



The voice of blind and partially sighted people in Europe



Erasmus+ Mobility of Students with Visual Impairment

Accessible Universities for Erasmus+ Students with Visual Impairment

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1 Introduction

Students with visual impairment, blind and partially sighted, represent a special group among Erasmus+ students because they are most likely to face barriers to education, which significantly impact their ability to study at university. The success of their study is highly determined by the level of their personal readiness and motivation, as well as by the level of technical support provided by higher education institutions, including all positive arrangements and support services.

There are many reasons why blind students approach the decision to study at university with trepidation. Even more difficult is the decision to study abroad. Once they have completed studies abroad, however, the experience is valuable, offering examples, indications, suggestions, and new approaches for solving problems; they motivate and help in the process of deciding and preparing for international mobility.

The Erasmus+ Programme is a great opportunity for personal development, gaining new skills, learning new languages, building new relationships, verifying one's own abilities, experiencing new challenges and opening new doors (not only) to the world of knowledge.

It certainly has a significant place in the process of preparing of students for their life, and what's more, it is a unique opportunity to support students with disabilities, especially blind and partially sighted students.

Recently we examined various activities aimed at increasing the participation of students with disabilities in international mobility programmes. From all of them we can point out two:

1. ***MappED! project*** aiming at reducing the disparities in learning outcomes affecting disadvantaged learners by increasing the participation of students with disabilities in the Erasmus+ exchanges. This platform with its improved interface provides students with information on the accessibility of not only university facilities, but also many other places and services (<https://mapped.eu/>).
2. ***Recommendations for the inclusion of higher education students and staff with physical, mental or health-related conditions in the Erasmus+ programme for higher education institutions***, prepared under the auspices of the European Commission

(http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/opportunities-for-individuals/physical-mental-conditions_en).

Mapping out and evaluating the accessibility of exchange programmes for blind and partially sighted students was the task of this research within the EBU project in 2016.

2 Subjects and methods

The report was prepared as the outcome of the 2nd phase of the common project on the accessibility of mobility programmes for students with visual impairment in Europe, which was launched in 2015 by the European Blind Union (EBU) and the International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment in Europe (ICEVI-Europe). Preceding this report, the *State-of-the-art study on accessibility of mobility programs for blind and partially sighted students* all over Europe was written in the 1st phase of the project.

This document reports on the outcomes of the activities of the common project in its 2nd phase. The activities were aimed at investigating the opinions, experiences and suggestions of Erasmus+ mobility participants, and employees of universities involved in arranging international mobility programmes for students with visual impairment. They were carried out by a working group comprised of experts from Comenius University in Bratislava (Slovak Republic), a specialist in visual impairment from ICEVI-Europe, a representative of the Slovak Blind and Partially Sighted Union and a member of EBU.

In the first round, an online questionnaire was prepared and distributed to disability coordinators and Erasmus+ coordinators at higher education institutions who deal with hosting or sending Erasmus+ students with and without disabilities. The survey focused on two aspects – the participation rate of students with visual impairment in the Erasmus+ programme, as well as the support services which universities can offer to these students during their preparation and stays abroad.

The research results are processed in the report ***Erasmus+ Mobility of Students with Visual Impairment : Pilot Survey Among Erasmus+ and Disability Coordinators***, available in English on the EBU website¹.

In the second round, meetings with two focus groups, one in Hungary and one in Slovakia, were organized. The participants were blind and partially sighted students and graduates of universities in Bratislava (Slovak Republic) and Budapest (Hungary), who had studied at foreign universities within the Erasmus mobility programme. During these meetings, the preparations for staying abroad, experiences of communication with the host university, positive and negative moments, barriers, services and support and social contacts were broadly discussed.

¹ www.euroblind.org

The experiences and suggestions of these students, as well as a summary of results from research and meetings form the subject of this report.

3 Summary of focus group meetings and research results

3.1 Experiences of students traveling from Slovakia

The Slovak focus group, consisting of 5 participants, met in Bratislava in October 2016 and was led by Mr. Radomír Masaryk. Its participants had stayed at universities in Ljubljana (Slovenia), Osnabrück (Germany), Antwerp (Belgium), Vienna (Austria), and Oslo (Norway) between 2007 and 2016. The summary focus group report is available in English.

The participants had different reasons for participating in the Erasmus programme. Two students were required to do so as part of the requirements within their study programmes; the other three wanted to improve their language competences, acquire experience in different education systems and get to know a country they liked. An important role in the university selection was played by efforts of the sending university to cooperate with the compensation of the sight impairment of the student. *“The coordinator and I spent a long time looking for a university that would accept me, and only one agreed in the end. There was no prior bilateral agreement, no one had ever been there before from our university, the agreement was just signed after we talked,”* said a participant from 2007.

For most students, Erasmus began with accommodation problems. Participants mentioned obstacles on the side of higher education institutions – unfinished renovations of dormitory buildings and unsuitable lighting for students with visual impairment. One of the participants stated that he had failed to organize his accommodation properly. The participants listed the possibility of travelling and establishing contacts with other Erasmus students, relief that the academic requirements were not impossible to meet, and in one case, relief due to the approach of an instructor, as positive aspects later during their stays. *“My language teacher was an amazing person, she was always very forthcoming. At the end of my stay, she even agreed to meet me privately, despite being enormously busy. It was a great experience.”*

The barriers students faced during Erasmus were related to unexpected situations, such as a broken computer or lack of knowledge of the

transport system in the town; this was demanding in terms of orientation and security for visually impaired students.

Support for students with visual impairment differed from one university to another. Students had orientation and mobility training; however, these were financially demanding. Also, it was hard to estimate in advance how much training would be necessary (this was a problem especially in the phase of requesting special grants). Students with visual impairment had access to digitized study texts and instructional materials. Certain universities provided free copying, note-taking, scanners for personal use, and board contributions.

During the focus group meeting, the students identified a few main needs for a simpler stay. Most frequently, they mentioned accessible study materials (digital form), note-taking provisions, and orientation and transportation training.

The following areas were identified as problematic for blind and partially sighted students:

1. Complicated administrative process – frequently, on-line forms are not very accessible for assistive technology – screen reader, duplicate information had to be sent to several locations several times; for a blind student it was impossible to work around the forms without assistance.
2. Inflexible grant support – students found it difficult to estimate all of the expenses even prior to departure and to cover their needs incurred during the programme; this is important when submitting an application for a special grant.
3. Complicated process of obtaining study materials in accessible form – some universities were not ready to host blind students and did not directly provide dedicated services; in several cases, accessible study materials had to be provided by the sending university.
4. Unprepared teachers – the university staff had little experience with the blind students; they were unaware of the requirements resulting from their impairments, and students had to voice their needs repeatedly with a number of teachers, each of them separately.
5. Contact with local students – members of the focus group established contact with other Erasmus students but lacked sufficient opportunities for communication with local students.

6. Transfer of experience – it would be very conducive to share experience and ideas with other Erasmus+ prospects in a single on-line discussion platform.

The testimonies of the participants show that differences exist between individual universities in terms of the opportunities and support for blind and partially sighted students. Also, they stressed that conditions for blind Erasmus students are gradually improving with their increased participation.

3.2 Experiences of students traveling from Hungary

The focus group in Budapest, which was held in October 2016, had three members and was led by Krisztina Kovács. The participants visited universities in Limerick (Ireland), Vienna (Austria), and Groningen (Netherlands).

The students in this group chose the hosting universities on the basis of courses offered in the relevant language. However, the choice of universities was limited, probably due to a lack of cooperating universities (limited number of bilateral agreements). The participants mentioned support from host universities upon arrival as positive experiences. *“I contacted a local coordinator who picked me up from the airport. Then she took me to my accommodation, showed me around the room, and introduced me to a few locals.”*

Also the system of the universities was efficient and friendly. One of the students had an unpleasant experience resulting from the lack of preparation of staff for communication with blind and partially sighted students. She had to explain everything many times to various people.

The participants felt that the change of environment was a barrier both to orientation and support. *“Orientation was hard for me. I would say that for a low vision girl who is used to living with her family and who got a lot of support from the family, adapting to a new situation, especially being alone is really a barrier”*. Others included fears of the administrative process and independence in everyday activities such as shopping and traveling that they also had to face.

The participants agreed on the need for more communication with host universities and a more efficient administration process.

To summarize, the problematic areas from their points of view can be listed as follows:

1. Information and communication – improved communication and support opportunities at the sending university prior to departure, but especially at the host university – also if an unforeseen event occurs.

2. Training of teachers and university staff – better knowledge of university staff of the area of disabilities/visual impairment, overview of their specific needs (adjustments during examinations, study materials provision, possibility to use assistive technology during written examinations – PC with a screen reader, or permission to be examined orally).

3. Complexity of the administration process – incompatibility of forms with assistive technology/ limited accessibility for blind students. It seems that administration is not only demanding and time-consuming but also impossible to master for blind students due to the complexity of the spatial structure of the forms and limited communication with screen readers.

3.3 Experiences of coordinators

The coordinators experience research featured the participation of 63 respondents from 17 countries. In terms of the position in which the respondents have been working, the majority were *Erasmus+ coordinators* (46 %) or *disability coordinators* (42.9 %). Slovakia (19%) and Poland (17.5%) were the most represented, followed by the Republic of Ireland (12.7%). Only one coordinator collaborated from Greece, Scotland, Bulgaria, Portugal, and Sweden. The respondents in the group differed in length of experience from 1 to 22 years. The respondents filled in questionnaires with non-compulsory answers, resulting in differing numbers of answers to individual questions. The entire report from the questionnaire research is available in English.

3.3.1 Summary of basic results of the research

The responses show that the total number of students with disabilities was 13 234, including 702 with visual impairment (i.e., 5.3%).

All respondents stated that universities provided adjustments in the conditions of education for students with visual impairment. The most frequent adjustments were the extended time for taking examinations (74.6%), the choice between an oral and written examination, the possibility to use their own computers during examinations, or providing computers with assistive technology (screen readers). At 14 universities

the library borrowing period can be extended for students with disabilities. The *Erasmus Student Network* organization can also work as a substantial aid; however, it only operates at 27% of the participating universities.

Another aspect of support services and accessibility is the way in which students can plan and organize their courses, and/or access the online study materials. In this context, the main question is whether and to what extent the academic information system at the university is accessible for students with visual impairment. Having limited accessibility of such technology may in fact be a barrier also for international students to apply for the Erasmus+ programme, since this would be another significant obstacle they would have to face in a new environment. It turned out that 11 universities had a fully accessible academic information system and 16 universities had a partially accessible academic information system. Another significant group of respondents (25 universities) were not sure about this issue.

This is also closely related to the possibility to search for information related to participation in the Erasmus+ programme and to conditions for blind students on university websites in English. 32 out of 63 participating universities confirmed that they provided this information online. Only 16 coordinators had been contacted by visually impaired Erasmus students from abroad in the past 2 years, and 17 coordinators were contacted by 47 students with visual impairment who expressed an interest in traveling abroad.

At the same time, the research has shown that there was certainly room for improvement in terms of informing and motivating students with visual impairment to apply for the Erasmus+ programme. In fact, the majority of universities do not specifically promote the Erasmus+ programme to students with disabilities, in particular the visually impaired, during the application process. Only 20 respondents (34.5 %) reported that they promoted the Erasmus+ programme to students with disabilities.

3.3.2 Main obstacles for Erasmus students with visual impairment from the coordinators' point of view

According to the report from the questionnaire research *Erasmus+ Mobility of Students with Visual Impairment: Pilot Survey Among Erasmus+ and Disability Coordinators*, several main barriers to the participation of students with visual impairment in the Erasmus programme

have been identified both on the side of students and on the side of institutions.

Main barriers on the side of students:

- a) Fear of change and the unknown (environment, school system, people and culture)
- b) Lack of courage and self-confidence, a feeling of causing trouble for the accepting university
- c) Cognitive barriers, such as insufficient knowledge of the language, learning new routes/ways
- d) Family support – lack of family support after departing family environment.

Main barriers on the side of institutions:

- a) Lack of information and support, problems finding a suitable assistant, unsuitable accommodation, unpreparedness of hosting universities to provide specialized support services.
- b) Administrative barriers, problems in accessibility of forms for users of assistive technology (screen readers), and the resulting restriction of independence when preparing and covering the administration needed for the Erasmus+ stay, dependence on the assistance of another person, an assistant. The communication between programme coordinators also seems to be insufficient.
- c) A big problem is access to study materials in English in an accessible form
- d) Financial barriers, complicated financial processes, vague financing rules, problematic insurance, unclear information about paid services and amounts of payments, about the responsibility of universities to provide services.

3.3.3 Support for coordinators

Part of the questionnaire was focused on the needs of Erasmus+ and disability coordinators. The following areas of desired development were selected:

- a) **Information** – extension of information about support for students with visual impairment as well as better preparedness for providing support. As a related area, better communication and sharing of good practice between universities.

- b) **Personal development** – improvement of employee skills (assistance, motivation of blind and partially sighted students, assuring them about their competences) and more staff that would be able to work with the students. Having experts in the field available for consulting to develop knowledge and competences continuously (supervision).
- c) **Financial needs** – more financial subsidies for *support centres* in order to improve the staffing in an adequate environment and timeframe for clients.
- d) **Technical support** – sufficient quantity of technical equipment, access to instructional texts, special hardware and software technology for assistance, tactile graphics, and web services accessible to students and coordinators.

4 Summary of recommendations

In this section, we offer a summary of the problems identified connected to the participation of students with visual impairment in the Erasmus+ programme. We have divided them into two parts – problems on the side of students and those on the side of coordinators, both of which include suggestions for improvement.

The common experience implied by individual analyses shows that the situation differs in environments where they had no experience with students with disabilities and in environments where they had already had similar stays. The possibilities and offers of support also significantly differ among universities, even within a single country.

4.1 Problems identified by students, proposals for solutions

1. Administrative process – both students and coordinators state that the administrative process is not transparent. Identical information is frequently provided several times and the accessibility of online forms for blind students is very limited; assistants are required, as students are unable to fill the forms themselves.

= Simplify the administrative procedures and increase the accessibility of forms for users of assistive technology.

2. Special grant support – students had trouble estimating all of the expenses prior to departure. It was practically impossible to estimate the nature and extent of the services and study texts needed, and exceptional situations when support was required could have occurred. The special grant did not allow for any changes.

= Establish rules to facilitate the process of obtaining a special grant, its usage and billing.

3. Study materials – access to study materials in accessible form is very often limited, lack of note-taking service. Host universities rarely had experience in supporting blind students. In critical situations study materials in accessible forms had to be provided by the sending university.

= Provide transparent information about services mentioned; if necessary, arrange for external contractors at the location of the host university for blind Erasmus+ students.

4. Staff education – the teachers and staff seemed uncertain and lacked information about special needs of blind students during studies.

= Provide employees with information about the basic needs of blind and partially sighted persons to enable them to offer adequate support.

5. Contact with other students – students were in contact only with other Erasmus students but very seldom had contact with local students or local students with identical disabilities, despite attempting to do so.

= Create conditions to provide Erasmus+ students with more opportunities to have closer contact with local students (accommodation, social activities).

6. Sharing of experiences – students lacked an on-line space that would enable them to share their experiences and discuss individual problems of newly departing students with those that already completed the programme.

= Create an online space for exchanging experience, discussion; wider promotion of good practice.

7. Information – better accessibility of information prior to departure. Websites of universities do not include information about the study conditions, support services and contact persons for students with disabilities. It is necessary to contact other persons.

= Ensure the transparency of basic information about the study conditions for students with disabilities at university web-sites, including contact details, in English.

Experience also shows a large diversity in the individual areas at each of the universities. It is thus hard to estimate how a university will react to student needs and find the offered support possibilities.

4.2 Problems identified by institutions, proposals for solutions

1. Information – absence or lack of information for university staff, including international relation offices (IRO) staff, about disability issues, the mobility of students with disabilities and support possibilities.

= Extend and update information for university staff about students with disabilities, support possibilities; improve cooperation between Erasmus+ coordinators and disability coordinators, establish positions of disability

coordinators that could inform individual instructors and other employees about the area.

2. Personal development – lack of preparedness and experience in dealing with blind and partially sighted students; lack of arguments to motivate blind students for international mobility.

= Provide training to improve practical skills (personal and academic assistance, motivating students at departure, persuading them about their competences); more trained staff able to work with students; supervision of experts available.

3. Financial support – limited staff, limited services, reducing support only to provide information and advice.

= Provide better financial support for support centres/services for students with disabilities.

4. Technical support – limited technical equipment.

= Provide technical equipment, accessible study texts and tactile graphics, assistive technology available for students, and improve web services.



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