



Overcoming the fear of the unknown

Young people with disabilities in the mobilised world

By Triin Ilves

Going abroad is a complex undertaking for people with disabilities. Regular problems double once you have to think of how to access a building, where to live or how to move from one destination to another.

Before starting the big adventure abroad, young people with disabilities have to think of all the previously mentioned access needs, but this doesn't mean that the experience itself should be limited by issues such as the existence of wheelchair ramps or audible traffic lights. Even more so, these questions should definitely not dictate who gets to participate in various mobility programmes, whether it's an exchange to another university, an internship in a company or going abroad to work.



Lana Nikolic and Agnes Sarolta Fazekas

STAGE 2:
BUILD THE NETWORK
BRICK BY BRICK

There are also many opportunities that are specifically designed to make going abroad easier. Although in many cases the question of resources, especially financial, is the biggest obstacle, there are additional options for young people with disabilities.

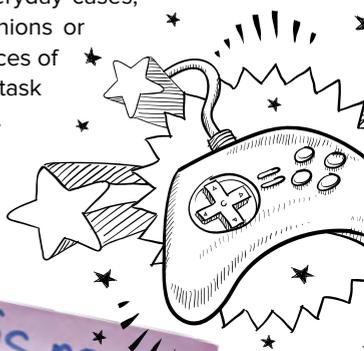
One of the biggest mobility vehicles – the Erasmus programme – offers extra grants for people with disabilities. However, there are still many who are not aware of this, according to Agnes Fazekas.

In 2012-13,¹ 388 students with special needs or disabilities received additional funding to take part in Erasmus exchanges, compared to 336 students in 2011-12. This is only .14% percent of the total Erasmus student population.

Fazekas added that there are also many other grant or funding options and she can see that the network of information and opportunities is becoming wider every day. There are also many pioneering countries in the area, such as Ireland and the UK, but she pointed out that in everyday cases, universities' welfare or disability officers in student unions or student exchange offices are most often the best sources of help for young people with disabilities. The important task here is to find that key person and be active yourself.

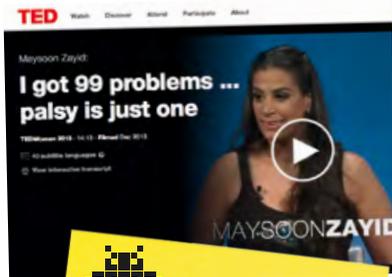


Lana Nikolic, right



There is no such thing in life as normal.
Morrissey

STAGE 3:
BECOME THE PROACTIVE LINK
IN THE NETWORK CHAIN



Clearly, young people with disabilities face more challenges when they participate in mobility programmes. In addition to the regular application process, the person doesn't need to handle just the additional paperwork, but also he or she must identify the exact needs and requirements of everyday life.

Agnes Sarolta Fazekas, Member of EAIE ACCESS (European Association for International Education Steering Group Access and Diversity) Expert Community, explained that in the application process, a lot depends on the different information the participant or the disability office procures.

It's important to combine information with dialogue. Both the home and host universities need to work together in order to figure out how to best meet access needs.

"Essentially it's bilateral co-operation", said Fazekas, "but you can't forget to include the young person".

What are the requirements in terms of accommodation and study materials to fully participate in classes? A lot of these questions are often answered without consulting the young person, thus creating a situation where access requirements are handled differently than really needed, Fazekas said. Often the situations don't even require substantial changes, but rather small adjustments, Anna Rita de Bonis from VIEWS (Visually Impaired's Educational World Support) Italy explained.

"Every disability type is a story of its own, so preparation is individual," Lana Nikolic from Serbia said. "Predict some of the basic possible problem situations, and make up solutions, try to be prepared as much as possible," she added.

Anna Rita de Bonis pointed out the importance of promotion and sharing the information in more channels. Addressing both the institutions as well as the individuals, it's not enough to merely send out the word to particular participants. In various awareness campaigns, organisations could also include media channels with more coverage.

Linking the personal experience to a wider campaign, young people with disabilities can also find motivation from other people's experiences. "If they can do it, why can't I do it?" However, this is just one part of it, at other times the promotion involves specific issues. For example, on many occasions it depends on the person with a disability to advocate for vocal synthesiser software that allows companies to hire blind people.

Naturally, not all situations can be solved with the help of technology – hiring personal assistants or creating buddy systems require more effort and resources, but once the system is established, it's almost guaranteed that it becomes "the new normal".

1. Erasmus 2012-13: the figures explained. http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-14-476_en.htm

Overcoming the fear of the unknown

Agnes Sarolta Fazekas (left) and Beata Bószó (right)



STAGE 4: MAKE OTHERS SEE THE PERSON, NOT THE DISABILITY



Illustration by Sirri Taimla

However, a simple “no” can still end many journeys. In reality, applying to various internships or work positions in companies can end up with rejection.

In many cases, the river of job opportunities is too narrow for people with disabilities. Moreover, the companies have to start seeing the person first.

“It’s important to apply a ‘yes’ attitude,” Agnes Fazekas said. Only then is it possible to overlook the rejections and swim towards the big fish, in order to become one yourself.

Internship opportunities offer the first real employment experience and are often the building blocks of a successful career. However, Agnes Fazekas stresses that it’s more difficult to do an internship than a study semester abroad because companies often do not have partnerships as universities do. Yet many firms are becoming more aware of how to include a diverse workforce.

“Nobody negates the fact of disability, but it is very important that people understand that a person does something not despite a disability, but in equilibrium with it,” Lana Nikolic said. Sometimes the refusal to employ a person is simple prejudice, other times employers think that they can’t provide a suitable workspace.

According to Anna Rita de Bonis, various associations should also work more towards awareness and change the discourse that a person with a disability is a less-qualified worker.

“Teaching people from companies or programmes about people with disabilities, what they can give and share, and about their professional competences and capacities leads to understanding and wider recognition,” Nikolic added.

The reality in many countries “looks like a still from a science fiction movie,” Lana Nikolic noted.

“We [in Serbia] are all in that youth with disabilities should have equal opportunities. But in reality it is so complicated that no one knows how and where to start. The main problem is that there is no recipe how to act, every disability type is unique in itself,” she added.

Anna Rita de Bonis sees some similarities. She explained that in Italy the state supports people with money, but there are not that many services that could also lead to more inclusion and equal opportunities.

However, giving out money without a cause does not erase the problem. Instead, it should be given to research and promotion. Lana Nikolic underlines the need for comprehensive research projects to find out the most common necessities – training, programmes, support structures and other things that lead to overall empowerment.

Both Agnes Fazekas and Anna Rita de Bonis suggested focusing on information sharing that could encourage and motivate young people.

STAGE 6: FIND AND SHARE THE BEST PRACTICES AMONG YOUR PEERS

More good examples emerge every day – Agnes Fazekas recommends looking at EU-wide companies or cases from within the network of relevant organisations. There are also many EU grants to support creating more inclusive work environments, she added.

Listing various initiatives – AHEAD WAM (Association for Higher Education Access & Disability Programme Willing Able Mentoring) from Ireland or ENIL (European Network on Independent Living) Youth Network – Fazekas said that employers are learning what can be done in order to make more the work environment more inclusive.

A lot of ideas come from the disabled people themselves. Adjusting the workplace is usually far easier than the companies imagine. Anna Rita de Bonis gave an example of vocal synthesiser software that lets blind people “see” things on screen.

Lana Nikolic emphasised that empowering youth with disabilities to believe that they can do a lot of things, and that disability is not an obstacle, is a force that pushes them forward.

“When they understand that they will become braver to try and apply to programmes or jobs,” she added.

Agnes Fazekas noted that the concept of a “normal” student doesn’t exist anymore. Therefore, institutions need to overcome the fear of dealing with the unknown. The knowledge of information and support structures gives more independence and encourages a young person with a disability to take steps towards joining the mobility programme.

