



## The GAPS Think Piece – 20

# Towards a more inclusive international mobility across Europe

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### Relevance of the topic

Among the broad goals of the European Union are to strengthen social cohesion, including fostering the inclusion of people with disabilities in higher education. In Europe, people with disabilities are still facing barriers to tertiary education and they are affected by limited access to the labour market (69% of all Europeans employed, compared to 19% of disabled). They are also exposed to a much higher risk of poverty (62% live below the poverty line) (EDF, 2009). In education and training policy the questions of access and inclusion of under-represented groups (including people with disabilities) have become increasingly important. The topic is on the agenda not only because equality legislation states that institutional systems of Member States should follow the European Union social dimension plans, but also because it is as important for the economy to employ people with disabilities as it is for the people themselves to be employed. Studies have shown that participating in higher education and in international study or training programs prepares all students to work in an interconnected and complex world. It gives them opportunity for self-development and to gain skills that enhance their future employability (EAIE, n.a). In the current labour market atmosphere, where there is more competition among employees to fill jobs, greater opportunities should be fostered for people with disabilities to participate in and gain access to employment. This becomes even more important when we consider groups at risk of social exclusion, such as people with disabilities. It is essential that students with disabilities be given the opportunity to access and participate in the whole spectrum of higher education experience.

### Looking at terminologies and the paradigm shift to disability

Before exploring the scope of this topic, it is essential to have an overview regarding the terminology and a paradigm shift for looking at disability. "The term 'persons with disabilities' is used to apply to all persons with disabilities, including those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various attitudinal and environmental barriers, hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. However, this minimum list of persons who may claim protection under the Convention (refers to UNCRPD) does not exhaust the categories of the disabilities which fall within it nor intend to undermine or



stand in the way of a wider definition of disabilities under national law (such as persons with short-term disabilities). The drafters of this Convention (refers to UNCRPD) were clear that disability should be seen as the result of the interaction between a person and his or her environment. Disability is not something that resides in the individual as the result of some impairment. UNCRPD recognizes that disability is an evolving concept and that legislation may adapt to reflect positive changes within society "(UNEnable, 2007). The earlier approach – the medical model has seen the person with a disability as the centre of the problem that needs to be fixed or changed - sees services in relation to the dependence of a person with disability. The emphasis is on the person's inability and what the person cannot do. Unfortunately, this is still embedded in several places across the world, looking at persons with disability. Under the current, social model, disability is seen as a social construction. The social model makes a clear distinction between impairment (the condition, illness or loss/lack of function) and disability (barriers and discrimination). The social model enables people with disabilities to express their situation in terms of human rights and as an issue of equality (Arlene-Kennedy, et al, 2006).

### **Challenges and enablers of access & inclusion of mobility programs for persons with disabilities**

International experience is becoming essential to prepare students to work in an interconnected world. The proportion of persons with disabilities is still very low in tertiary education and in study abroad programs worldwide (OECD, 2010). There are many challenges for *all* students to participate in exchange programs such as financial constraints, an adequate level of foreign language skills, convertibility of knowledge and credits transfer across Higher Education Institutions in Europe. Students with disabilities encounter additional barriers. While access and non-discrimination policies are removing obstacles for these students, there are still barriers such as challenges in policy implementation, difficulties of availability and portability of support services between countries, financial constraints to cover access needs, barriers of ICT and the built environment, lack of adequate information or insufficient cooperation within and between Higher Education Institutions when it comes to supporting international students with disabilities (Fazekas, 2013). It is time to truly exploit the wealth of knowledge and rethink what makes a program inclusive and of benefit to all. As study abroad programs are not fully adapted yet to the needs of disabled people, professionals sometimes lack the relevant knowledge to make exchange programs more inclusive. Exchange program organizers have a very important responsibility in developing adequate perception and in learning to encourage and manage diversity.

### **Policy framework in a nutshell**



Beyond economic cooperation, the idea of cooperation in education, training and youth policy emerged only with the Maastricht Treaty (1992) and then the reconfirmed Amsterdam Treaty (1997). While respecting the sovereignty of member states, the community's policy has a role in promoting cooperation and creating action programs for the whole community. Consummation of the process in education occurred through the so-called "Bologna Treaty" and the "Bologna Process" which started in 1999 (Sziklai, 2012). Integration of the European Community has occurred gradually and the social dimension has become more relevant in the actions of the community. The broad field (included disability) of equality policy (although equality among men and women has been there before) was officially emphasized and included in the Amsterdam Treaty in 1997. But social and education policies remain the responsibility of EU member states and there are limited tools to intervene from the EU level. Because of the EU's limited legal tools, it uses the Open Method Coordination as an "external legal tool" among others in the field of education and social inclusion (Bókai, et al. 2010). Within the ERASMUS scheme for people with disabilities, education, social dimension and disability related legislation and practices must be considered in conjunction. Without a comprehensive list, documents such as the European Disability Strategy, EU2020 strategy, Education & Training Strategy 2020, the Social Dimension in the Bologna Process and UNCRPD, which were signed and ratified by the European Union as an entity, should be considered as a package when it comes to mobility programs for persons with disabilities (EDF, 2011).

### **The former Erasmus and current Erasmus+ Programme in Higher Education**

The European flagship project, the former Erasmus and current Erasmus+ in Higher Education has been running since 1987. Erasmus+ is the new European Union program for education, training, youth and sport for 2014-2020, joining seven existing EU programs covering all sectors of education. ERASMUS+ in Higher Education enables students to study and/or train abroad for up to 12 months within each study cycle including Bachelor, Master and Doctorate Programs. It aims to boost skills and employability. It promotes cooperation between higher education institutions and enterprises or organizations and contributes to the development of a pool of well-qualified, open-minded and internationally experienced young people as future professionals (Erasmus Programme, n.a).

### **Supporting staff and students with disabilities**

The former Erasmus and current Erasmus+ programme pay particular attention to ensuring that students and staff with disabilities can take full



advantage of the European mobility arrangements, by providing supplementary grants to cover access needs (European Commission, n.a).

The supplementary grant is a great tool but faces limitations at the level of inter-institutional cooperation in Erasmus+. Disability falls within non-discrimination, data-protection and confidentiality and the supplementary documents are also found under confidentiality and data protection. Out of respect for data protection, the European Commission collects data from National Agencies about all Erasmus mobility, but only about the number of students receiving supplementary grants. In academic year 2012/2013, only 388 students received a supplementary Erasmus grant – this represents only 0.14 % of all Erasmus students (European Commission, 2013). While there is an increase over previous years, there is significant room for improvement. The allocation and management procedure of the supplementary grants varies among the Erasmus+ countries. From the National Agencies' perspective there is a challenge with how to distribute the supplementary grant among the numerous applicants while fulfilling the access needs of all applicants. From the applicant's perspective, it is difficult to pre-plan the access needs related budget and calculate all the unknown costs, which can immediately emerge during the stay abroad.

### **Terminologies within former Erasmus & current Erasmus+ for Higher Education**

The situation of those considered as "people with disabilities" is diverse among the EU member states and countries involved in the Erasmus+ Programme. It is understandable that the Erasmus Programme would like to use a broad framework to cover all, who might be entitled for the supplementary grant. In 2014/2015, a Working Group was established for *Erasmus+ Higher Education* focusing on students with disabilities /special needs. Outcomes from this working group included recommendations for National Agencies and Higher Education Institutions on the inclusion of disabled students and the implementation of a wording change from *special needs* to *students and staff with physical, mental or health related conditions*. (European Commission, 2016). However, it is important to highlight, that the "special needs" term is still noticeable in European policy papers, especially within several EU level Education and Tertiary Education related documents. However, looking at the Directorate General of Social Affairs and Employment, the "persons with disabilities" terminology is in use and EU bodies' approach to the target group remains varied and inconsistent. It is also important to re-consider the term "special needs" as it can be considered to be euphemistic. It's essential that people are aware of the meaning behind the words. People with disabilities are the same as everyone else in that they are not necessarily superhuman. "Special needs" terminology is to be avoided and EU jargon made more coherent through the



use of the term “people with disability”. It is crucial to understand and distinguish the difference between special needs and access needs. The explanation below gives a good insight into why language is so important and its power. Some individuals may feel that these language considerations are unnecessary. However, it's important to keep in mind that offensive language is offensive for a reason; specific words and concepts used to describe disability all have their own histories and implications for people with disabilities. Being "politically correct" does not make a term automatically inoffensive to a group of people; indeed, many "politically correct" words and phrases used to refer to disability can actually be insulting to some of the people to whom these labels are attached. Saying "differently abled" or "special," for instance, may seem on the surface to convey that someone with a disability has positive qualities about them. However, terms like these tend to be euphemistic, and are not frequently used by the people to whom they refer (Linton, 1998, pp. 14-16). “The Disabled People's movement prefers to use the term access needs when talking about the support that people may need to do things. This is for four main reasons: (1) Providing impairment details does not tell you what someone needs because everyone is individual and how their impairment affects their ability to function is different, so people with the same impairment may have completely different needs; (2) there are many access needs that are not necessarily apparent to non-disabled people when given impairment labels, for example, a wide range of people may require a quiet room or an accessible bathroom, not merely those with autism or wheelchair users; (3) everybody has needs, while the needs of disabled people may involve more adjustments. Many of the adjustments that benefit disabled people are equally useful to nondisabled people; (4) many disabled people/those with impairments do not identify as having special needs, so when asked that question will assume that it doesn't apply to them. This is particularly the case when definitions are not provided. In the disability movement questions around access needs will tend to be framed as: tell us what you need to be included in this activity? What are your access needs? Do you have any needs which may need to be accounted for when thinking about x?” (Todd, 2014).

### **Overview of Practices**

Many studies highlight that the teaching and learning environment of higher education still needs to better accommodate the needs of disabled students. Disabled students face ongoing barriers to receiving adequate support from their home higher education institution. Participating in mobility programs may be “*the tip of the iceberg*” for academic institutions given that so many factors (including risk factors) must be well considered because of inaccessible settings and the context for mobility programs in the host environment. Barriers experienced by disabled students such as limited or no access to adapted learning materials at the host environment or different



levels of support services at the host Higher Education Institution, limited access to sign language interpretation, challenges of budget, and legislation concerning personal assistance while abroad, have all been recorded within European projects such as ExchangeAbility, running since 2010 (De La Rosa, 2011), and in other research (Fazekas, 2013). Challenges, such as disability-related stereotypes, presumptions, and negative attitudes towards disabled students and differing levels or lack/limited availability of support mechanisms at higher education institutions, may have a negative impact on students' well-being and academic performance. Poor communication with disabled students within and among Higher Education Institutions is among the greatest barriers singled out by students. In many cases, international and disability offices do *not* have contact with each other and the student may be caught in between these offices with inadequate information. Students report that, in some cases, even without access needs assessments, institutions may refuse to welcome them or suggest they approach another university to apply for a mobility program. These examples underline the potential to provide learning to higher education professionals, staff and mobility organizers, sharing knowledge and organizing staff development trainings about inclusion, disability, diversity that may serve to address fears and presumptions about disability and increase faculty and staff open-mindedness to student diversity. Possibly the biggest challenge remaining is sign language interpretation and access for support persons /personal assistants (or any equivalent) who are supporting the disabled student to fully participate and enjoy the whole college experience and everyday life while abroad (Fazekas, 2013). The European Union of Deaf Youth (EUDY) and European Deaf Student Union (EDSU) have also indicated in consultations organized by the ExchangeAbility and MappED projects of the Erasmus Student Network, that deaf participants are the most likely to be excluded from mobility arrangements because of financial constraints and limitations of the supplementary grant and the difficulty of finding an available and suitable sign language interpreters to provide support within a given study field during the entire mobility period (ESN, 2017). Testimonies of disabled students reveal that, in countries where the personal assistance system does not exist within the social policy framework, family members or friends tend to support the person for the mobility (Fazekas, 2013). In countries where a personal assistance system is in place, the question is about the cross-national mobility as usually the personal assistance system is tailored to its national setting to support disabled persons. Therefore, there are still unresolved areas in policy implementation for short-term study mobility and traineeship arrangements when it comes to the free movement of European disabled citizens (EDF, 2011). Additional examples, like covering health insurance for disabled students for short-term study or traineeship mobility (3-6 month or up to 12 months) show a high degree of variability depending on national legislation as to how the disabled person's health insurance and equipment-related insurance is arranged. While the Erasmus



Special Need Supplementary Grant is definitely a good tool to contribute to covering the access needs of a disabled person, there are still these areas, as mentioned, that can hardly be covered by the supplementary grant (Fazekas, 2013). Various consultations with stakeholders from the Higher Education and Disability Sector – such as the roundtable event on the portability of personal assistance at the European Parliament in 2014 - highlighted that there are still policy implementation barriers and financial and human resources constraints that stand in the way of realizing support for disabled students within the mobility programs and when moving across EU member states for other reasons (ENIL, 2014).

## Conclusion

In order to achieve effective support for students with disabilities, enhance cooperation and support the structures of Higher Education Institutions in becoming more accessible, good practices must be shared with staff and practical information provided to students with disabilities. This information is required for disabled students to make educational and life decisions and be confident about going abroad and is the key to making mobility programs more accessible. Strengthening the “knowledge *quartet*” is one of the potential solutions: in other words, a wider dialogue among International Relations, Disability Officers, student organizations and other relevant stakeholders and disabled students, where they are in the centre of communication in line with the concept “Nothing about us without us” (Madrid Declaration, 2002). Student organizations are also a suitable vehicle as students may be more confident to ask for advice from their peers rather than the official bodies. In order to decrease fear of the unknown host environment, It is necessary to provide information about the support services students with disabilities are entitled to in Higher Education, such as those the MapAbility Project has been collecting since 2014 (ESN, Mapability, 2014). It is important to provide more specific guidelines for National Agencies on how to manage the whole supplementary procedure and assess the needs of disabled students. In order to reduce the unknown risks, a comprehensive checklist for the mobility of students with disabilities is recommended. It would be useful to create monitoring mechanisms to measure fulfilment of responsibilities of the home/host universities and to consider how to better implement rights of people with disabilities in Erasmus+ also in relation with UNCRPD (Fazekas, 2013). Last but not least, in order to improve the inclusivity of policy and practice of mobility programs, it is essential to share the experiences of disabled people - with and without mobility experiences - with relevant stakeholders and higher education institutions, as is the objective of the ESNsurvey 2017 (ESN, 2017).



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