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## Adults with disabilities as students at the university

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### Abstract

This study is a combination of a literature review, collecting information in English, French and Romanian language (from journal articles, books, webpages and electronic newspaper articles) and a small investigation using a qualitative approach, through case studies of students with disabilities from Romanian universities - documented by individual interviews. In its first part the study is reviewing international studies and some universities webpages, from countries like Belgium, Canada, France, Italy, Switzerland, UK, USA and Romania, in order to see how much there is awareness and how is the response to the rights and particular needs of the adult learners with disabilities in higher education. The second part is presenting a synthesis of 6 individual case studies, focusing on the personal experiences of some young people with disabilities, in the university studies from Romania, identifying main barriers and facilitators.

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*Key words:* students with disabilities; university studies; barriers and facilitators

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## 1. Introduction

The participation of persons with disabilities to higher education institutions has started to be investigated more thoroughly in the recent years, in various countries, particularly from the West.

Studies and realities from the world and from the Romanian universities are showing that the access and participation of students with disabilities as adult learners are increasing. The recent international (UN) and EU (Commission) documents from 2006 and 2010 - when referring to the education of people with disabilities - have enhanced their right for the equal opportunities, including at higher education level.

In order to get a clearer picture on how the universities are dealing with the students having a disability, two objectives of the study were established:

- To explore how the universities are responding – at the institutional level - to the rights and needs of the adult learners with disabilities.

- To investigate the main barriers and facilitators for the access and participation of individuals with disabilities, to the university raining.

The main *methods* used were *literature review*, in three languages (English, French and Romanian), focussing in principal on internet sources and a *semi structured interview*, with 6 Romanian former students.

### 1. Main findings from literature review

#### 1.1. International documents on university studies for persons with disabilities

After 1971, the United Nations began to pay a particular attention to persons with disabilities and their human rights, education became increasingly a very important issue under various international documents.

The World Program of Action concerning Disabled Persons was adopted by the United Nations in 1982. This document had a particular statement, relevant for our investigation theme: “Member States should grant disabled persons possibilities for education at the university level” (127).

In 1993, the UN Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities stipulates that “States should recognize the principle of equal primary, secondary and tertiary educational opportunities for children, youth and adults with disabilities, in integrated settings. They should ensure that the education of persons with disabilities is an integral part of the educational system” (Rule 6. Education).

The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994) addresses university training for persons with disabilities as it follows:

“Appropriate preparation of all educational personnel stands out as a key factor in promoting progress towards inclusive schools. Furthermore, the importance of recruiting teachers with disabilities who can serve as role models for children with disabilities is increasingly recognized...

Education systems should therefore seek to recruit qualified teachers and other educational personnel who have disabilities and should also seek to involve successful individuals with disabilities from within the region in the education of special needs children (48)

In 2006, the Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities adopted by UN General Assembly – ratified by Romania as Law no.221/2010- 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 (art. 24, 5).

In 2010, The European Commission adopted a European Disability Strategy 2010-2020: A Renewed Commitment to a Barrier-Free Europe. Under the education sector the key sentence is: Promote inclusive education and lifelong learning for pupils and students with disabilities.

As a conclusion to this chronological presentation, it is obvious that the international community has paid in the last 20 years more and more attention to the rights of persons with disabilities to have access and to participate at the university education on an equal basis with others – which means equal opportunities.

## 1.2. Facts from universities around the world

The history of special education – meaning here separate schooling – has started about two centuries ago. We have chosen to make a s first a short presentation for one special university which is very well known for deaf persons and relevant for the special schooling history. The new spirit of inclusive universities was then investigated more in depth, in three languages and using three main expressions for the electronic search: inclusive universities (EN), etudiant avec handicap (FR), studenți cu dizabilitati (RO).

### 1.2.1. A special university for deaf students – Gallaudet, Washington, USA ([www.gallaudet.edu](http://www.gallaudet.edu))

Established 150 years ago (in 1864), The Gallaudet University was set up to provide instruction for aspiring teachers of the deaf and became the world's first and still only institution of higher education uniquely devoted to deaf and hard of hearing students.

Gallaudet is a bilingual, diverse, multicultural institution of higher education that ensures the intellectual and professional advancement of its students, through American Sign Language and English. Gallaudet maintains a proud tradition of research and scholarly activity and prepares its graduates for career opportunities in a highly competitive, technological, and rapidly changing world.

Graduate programs, open to deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing students (up to 5% of an entering class), include master of arts or master of science degrees, specialist degrees, certificates, and doctoral degrees in a variety of fields involving professional services to deaf and hard of hearing people.

In the fall of 2013, the Gallaudet University had 1.753 students.

Gallaudet University has more than 19.000 alumni around the world.

### 1.2.2. Towards inclusive universities

The more recent and widespread trend in university education for adults with disabilities is to be made in the mainstream higher institutions. It is worthwhile to mention first of all that there are some journals in the world promoting such attempts, towards more inclusive universities: The International Journal of Inclusive Education; The Journal of Post secondary Education and Disability (2013).

#### a. An USA example

Syracuse University (SU), New York state is committed to Inclusion and Accessibility. Syracuse University values diversity, and is committed to inclusion and seeks to provide access for all people, including those with disabilities. The website [www.syr.edu](http://www.syr.edu) serves as a clearinghouse for information on disability and accessibility at SU. Here is some information on services available:

- The Office of Disability Services
- The staff in the Office of Disability Services (14 persons) is responsible for coordinating access for students with disabilities through an interactive process involving the Office Disability Services, the student, and when necessary, representatives from other University departments. Services for students with documented disabilities – are offered to students individually to provide support services and accommodations that are necessary and appropriate; such services may include, but are not limited to: academic modifications, exam accommodations, note-taking services, alternate format of printed materials, interpreter services/captioning, assistive technology, counseling and advocacy.

The Office of Disability Services provides accommodations and support services for students with a range of disabilities including:

- physical disabilities
- sensory disabilities
- learning disabilities and ADD/ADHD
- neurological disabilities such as TBI
- mental health disabilities
- The Syracuse University *Access Map & Guide* has been prepared primarily as a guide for visitors, students, faculty, and staff with *mobility impairments*.

- *Adaptive aids* - A number of adaptive aids related to safety are available for students with disabilities living in residence halls. Adaptive aids include adaptive alarms, adaptive doorbells, and adaptive telephones.
- Information regarding *the rental and repair of wheelchairs*, vendors who sell wheelchairs and information about businesses that provide vehicle modification.

Syracuse University (SU) seems to be one of the leading higher education institutions on disability and inclusion approaches.

The Taishoff Center for Inclusive Higher Education at SU is offering support through the inclusive/individual support model where individualized services and accommodations are provided as students take college classes based on personal choices and preferences.

Inclusive adaptations/ modifications vary across different universities in the USA.

*b. Universities of Quebec, from Montreal, Canada (à Trois-Rivières, Sherbrooke, the Politehnic, Laval), are offering various kinds of support for students with disabilities (www.uqtr.ca).*

The services for students with disabilities are facilitating the entrance, allowing the continuation of the studies and maximizing the success opportunities for students with a disability or a learning disorder. A student in such a situation is invited to contact a counselor, in order to establish an adapted service plan, preparing the university entering and the necessary resources.

Montreal universities are addressing the support needs of students with learning disabilities, ADHD, mental health, hearing and visual impairment, physical disabilities, autism.

During the period 2001 – 2011 the number of students benefiting from such support services has grown from 17 to 188.

*c. France*

In **France**, after new *legislation that was passed in 2005 in favour of persons with disabilities*, there is a governmental webpage only for students with disabilities ([www.handi-u.fr](http://www.handi-u.fr)). The information provided on this page shows that the number of students with disabilities at the university has increased and there are new measures provided for better receiving, supporting and pedagogical adaptations for these students, such as:

- receiving these students inside the university buildings (someone is responsible from the university side);
- developing for each student a personalised training project;
- monitoring the student during the university studies;
- working with each student for the vocational integration;
- making available all the means needed (logistically);
- establishing partnerships with other structures which could support (governmental or nongovernmental);
- disseminating such info at the level of high secondary schools (for future students).

**L'École des hautes études en sciences sociales (l'EHESS) from Paris**/[www.ehess.fr](http://www.ehess.fr)) has a service for students with disabilities which is offering:

- a) human support (for procedures related to enrollment, social security, transport, persons to take notes, interprets tutors, giving support in the library etc
- b) technical aids such as: laptops equipped with software like zoom-text, vocal synthesis (JAWS), acces to scanner and printer use (OMNIPAGE), Easybook M3, etc
- c) exams adaptations (extratime, secretarial support, etc)

At the **University Blaise Pascal Auvergne** there is a free support service (SUH) operational since 2001, offering physical support (accompagnement) material or pedagogical. During 2011-2012 school year SUH has identified 201 pupils in the high schools and has monitored 87.

([www.onisep.fr/content/download/610208/12121325/file/leny\\_etudiant\\_avec\\_un\\_handicap\\_auvergne.pdf](http://www.onisep.fr/content/download/610208/12121325/file/leny_etudiant_avec_un_handicap_auvergne.pdf))

Similar arrangements can be found at the **universities of Cergy-Pontoise** ([www.u-cergy.fr](http://www.u-cergy.fr)), **Lumiere de Lyon** ([www.univ-lyon2.fr](http://www.univ-lyon2.fr)), **Avignon** ([www.univ-avignon.fr](http://www.univ-avignon.fr)), **Savoie University - Chambéry**, **Annecy** ([/www.univ-savoie.fr](http://www.univ-savoie.fr)).

#### d. Belgium

In Belgium at Liege University ([www.ulg.ac.be](http://www.ulg.ac.be)) there are similar arrangements for students with sensory limitations, mental health or psychical problems or dyslexic students. Some *other adaptations* might be here:

- extending the time of studies from one to two years;
- specific manners of organising instruction and learning, assesment and exams (changing oral to written or viceversa);
- individual administrative support etc.

#### e. Switzerland

In Switzerland, at Geneva University ([www.unige.ch](http://www.unige.ch)) particular information for students with disabilities is made available, concerning acomodation, social security, access to different buildings, links with various organisations and structures. An useful document seems to be „*le fiche de contact*”- a *liaison document* (confidential) used for mentioning the personal data, the disability type and anticipated difficulties

#### f. Italy

In Italy, during the recent years the access opportunities for persons with disabilities to academic education in Italy have greatly increased, thanks to some legislative initiatives that supported the implementation of important measures to protect the right to study. The Centre for Inclusion of Students with Disability and Dyslexia of Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan is presented as an example case (Magillini, & Molteni, 2013).

### 1.3. The Romanian situation in universities

The Education Law from 2011 has introduced for the first time in Romania some provision for students with disabilities at the university.

*The Education Law (no.1/2011)* has potentially modern principles which are guiding the whole educational system, comprising higher education: *social inclusion, equity, equal opportunities*. The law has particular providings relevant for our intestigation topic:

- In higher education discrimination is not allowed...(art. 118, 2)
- „Students with physical disabilities have the right to adapted acces routes in all university spaces, as well as conditions for normal academic, social and cultural activities, under the framework of higher education institutions...”(art.118, 3).

### 1.4. Findings from projects

*University education for persons with disabilities* (<http://eupd.ro/> - 20.12.2013) – a project financed from EU Social Funds aims at integrating persons with disabilities into the university environment, by creating a performant e-learning system, as part of a development and implementing program. The project is implemented in partnership by Education Ministry (as beneficiary), three universities („Valahia”, Targoviște, “Lucian Blaga” Sibiu, „Dunarea de Jos” Galati) and others.

„*Accesible courses for blind students*” (<http://www.incluziune.org/competitie/candidati?item=fcac695db02687ffb7955b66a43fe6e6> – 9.01.2014)

In this project, implemented by the Foundation „Traveling book” (Cartea calatoare) and financed by Orange Foundation, 5 universities have come together as a network, which aims at making more accesible the content of courses and books for blind students learning at:

- Babes Bolyai University – Cluj Napoca;
- Alexandru Ioan Cuza University – Iași;
- Bucharest University;
- TimișoaraWest University;

- Oradea University.

Each of these five universities has established a center, with necessary equipment, for allowing the work, using students volunteers. In two of these centers there are Braille printers. There are 50 students beneficiaries (in all 5 universities).

#### *Adapted Physical Activities (APA)*

The program will ensure the transfer of swiss expertise on APA to Romanian universities, special schools, institutions and civil society organisations. The Romanian universities involved are:

- Universitatea Națională de Educație Fizică și Sport București
- Universitatea Babeș-Bolyai Cluj-Napoca
- Universitatea Alexandru Ioan Cuza Iași
- Universitatea de Vest Timisoara
- Universitatea din Pitești ([www.specialolympics.ro/content/activit-i-fizice-adaptate](http://www.specialolympics.ro/content/activit-i-fizice-adaptate))

### *1.5. Some findings from interviewing individual students*

In order to follow the the second objective - *to investigate the main barriers and facilitators for the access and participation of individuals with disabilities, to the university raining* - 6 individual interviews were organised. The persons interviewed were students or former students from Ovidius Constanta University and from Bucharest University. Only actual students or graduates after 2000 were chosen. Three main types of disability at students were perceived: blindness (2 participants), motor disability (2) and hearing disability (2). The age range of the 4 men and 2 women participants was between 26 and 41.

The university studies followed by the persons interviewed were: mathematics, psychology, special education and social work. Two of the participants have followed master courses as well and one is actually now a PhD student. A summary of the analysed responses is following (based on one or several ideas expressed by each participant, for each question):

#### *a) Powerful impressions about the university time (some relevant responses)*

„Only when I have finished the university studies I realized the difficulties she had during”.

„It was a very difficult time (around the year 2000, in one particular faculty)”;

“I remember university time as an opening, more freedom in the student life (comparing with secondary school)”;

“I have received a lot of support from peers”...

„A time of intense learning and strong internal fight (to demonstrate that I am strong)...

#### *b) Reasons for deciding to enter an university*

Participants have expressed a double motivation:

A major one linked to the disability situation (to overcome it, to prove that is possible to be a student even having a disability);

A secondary one based on particular reasons for the domain of study.

#### *c) Main barriers when entering universities*

Lack of accessible information (in alternative formats);

Lack of physical access (ramps, adapted toilets etc);

Communication with peers – at the beginning;

The negative attitude of some teachers and managers...

Various technical aspects (linked to the particular type of disability limitations);

The need to move between different locations;

Emotional adjustment to new challenges;

Lack of guidance and orientation inside university...

#### *d) Main facilitators at the entrance*

A friend (a boy or a girl);

The wife;

The father;

The family and colleagues;

The advice of a teacher;

The self determination to succeed;

The own desire to overcome the disability condition.

e) *Main barriers during the studies*

Lack of physical access (ramps, elevators, adapted tables, doors, toilets etc)  
 Accommodating with the big rooms for courses – it was difficult to make the auditory reception  
 Oral exams (for hearing problems);  
 The need to move between buildings, including for the practical work (in most individual cases);  
 A mixed groups of students (different from the usual one) when doing practice...  
 The research part of the diploma paper (particularly for a visual disability);  
 No (or not enough) vocal description (for a blind student);  
 Social interactions with colleagues (for hearing problems).

f) *Main facilitators during the studies*

Support from some colleagues and teachers (3 responses);  
 Being serious and hard work (2 responses)  
 Social links (colleagues) and friendships (even now, after graduation);  
 The family and colleagues support.

g) *Recommendations for the universities*

Making the buildings and locations more accessible (particularly for wheelchair users);  
 A well planned and organized institutional support regarding students with a disability;  
 When getting inscribed as a student the type of disability should be specified in order for teachers to find the proper methods, to facilitate adapted learning;  
 Taking into account particular disabilities when making the timetable;  
 Providing proper support, where the disability requires, for ensuring equal opportunities;  
 Adapted procedures for students with disabilities (taking into account the disability type);  
 Providing someone competent to offer advice (technically, morally, with empathy);  
 More flexibility in teaching to students (ways of communication) and assessment... alternatives;  
 For deaf students is very important to have teachers (or interpreters for sign language);

h) *Recommendations in particular for visual disabilities:*

- Proper electronic support;
- Audio description, when necessary;
- Internet access makes easier the transfer of information;
- Access technology at the university.

## 2. Conclusions and recommendations

More advanced levels of awareness and solid support systems (including accessibility, reasonable adaptations, counseling and various resources) are identified in the developed countries universities. The emerging issue seems to be in the West the idea of “inclusive universities”.

Some of the Romanian universities have started to deal with this issue in the recent years.

Individual cases of such students in Romanian universities are rich in experiences showing both barriers and facilitators from their personal history. Barriers and difficulties seems to be greater than facilitators, in most cases. The facilitators identified are rather showing an individual approach, and very little an institutional one.

The recent interest of some Romanian universities regarding support for students with disabilities is encouraging.

The conclusions drawn are clearly showing and inform the need in Romania for the following **recommendations:**

- a) More research and documentation regarding the students with disabilities;
- b) Positive institutional measures at the university level, such as:
  - A formal institutional awareness concerning the diversity of student’s needs, including those with disabilities;
  - An institutional structure (a centre, service etc) to identify and respond to the particular needs of students with various disabilities.

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