Chapter 9

“I Have Never Met a Student With a Disability in My 15 Years of Teaching”: Accessibility of Higher Education for Students With Disabilities – A Case Study From Abroad

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ABSTRACT

The study presents results of a survey concerning students with disabilities, their chances to study at universities, and accessibility of higher education in the Czech Republic. We conducted interviews of academic employees at Jan Evangelista Purkyne University in Ústí nad Labem in the Czech Republic when I worked there. The chapter reveals the current state of accessible higher education. Further, it shares results from research conducted among existing faculty and administration about their attitudes towards students with disabilities as well as about their preparedness to accommodate candidates and to modify their own courses. We revealed intensive attitudinal barriers that existed among faculty. Some of the respondents even expressed an opinion that disabled students should be excluded from higher education. Professors and instructors were not aware of the needs of students with disabilities or how to include them in the learning process. They never thought about how inaccessible their courses were regarding representation, expression, engagement, or assessment.

PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

There are about 10 percent of people with disabilities in the world population. Based on that number, people with various types of disabilities should also encompass approximately 10% of all persons studying colleges and universities. Optimistically, in the United States this number is slightly higher. According to the National Center for Education Statistic (2014), a little over 11 percent of undergraduates in both...
2007–08 and 2011–12 survey period reported having a disability. The percentage of post-baccalaureate students who reported having a disability in 2011–12 was five percent. In the Czech Republic, the statistical data on the number of people with disabilities differ in social, health or cultural contexts. Overall, Troska and others estimate that there are 1.3 million people with disabilities based on a 10 percent estimate where 10 percent is the average projection of other European countries (Troska, 1999).

There are several sources of disability statistics. The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs collects data on disability pension beneficiaries, and the Ministry of Health collects data on those receiving health insurance (temporarily unemployed) beneficiaries. According to the Czech Statistical Office, there were 563,000 people receiving disability pensions in 2014 (Czech Statistical Office, 2015).

**Czech Disability and Education Law**

The Czech law does not include a coherent definition of disability and/or “persons with disabilities”. People with disabilities are referred to as “persons with changed labor ability” in employment law (Labor Act No. 435/2004), “invalids” in social policy (Social Act No. 100/1988, amended in 2004 to “people with health disadvantages”), “people with health impairments” in health policy (Health Act No. 47/1997), “people with partial/full invalidity pension” (Social Security Act No. 155/1995) or “children with special needs” in education policy (Education Act No. 561/2004). To decide whether a person is disabled, a team of medical staff called “Medical Advisory Committee” assesses the person’s condition and decides whether the applicant should receive one of three types of Disability ID Cards. These three types are: “very severely disabled with a companion” (for example for blind, deaf or physically impaired children under 15); “very severely disabled”; and “severely disabled”. All three types include various social, economic, transportation and cultural advantages and discounts for holders (Medical Advisory Committee, 2003).

The Education Act No. 29 of 1984 (amended as No. 561 of 2004 and recently amended in 2015) aims at integrating children with disabilities at regular schools whenever possible. The wording “whenever possible” has been problematic since principals of schools could claim that it is not possible to include a child based on objective factors (inaccessibility of building) or subjective personal beliefs. If the child’s disability hinders integration, there are special schools for deaf blind, mentally or learning disabled children. Governmental Educational Ordinances of 1992, 1994, 1998 provide for Individual Education Plans, Special Education Centers, assistive technologies and other support that are provided by the state. In reality, integration varies from school to school, depending on the decision of a particular school and its principal who decides whether or not a child with a disability is accepted into the mainstream education process. The newest amendment of 2015 introduces the concept of inclusion to the old Education Act that talked about integration (when the student with disability has to adapt, the school and teachers make no changes or modifications). As of September 1, 2016, schools are required to accept children with various disabilities, including children with mild mental difficulties. This is geared especially towards children of Roma origin who were labeled as such and placed in special schools. Many teachers expressed concerns and disbelief that students with disabilities can be educated in mainstream schools. They present an ableist thinking, discrimination based on someone’s disability. These people claim that the problem lies in the student and their disability and that they have to change/adjust to the mainstream able-bodied society. However, there are also educators who value such process and see the benefits of
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