guide blind persons that are not accustomed with the space.
- **3.** For hearing impaired students
- a. Specific place in the halls (in front so he/she could lip-read the teacher)
- b. Audio system for enhancing sounds for low hearing.

The physical accessibilities could be expensive. Some of them are compulsory for every institution (i.e. accessible parking lots, ramps and handrails, accessible toilets etc), but standards differ across countries. Other should be made on demand starting from a need assessment. The main idea is to use UNIVERSAL DESIGN in order to have a physical inclusive space. The universal design is a barrier free space that is suitable for everybody, including people with disability. The universal design provides equity and flexibility usage of the building and pathways. The universal design is beneficial not only for the students with disabilities but for the entire community.





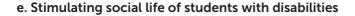


d. Creating accessible living condition (accommodation)

Accommodation and living condition for international students with disabilities is one of the key issues of successful inclusion. The living space needs not only to be physically accessible and functional, but also needs access to main resources around it like shops, health facilities, libraries, social clubs and sport facilities. Incoming international students (including those with disabilities) are hosted in universities' facilities. Most of European universities have their own living campuses in proximity to teaching buildings, but also some living campuses scattered across city. Most campuses were designed in order to concentrate all necessary facilities becoming a city inside the city. However, these campuses need to be accessible.

Apart of the physical accessibilities mentioned before, in the case that a campus belongs entirely to university it must make accessibility changes in the outdoor spaces. Most of the measures are in one of the following categories:

- Pathways. The pathways are difficult to design in universal design philosophy. Students in wheelchairs needs clear straight pathways, made of a uniform, non-texturized material. Blind students that are using white-cane for navigation needs texturized slowly rounded pathways in order to keep track. However there are compromise solutions.
- •Information and directions. Students have to orientate themselves in space until they form a mental map of the campus. The campus must have clear orientation and instruction. For international students all the information should be in a international language. Maps and tactile maps are a good way to orientate the students inside the campus. A more elegant and functional solution is to use pre-programmed beacons. The system is based on applications that read the beacons transmitted information. The main advantage of the system is that students have access not only to the physical location, but also to any supplementary information that university is offering.
- Support facilities. Support facilities are those available in site specifically for the use of students like computer rooms, recreation rooms, bistros, sport facilities, banking services etc. It is university's responsibility to develop such facilities, but that doesn't mean that all the investment should be supported by it. As all other decisions, the measures to improve the living condition of students with disabilities trigger a qualitative change for all students.



International exchange mobilities are not only academic and professional experiences for students but, even more, cultural and social ones. Students with disabilities should have access to a range of social, cultural and sports activities according to their needs and hobbies.

Social life of students is based on association, peer groups and individual relations. In order to include an international student in the social and cultural life of the host city he needs some meaningful new relation. The main actions that could be pursued in this sense by universities are:

- 1. Encouraging students' associations to include international students with disabilities in their activities. The associative life of students is very different in universities across Europe. Some of universities encourage small group association and in this case there are some association of students with disabilities. Other associations are based on specific interest and those could also include international students with disabilities. Other universities encourage wide associations for the entire institution and that are the main student representative partner. In all the cases universities could require assistance from universities in including international students with disabilities. A specific student organisation for internationally mobile students is the Erasmus+ Student Network, a best practices example in terms of addressing disability issues, as it will be seen in the final part of this Manual.
- **2.** In all countries and cities there are associations of people with specific disabilities. Also there are allied NGOs and support groups. Universities need to disseminate information about them prior to student arrival and to act as an interface between them and student. The association and NGO could provide not only psychological comfort but also some accessibility that are not available in universities.
- **3.** All international students are assigned to courses. International Relations Offices could provide support in the learning group by finding volunteers from the same class. Some universities have specific volunteering procedures and that could be employed in developing support groups for international students with disabilities. The experience gained in interacting with such students could be recognized by the universities as informal learned competencies.



- **4.** A usually underused resource is the group of identified students with disabilities. Those students have the best knowledge about support groups, accessibilities and barriers in participation in universities.
- **5.** Finally, universities could assign a department (if existent) or a member of staff to act as international students with disabilities advisor in order to create a link between students and university representatives. This task could be performed as a collaboration between Student Services Offices and International Relations Offices, should a specific Disability Office not be "in place".

Social and cultural life means also some accessible social and cultural institutions, from museums and galleries to clubs and pubs. There is a good idea to have an assessment of available places for different type of disabilities across the city. Unfortunately universities could not raise the accessibility level of a city in a short period of time, but systematic efforts have to be made, as most universities act as agents of social change in their communities. The level of accessibility of the cities has a wide range, from cities that are very friendly with people with disabilities to cities that doesn't made any effort in this direction.







2. Inform students about programmes and services

One key issue of international exchange programmes is to manage the flow of communication between university and prospective students, be they students wishing to pursue a mobility abroad (and you represent the home university), or students wishing to pursue a mobility abroad at your institutions (and you represent the host university). A student with disability requires useful information that allows him/her to make an informed decision when applying for an exchange grant. Their questions are focused on specific demands that are not the mainstream question of a regular student. Also, even if inclusion in the outgoing or incoming cohort of international students is highly important, they usually cannot rely on the experience of previous students. For all this reason the university must design specialised communication channels and procedure for the international incoming students that have a disability, as well as international outgoing students that have a disability and wish to pursue a mobility abroad.

Moreover, specific information about additional benefits for students with disabilities engaged in an international mobility (incoming or outgoing), whether connected to home or host university, are very important and should be within disabled students' reach, online and offline (including website accessibility for the blind or specific mentions of particular benefits during presentations of mobility programmes for various types of mobilities abroad). Moreover, host universities should be honest and realistic about their capacity to host disabled students. As we all know institutional, local and national regulations and legislation can be (not necessarily!) superficially "passed" without actual consideration for authentic needs of the group they target. Last, but not least, communication between home and host university is essential in organising the mobility of a disabled student and should be given proper consideration and time.





a. Accessible communication

Communication consists in a two way channel for information. We must acknowledge that from an institutional point of view we usually cast our information on a network of partners and on public sites. In other words, we design one way channel of information. The social media made possible a more dynamic approach of institutional communication. However, we should analyse three level of information:

- **1.** What kind of information do we offer to prospective incoming and outgoing students with disabilities?
- 2. How accessible is our information?
- **3.** How do we collect, analyse and respond to the feedbacks from prospective students with disabilities?

All universities try to present their academic offer, the structure of the programmes at undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral levels. Most of the information is about the content of the programmes, academic staff, procedure of enrolment and fees. All this information is good for every prospective student. There are also information about international exchanges in terms of partnership, Erasmus+ welcome weeks and other events. If universities have a centre for disability it is necessary to provide a link to it. But for prospective incoming students with disabilities there is a number of information that are sometimes left out of the website, for example, although they shouldn't (and by "left out" it might just mean that that specific information is not available in an international "language":

- What services are available for (international!) students with disabilities?
- Is there any person that in entitled to respond to specific questions of prospective international students with disabilities?
 - Is there a list of available accessible courses?
- Are there accessible living conditions for international students with disabilities (including personal assistant or human or dog quide)?
- Is university offering accessible devices (including electronic devices for converting learning materials, physical devices where necessary, assisting devices in class)?



The same is valid for prospective students with disabilities wishing to pursue a mobility abroad:

- What services/benefits/programmes are available students with disabilities in order to support mobilities abroad? Is information in this regard available in various formats?
- Is there any person that in entitled to respond to specific questions of prospective students with disabilities wishing to pursue a mobility abroad? At home university? At host university? Who is responsible for ensuring specific needs are known at host university?
- Is the university offering accessible devices (including electronic devices for converting learning materials, physical devices where necessary, assisting devices in class) for a mobile student abroad?

All this responses helps students with disabilities to decide if the exchange programme is useful and manageable. If there are no resources or some barriers in participation to exchange programme then the student must know in advance and has to possibilities. One is to renounce to apply to that exchange programme and the other is to work with university team to overcome the barriers and to develop on demand resources. In order to have accessible information we must design communication patterns that have some specific traits:

- We must offer information that is useful and as comprehensive as it is possible;
- The information should be in an accessible format (for example all images and menus are properly tagged so a screen reader could process it completely);
- We must avoid drop menus in order to find specific information because is difficult for blind students to find it on electronic devices;
- We must keep an open channel of communication so we allow students to ask question or to comment on each information we are casting;
- We must encourage students to notify us when they cannot find specific information or a barrier in applying for an exchange program.

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Collecting, analysing and responding to feedback from students is a sign of a continuous internal auditing procedure. Most universities have quality assurance procedures and internal audit of the quality of services is one of them. In the case of international prospective students with disabilities the procedures should be adapted to respond to different needs.

The internal audit is often initiated by university in order to assess its services and to implement necessary change to optimize them. In the case of students with disabilities the feedback survey is designed to assess students' needs not universities'. The aim of the survey is to identify necessary support for students with similar needs.

The internal auditing is usually a recurrent activity. In the case of auditing services for students with disabilities the surveying methods should be refined by each occasion. We should use not only close question surveys and checklists, but also open ended questions, focus groups and individual interviews. The idea is to use every situation and individual experience of international students with disabilities as an institutional learning opportunity. Moreover, specifics audit and evaluation procedures in place for "international mobility students" could engender institutional change for all disabled students.







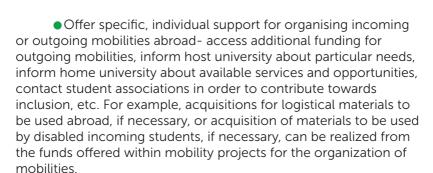
b. Transparent procedures and decision making

In an ideal situation all procedures and decision making is transparent and participative. From an institutional point of view this means that universities are public bodies regulated by joint and open decision making processes. The managerial structure of universities has an executive and a regulatory body. Students' participation to decisions is assured by their representatives in all structure of university's management. For example, in Romania all regulatory bodies of universities (i.e. Senate, faculties' council et al) must have a 25% student component. The role of students' representatives is to assure the best interest of students and to offer a student focused perspective.

In the case of students with disabilities they are often underrepresented. On the other hand, their perspective is "nothing about us without us" and universities must respect that. The logical conclusion is that universities must design procedures to make extensive and comprehensive consultations of students with disabilities and stakeholders when deciding about them. Some useful tips are:

- Have a section or forum dedicated to students with disabilities that is linked to the general university's site;
- Publish in advance a draft of every decision regarding students and allow feedback and comments;
- If possible, consult students with disabilities in person or through associations;
- If there are physical modifications of the environment or if you change the sites please ask students with different disabilities to test them:
- Allow students with disabilities to propose measures and decisions;
- Have a complaint form and solve every complaint in a reasonable time;
- Offer information concerning disability services in various "languages" for potential incoming students;
- Offer information concerning mobility programmes and accessibility for potential outgoing students;





• Selection processes for mobility programmes at home university must be transparent and additional support is compulsory in the case of students with disabilities in order to ensure equal access to opportunities for education in an intensively globalized academic world.





3. Implementing International Exchange programmes for students with disabilities

The implementation of international exchange programmes for students with disabilities is a challenge for every university. As we stated before, there is an objective to have more students with disabilities able to complete international exchange programmes. The benefits of such exchange programmes are multiple:

- The first beneficiary must be the disabled student. His/her benefits should be assessed not only in academic gains and experience but also in cultural and life skills experience. So the role of universities is not only to offer excellent training but a meaningful life and cultural experience. Personal and professional development alike need to be taken into consideration, as should be the case in regards to all mobilities.
- The secondary beneficiary is the university. Every decision making that is raising the level of inclusiveness of the university makes it a more developed, quality focused higher education institution. As we stressed several times before, the university is growing by accepting diversity.
- The tertiary beneficiaries are the next prospective students. As the university grows organically with each experience of international exchange programmes for students with disabilities, it will be easier to cope with the next students and their needs. The level of incoming and outgoing students with disabilities should rise as university gains expertise.

The implementation of these programmes falls into the role of international exchange/relations offices. In fact we could see these offices as a pivot or interface between prospective student with disabilities and the two universities involved in an exchange, their policies and politics in regards to equal acces. Thus, a set of additional special skills and knowledge could and should be internalized by incoming and outgoing exchange officers. In the classic figure of communication, both sending and receiving universities are acting as ends of communication. The rest of communication is internal. In the case of students with disabilities that role is becoming more complex because international offices



are not specialised centres for students of disabilities so they must facilitate communications between the students and specialised structures and/or gain some knowledge for the first-hand interaction that is most times highly important. Training to this end can be done through staff exchanges or specific events' participation.

a. The International relation office

If we are looking at International Relation Offices' role into organization we could easily see that they were not designed to handle students with disabilities. On the other hand they are the best resource in organizing and running the international exchange programmes. In a typical exchange program the main role of International Relations Office is to handle the organization of exchanges, from a logistical point of view, while they work closely together with faculties'/departmental coordinators in order to organize the academic dimension of them. Organizing logistical and academic inclusion of incoming students with disabilities means:

- To have useful information about accessible course availability
- To negotiate the necessary adaptation for specific students;
- To introduce and monitor the academic activity of the incoming student with disabilities;
- To offer guidance to the incoming students on contacting academic advisors and student organizations.

Moreover, for outgoing mobilities, a role of the IROs is to have first-hand knowledge on opportunities for extra-grants for students with disabilities or ways of accessing these extra-grants and help the students to access them. The main challenge, however, in organising outgoing mobilities for students with disabilities is to find partners that have a similar understanding of disability issues and that could offer similar or even better services. The IROs are the first, in most cases, advisor regarding the potential host university, as most students, including disabled ones, don't choose host universities based only on academic

performance, but also on location, previous students' experiences, opportunities for personal extracurricular development. And such information is available at the IRO. IROs have also the responsibility of selecting and empowering disabled students concerning access and pursuance of international exchange. The responsibility falls at the intersecting work of International Relations/Mobility Offices, academic staff and Faculties/Departments, and Social Services at both sending and receiving universities, but more often it is the IRO officer in charge of outgoing mobilities that can open up a door for interest in an international mobility for students with disabilities (through targeted presentations, making necessary information available, raising awareness among academic advisors, etc).





b. Erasmus Student Network

One important resources in ensuring the high quality of international mobilities in general is the support of student organisations. Such an organisation is the Erasmus Student Network, ESN. It is a network of local student organisations made up usually of former students engaged in an Erasmus mobility. Their support is, in our opinion, twofold: peer support in regards to introduction to a new academic community and culture and group support for socio-cultural inclusion. These two dimensions of their work, usually based on individual support offered through a "buddy" system are highly important for adding value to the International Relations Offices' work with exchange students or to other university support offices' work with, for example, disabled students. The Erasmus Student Network sections, along with other student organisations are invaluable for student inclusion at the host university. Moreover, their "personal touch", as their work is grounded on personal experience can benefit both outgoing and incoming students, especially with information that are not "official" or generally available, but more specific.

A useful and interesting project of the Erasmus Student Network, as a growing European network of local sections, is the mapping of universities "able" to offer disabled students the specific services they require in order to maximize their professional and personal experience abroad. It is called the Exchangeability project and we invite you to look it up and register your university if you are part of the staff, or look for useful information if you're a disabled student wishing to pursue a mobility abroad.







c. Steps to follow if wishing to go abroad and you're a disabled student

- **a.** Inform yourself- the university website or the International Relations Office, through its exchange officers, should be able to offer you the necessary information regarding opportunities for international mobilities through exchange programmes, the selection process, as well as information regarding additional funding, specific adjustments to selection evaluations based on your disability or "more accessible" universities, based on prior experience.
- **b.** Apply for a mobility abroad and go through the selection process for a grant to support it.
- **c.** Win a grant for a mobility abroad and keep in touch with the responsible international exchange officer for the nomination procedure, the Financial Contract and Learning Agreement, and other specific actions to be taken in your case (request of information from host university concerning physical accessibility, support services or course offer for specific disabilities, additional funding conditions and regulations, etc). Always remember that international exchange officers at both universities are there to support you before, during and after your mobility. A lot of transitions will be happening to you and they are able to help from an administrative point of view. Nevertheless, remember peers, family and friends for other types of support.
- **d.** Get in touch with the host university and start your communication with them (there will probably be an international exchange officer on that side as well, together with an academic advisor and other support services officers and student organisations able to offer peer support). Set up all details of your arrival. No detail is insignificant and if you meet any problems immediately get in touch with your home university international exchange officer.
- **e.** Go abroad and immerse yourself in the academic and local community, learn, grow and tackle your limits! Attend courses as well as social events, get to extend your professional network of academic staff you've been in contact with throughout your studies, as well as your personal network of friends. The first





month is the most difficult. The rest will be as smooth as the easiest thing you've ever done. You will learn that mobility programmes tend to create very welcoming multicultural communities around them. You are now the member of such a community.

- **f.** Procedures after the mobility include getting back home with your credits and your memories, as well as your Transcript of Records and your Attendance Certificate. Proceed to getting your abroad credits acknowledged at your home university, together with your academic advisor, and to your final administrative details, together with your international exchange officer.
- **g.** Remember when you went abroad and colleagues at your host university helped you with your inclusion in the local academic, student and social community? You can do the same now for other students coming to your home university. Contact your local student organisations or International Relations Offices in order to find out how you can give back to your colleagues in order to either help them settle in or help them know more about where they're going. Your input is invaluable!





What our project has done is put together some solutions four universities in different parts of Europe have managed to find in their quest for constant development in order to ensure high quality international mobilities for all students, with a special focus on students with disabilities. The work on this matter, however, is far from being done and results will constantly need to be adjusted. We will definitely do so. At the same time, administrative staff, academic staff, student organizations, national/government agencies or transnational associations in higher education should all assume and come to the realization, if they haven't already, that they have a role in supporting high quality international mobilities

Project website where you can find more: www.iciesd.uvt.ro

Project outcomes for learning and doing:

• "Evaluation" tool for HEIs' services and support to international mobilities for students with disabilities

for students with disabilities. We all have a part in this.

- "State of the Art report" concerning the issue of internationalization and social equity in regards to students with disabilities
- "White Paper" on the situation of international mobilities for students with disabilities
- "Manual" on institutional change for international exchange of students with disabilities
 - International Mobility ends Disability HEI network

Project events:

Mutual Learning Workshop: "Internationalization and equity in higher education- the case of international mobility for students with physical disabilities"

Conference: "International mobility for students with disabilities: challenges and opportunities"















RO-15 SCHOLARSHIPS AND INTER-INSTITUTIONAL COOPERATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

FINANCED BY THE EEA FINANCIAL MECHANISM 2009-2014

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