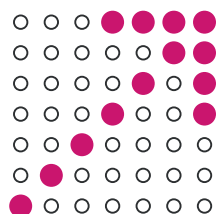


Exchange?



EXCHANGE ABILITY

Yes, it's possible!



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“It’s possible!” Report of ExchangeAbility: Fostering mobility of students with disabilities
By Marco La Rosa (ESN-Erasmus Student Network), Eva Reina (UNICA-Network of Universities
from the Capitals of Europe)

Published by Erasmus Student Network AISBL

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Electronic version of this report is available through www.exchangeability.eu



Education and Culture DG

Lifelong Learning Programme

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Table of Contents

About the Project.....	4
Bratislava.....	8
Brussels.....	9
Budapest.....	10
Nicosia.....	11
Tallinn.....	12
Final Café Event.....	13
Stories... and Suggestions!.....	14
What do they say about the project?.....	24
Outcomes and suggestions from the Consortium.....	34
ExchangeAbility.eu.....	44
Award Winning... Video!.....	45
Contacts.....	46

About the project

DID YOU KNOW THAT...?

In order to meet the objectives established by the EU 2020 Strategy, at least 20% of those graduating in the EHEA should have experienced a study or training period abroad by 2020. Mobility offers young people opportunities for self-development and enhances their future employability. This becomes even more important when we speak about groups more susceptible to suffer from social exclusion, such as people with disabilities. However, according to the data from the European Commission, the percentage of students with disabilities participating in the Erasmus programme during the academic years 2006-2007 and 2008-2009 represents 0.09 % and 0.17% respectively. The most recent figures show that a total of 257 students with disabilities participated in Erasmus in 2009-2010, which represents 0.12% of the Erasmus students. Despite the modest increase that may be observed, the participation of students with disabilities in mobility is still very low.

EXCHANGEABILITY

A consortium composed by UNICA (coordinator), ESN, ErasmusHogeschool

Brussel, University of Cyprus, Tallinn University of Technology, Eötvös Lorand University Budapest, Comenius University Bratislava set up a project that aimed to enable students with disabilities to participate more fully in exchange programmes.

The European Commission awarded the consortium a grant within the framework of the Accompanying Measures of the Lifelong Learning Programme (call DG EAC/41/09).

Project Number: 177193-LLP-1-2010-1-BE-ERASMUS-EAM

AIMS

ExchangeAbility aims to increase the number of students with special needs taking part in exchange programmes by stimulating their mobility through the organisation of site visits to other European universities. On the occasion of every site visit a video was recorded to compile an eye-catching film providing information about both, the accessibility of each university, and the obstacles that students might encounter. The main target of ExchangeAbility has been raising awareness about all the aspects to be considered when sending and welcoming students with disabilities at universities. This is a project made by students for students and by persons for disabled persons. Only a systematic cooperation of professors, university staff, students with and without disabilities and other stakeholders may result in a comprehensive social support and an active engagement of students with disabilities in exchange programmes. Understanding the needs of these students will help remove physical and human barriers within our society, and therefore, it will lead to the progressive inclusion of every student in the global mobility flows.

SITE VISITS

The site visits gathered each time between 25-30 participants (including the local and visiting working groups). The necessity of involving all the stakeholders and students with different types of disabilities was stressed since the beginning. A set of guidelines was prepared before the events to help the hosting institution planning and organising the site visits. The guidelines paid particular attention to the special needs of the participants, and subsequently, to the accessibility of the venues. They also previewed accommodation

requirements, transportation and any other element to be considered to assure the inclusive character of the events.

WHO WENT WHERE?

Tallinn -> Bratislava: 31 January - 1 February 2011

Nicosia -> Brussels: 15-16 February 2011

Bratislava -> Budapest: 24-25 March 2011

Budapest -> Nicosia: 7-8 April 2011

Brussels -> Tallinn: 5-6 May 2011

WORKING GROUPS?

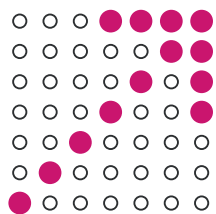
One working group was hosting and another visiting!

HOSTING WORKING GROUP

- students with different types of disabilities (ExchangeAbility Ambassadors)
- 2 university officers
- 2 ESN students local section
- 2-3 stakeholders

VISITING WORKING GROUP

- 3 students with different types of disabilities 'ExchangeAbility Ambassadors'
- 1 university officer
- 1 ESN student local section
- 1 UNICA representative
- 1 ESN international coordinator
- 1 Stakeholder representative
- 2 Students of Audiovisual Arts from Erasmushogeschool



EXCHANGE ABILITY



Network of Universities
from the Capitals of Europe



1918

TALLINNA TEHNIKAÜLIKOOOL
TALLINN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY



Bratislava

The site visit to Comenius University Bratislava raised questions on the accessibility of universities, the various standards and norms of buildings and institutions and the assistance provided by different university departments. The participants had the opportunity to visit the technical support centre of the university where visually impaired and blind students can have access to their study material. Furthermore, the meeting with Paralympic sportsmen and women proved to be an inspirational moment for those present, showing that after overcoming boundaries in one's mind, nothing is impossible, not even winning the Paralympic gold medal. The Estonian 'ExchangeAbility Ambassadors' and a group of stakeholders also provided an interesting input through their presentations.

At the question "Would you like to be an exchange student in the future?"

All the students answered YES

"[...]Try to think as if yourself would need to move there. Then as a person you would not like to go around the building to find the lowers step to get to the pavement or you would like to go out from the nearby side-door rather than going back around to the only accessible main entrance, just because the side-door has 2 steps or one 10-centimetre high step[...]"



Check the video!

www.youtube.com/watch?v=IBYyxWwvWrU

Brussels



The site visit to Erasmushogeschool Brussel counted on the participation of Mrs. Helga Stevens, Member of the Belgian Senate, who shared her personal experience as a deaf student and illustrated the obstacles to overcome by comparing the European and the American university systems in terms of accessibility and support provided to students with disabilities. Her contribution was highly appreciated by the audience, and namely by the students, who asked numerous questions. After the seminar, the group took the time to test the accessibility of the city centre of Brussels and to visit the European Parliament. The participants obtained an overview on the work of the Committee for Employment and Social Affairs of the European Parliament (EP), which deals with disability matters. The group also tested the accessibility of the EP building.

*Which cultural or recreational programme did you find the **most joyful**?*

“The diners with the whole group! Visit to the Grand Place with the other students. Reception, dinner at the restaurant, dancing in the nightclub, sightseeing, the sea.”

What would be your suggestions for improving the organization of the next meeting?

“A little bit more time, maybe one night more for the visitors, so it is less exhausting and hurrying for them and that they get a little more rest. The organisation was very well. As far as I’m concerned, I was very pleased with the organization.”

Check the video!

www.youtube.com/watch?v=92jylhxGCj4





Budapest

The site visit to ELTE University in Budapest was attended by the Slovakian delegation. It was an excellent opportunity for both visiting and hosting universities to exchange best practices and experiences. The presentations given by the local 'ExchangeAbility Ambassadors' illustrated very clearly how is the day-to-day of a disabled student at ELTE University. The participants also visited the Ability Park, which aims to shift the social attitude about disabilities, and to offer a meaningful and pleasant experience through games led by people with disabilities. At the end of the visit the students showed their satisfaction and highlighted the importance of meeting new friends and establishing contacts. Some of them expressed their interest in becoming mobility students.

*"I think the solution of this problem starts in the not disabled people mind. The least we can do is the **sensibilization**. To tell them, **how to handle**, help a blind, how to **communicate** with a deaf or hard of hearing person etc."*

Which part(s) of the meeting did you find most interesting and/or useful? "The presentations of students with special needs about their experiences"



Check the video!

www.youtube.com/watch?v=8IYU1ivCVoE

Nicosia



The event hosted by the University of Cyprus also provided an ideal forum to discuss the inclusion of disabled students in higher education institutions. The different speakers gave an overview of the situation of students with disabilities in Cyprus and Hungary, and the existing policies at the national and European level. The United Nations' convention on the rights of persons with disabilities was also discussed. Mr. Petros Demetriou, a PhD student of Social Sciences from the University of Cyprus, pointed out that approximately 10% of the world's population has a disability (over 650 million persons). He stressed that the convention marks a "paradigm shift" in attitudes and approaches to persons with disabilities. People with disabilities are no longer perceived as "objects" of charity, medical treatment and social protection, but rather as "subjects" with rights, capable of claiming those rights and making decisions for their lives based on their free and informed consent as active members of society. The United Nations' convention gives universal recognition to the dignity of persons with disabilities.

What would be your suggestions for to improve the accessibility and inclusiveness of universities?

"The university of Nicosia is very accessible. I think the state could give more money to the universities to use it to make themselves accessible."

"More help from professors to students with disabilities".

Check the video!

www.youtube.com/watch?v=-p5ACOVjQBI





Tallinn

The site visit to Tallinn University of Technology focused on the inclusion of disabled students in the university student life. The contribution of students with disabilities from the hosting university was highly appreciated. The group visited most faculties of the university and tested the accessibility of the different departments. A workshop entitled 'Challenge your senses' was organised by the local 'ExchangeAbility Ambassadors'. The participants were able to experience different types of disabilities through role games. The local television and a radio station broadcasted the event and interviewed some of the participants.

The five site visits provided an excellent opportunity to experience the difference between practice and theory and tested the accessibility of five European cities and universities. Evidence demonstrates that the historical parts of cities usually do not prove to be very accessible. In addition, the public transportation systems still need to break down a significant number of barriers.

What would be your suggestions for to improve the accessibility and inclusiveness of universities?

"Awareness raising campaign for students, lecturers, professors and university officers. To inform as many as possible on the needs of students with different disabilities"

"The old part of the university isn't so accessible, there are stairs if you can't walk you have to wait for a little 'elevator' that isn't so fast [...]"



Check the video!

www.youtube.com/watch?v=_gcvT3EXPH8

Final Event Café



Programme

MODERATOR: ANNABELLE VAN NIEUWENHUYSE

18.30 - 19.00 REGISTRATION

19.00- 19:15 WELCOME WORDS AND PRESENTATION OF THE PROJECT EVA REINA, UNICÁ & MARCO LA ROSA, ESN

19:15- 19:25 SCREENING OF MOVIES 1 & 2, SVEN KÖLLAMETS AND MEI LAN NG

19:25- 19:40 EXPERIENCE OF MEI LAN NG AND SVEN KÖLLAMETS, EXCHANGEABILITY AMBASSADORS

19:40- 19:45 SCREENING OF MOVIE 3, LENKA MARUŠÁKOVÁ

19:45- 20:00 CONTRIBUTION THE EUROPEAN DISABILITY FORUM BY AURELIE BARANGER

20:00- 20:05 SCREENING OF MOVIE 4, ÁGNES FAZEKAS

20:05- 20:25 GALINA KRYSŤEVA, ESN EXCHANGEABILITY AMBASSADOR

20:25- 20:40 ERASMUS MOBILITY OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES, KLARA ENGELS-PÉRENY, EUROPEAN COMMISSION

20:40- 20:45 SCREENING OF MOVIE 5, ZENON ZENIU

20:45- 21:00 CONCLUSIONS OF EXCHANGEABILITY, KRISZTINA KOVACS, ELTE UNIVERSITY BUDAPEST

21:00 - 22:00

THE WILD CLASSICAL MUSIC ENSEMBLE
in concert

25 October
Tuesday 21.00 @ Rits Café

"I returned home with lots of unbelievable experiences. Standing on my own feet abroad developed my personality."

Agnes Inésula Fardas, Elnika Lodovik University Bulgaria

"I am so happy that I decided to fly in the face of myself. This experience made me stronger, more independent, self-confident and purposeful."

Rafael Kyprianou, Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski

"I can
I can overcome
I can survive
I can love
I can have fun
I like travelling
I can play the piano
I believe in myself
I have more abilities
than disabilities"



www.exchangeability.eu



This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

More videos? Check the making-of!

www.youtube.com/watch?v=dv7bYSYA7P4



Stories

...and Suggestions!

MEET AGNES FROM HUNGARY

My name is Agnes Sarolta Fazekas. I am 23 years old. I am currently studying in Budapest, Hungary, at the Faculty of the Social Sciences of Eötvös Loránd University. I am completing the last year of a bachelor degree in Social Studies. I was born with a malformation in my arms, but it did not cause any problem to socialize and study. I am very grateful to my parents and my environment.

My condition certainly influences my interest in fields such as equal opportunities, integration and disability policies. This played a major role when I had to decide what to study, because I wanted to learn and attain a higher knowledge in these fields.

I have always loved learning languages, meeting people from different cultures, and getting to know better the history of other countries.

During my high school studies, I participated in a lot of exchange programs. I wanted combine somehow my hobby with my activity at the university. Therefore, I applied to become a volunteer to help incoming exchange students at my faculty. I have been a mentor at ESN ELTE at the Faculty of Social Sciences since 2008. I have been supporting exchange students during their exchange program in Budapest.

In 2009, I applied to participate in the Erasmus Student Mobility Program in Frankfurt (Oder), Germany. I also participated in the 2010 Spring Semester program. When I applied for an Erasmus grant, I had a lot of questions in my mind: how could I handle alone some things I usually needed help for being abroad? On the one hand, I could meet several unexpected difficulties in my daily life, which seemed invisible at home, where everything is so familiar, and known. On the other hand, mobility programs contain lots of

amazing and unique elements, which you cannot experience in your home country. From the moment I got the scholarship, I received a lot of help from my sending and hosting institutions regarding my special needs. Different kinds of them: financial, legal, practical, personal help... I was contacted a disability coordinator from the hosting university, a volunteer student. I received personal help at the student house, during my lectures and my free time.

My condition is not so serious, I can handle most of my daily routine situations. In my case there small things, which are maybe not remarkable for the majority. I write slower. It is also difficult for me to grab heavy things, hold, or reach some things, climb on the bus, or insert the coin in the washing machine of the student house, etc. I was lucky, because other exchange students accepted my condition, and they were very helpful all the time.

I returned home with lots of unbelievable experiences. Standing on my own feet abroad developed my personality

We became very close friends. Happily, I can say that I don't have memories, due to my malformation. I had difficulties, but I always figured it out, and I was helped. In addition, I learned it too, that it is not a shame to say, "I need help!" So, when I needed help, I was not afraid of asking for it. It was easier for the other person too, because, sometimes people do not know, how to help properly a person with disabilities.

After the semester, I went back to Hungary with lots of unbelievable experiences. My conclusion was that standing on my own feet abroad developed my personality, it is was an opportunity to

demonstrate myself that even with my condition I was able to meet the requirements. In 2011, for my Bachelor's thesis, I made a comparative study about the conditions for disabled higher education students in Hungary and Germany. In addition, my Erasmus exchange experience in Frankfurt Oder (Germany) has influenced my choice of topic for my Bachelor's thesis. In my opinion, the reason why there is a low mobility of students with disabilities in Hungary is that most students have doubts about how to cope with studying and living abroad. They find some difficulties in Hungary (physical barriers, or other obstacles), however, in the last decade, the Hungarian government has put into force more legal and practical developments, which encourage students with disabilities to attain higher education.

I assume, that the raising awareness through projects like ExchangeAbility can encourage students with disabilities to take part in mobility programs. I am happy to see that the Exchangeability project is extending to students with disabilities. I hope I will be one of the students with a disability promoting this great initiative and encouraging other students with disabilities to apply for the Erasmus mobility program.

SUGGESTIONS

There are several challenges. In my opinion, society should first modify its mindset about people with disabilities. Personally I can encourage with my story other disabled students to have a mobility experience, at my university.

Positive experiences may cause a change of attitude and dismantle possible doubts.

MEET NORBERT FROM HUNGARY

“For the first time, I was introduced to academic life by the support of the EU. Participating in these conferences provided us, disabled students, with a great opportunity for to shed our insecurities and introduce ourselves to each other with our different European identities and enhance cultural diversity. The first day began with a „conference matinee” where, following pleasantries, we could share information about the practical reality of rules and regulations concerning disabilities in all aspects of life, and specifically in the field of equal opportunity in higher education, in both Slovakia (the sender) and Hungary (the host). We found crucial differences in the situation of people outside the classic categories of disabilities. The discovery and interpretation of such special needs resulted in a paradigm shift within the heads of the guests. I participated in the conference as a hearing-impaired person with minimal knowledge of English, which placed harsh demands on me concerning understanding of the sign-language interpreter, and led to such exhaustion that when I finally made my presentation, I was almost literally out of breath. I have thought of sign-language before as a system unable to fully cover and replace spoken languages.

This opinion of mine was partially refuted by the two wonderful expert interpreters in both of the conferences, who had both languages under control. They were able to quasi-simplify and make connections between full spoken language and the set of signs. It was a „valuable” experience, as this was something I’ve never seen before! (I have to add in parentheses though that this was not the result of an improvement in our national system of sign-language education, but that of a foreign practice in seeing the language as „movie instead of picture”.)

Due to my limited knowledge of English I had difficulties joining in

the roundtables and leisure activities, and I couldn't have deeper conversations. This made me realize that even though my hearing curve is obviously too low for auditory learning, I should use „any means necessary” to use the reverse method (the same way I use Hungarian language with the aid of the context and the vowels which I can distinguish), widening my vocabulary to eventually be able to use substitution, a.k.a. effectively think in English. Within my own university though I made connections that would have never been possible without the project. It was a surprise for me that despite my unique isolation (limited communication), I could carry on a good conversation or debate with everyone.

The next day we paid a visit to the Ability Park. This was, in my opinion, a good idea because (for me) the wheelchair task was easy, the intellectual one was intermediate, but the most difficult challenge was the dark room. There, I fully realized how great it is that I have intact eyesight, through which I can acquire most of information about the world. However, I'm not willing to conceal my criticism to the Ability Park project: as I heard, „impaired” people make up only a third of their organizational hierarchy. This makes me feel unnerved.

The experiences of the Marco Polo group in Cyprus

While making preparations for the trip, I inquired whether I'll need a passport or not. I looked up information first on the Internet where I discovered that Cyprus is not a member of the Schengen agreement, which to me evidently meant that a passport would be necessary. Yet through phone inquiry I received contradictory information from our foreign ministry, which I regarded as unreliable because it didn't seem logical and because in Hungarian culture „spoken words fly, while written words stay”. I tried to obtain a passport as quickly as I

could – the process was set in motion but I did not receive anything by the scheduled date of departure. So I set out to Cyprus saddened by the uncertainty – will I ever get there, or will I be turned back from the 2nd terminal of the international airport of Budapest, freshly renamed after Franz Liszt? At the airport, however, Niki tried to explain that no EU member should request me a passport, regardless of their Schengen status, a bit of information of which no signs were posted within the territory at the airport itself.

There is a way to change things, to achieve objectives you really want but you haven't tried yet

During the inspection of carry-on luggage, though, there was a sign saying no liquids are permitted to be brought on the plane. This was new, as I didn't remember such a rule applied during any of my previous flights. The inspection however wasn't as strict as it could have been, neither in Budapest nor in Larnaca, since my backpack apparently contained two bottles of perfume which I'd forgotten about. It was a night flight both on the way there and back, which put a strain on my system far more than any of my previous (daytime) flights. Upon arrival, were overwhelmed by the Mediterranean nature of Cyprus.

I had the feeling of being at an English Balaton; a typical vacation area formerly under British rule. We marveled at the efficiency of local infrastructures, the division within the country, the left-hand rule, the top quality hotels and the „native“ use of English. In retrospect, the dinners we had during our time there were monumental occasions. Nikolas and his companions created such

a friendly atmosphere that it was a pleasure to converse using „hands and feet”, which meant a special emotional treat for me. I have a dear memory of the Nicosian restaurant: the „all-expressive” Mediterranean gestures of the waitress, which perfectly conveyed her concern about „how will I put such big plates onto this tiny little table?”. I thought about not having comprehended the purpose of the conference, and that I should have only presented about the disabled status itself. I doubt that it would have been better that way. I hope that our presentations contributed to the diversity of the locals’ thinking, expanding their range of useful tools. I felt the conference to be active, especially that all our ambassadors received reflective, respectful questions. I went knee-deep into the sea and wrote an SMS from there to my girlfriend. I was enlightened to the notion that there is a different path of progress (urbanization) for a 800-thousand-strong (Cypriot), 10-million-strong (Hungarian), 60-million-strong (German), 300-million-strong (American) and a 1-billion-strong (Chinese) community. It is ridiculous to suggest that they will ever possess the exact same attitude, knowledge, ability and competence. In Pedagogical Sciences there is a measure called „brought value”, which expresses the social-cultural background from which the student is coming. The estimation of this variable is crucial in determining the efficiency of institutions, because it corrects for a number of factors and enables us to measure the real capability of the institution to create pedagogical added value. I think that this method could be adapted to measure the level of progress of countries as well. (In which, by the way, Cyprus would show a much higher value than expected).

I had an opportunity to satisfy my cultural curiosity as well, having stumbled upon pre-mass moments in orthodox Christian churches. In my desperate search for the water fountain, my first reflex was to think of the year (1054) of the West-East schism, and I marveled at

how different patriarchal customs were since ossified, canonised there. I could discern the threefold structure of medieval church buildings with a central corridor in each segment, delineated on both sides by unique, dignified, large chairs with decorated backs and armrests, serving as the pews. I took one of these seats. I made quite a spectacle of myself, having done the prayers differently. Before the main altar, there stood a statue of the Virgin Mary. The locals kissed this picture and ducked under its scaffolding as a sort of ritual episode. I gathered pleasant experiences on Cyprus. As an aftereffect, I thought a lot about how exactly we disabled youth (me included) are hindered in terms of integration into groups in mainstream society? I'm under the impression that Hungarian special education is afraid of changing the routine of overpraising.

Yet as adults we have to cope with constructive criticism as well as praise, since it serves our development. For some reason the educational aim of creating an informed citizenship is also missing, causing impairment in the ability for making independent decisions. There is a quasi-individual (boxed) education with no attention to the social influence of peer groups present from the teen years.

These events both in Hungary and in Cyprus had an additional utility: we got to know each other „within campus“ as well, better than we could have during normal university life.

SUGGESTIONS

As a man for community improvement, I highly recommend the European-level integration of disabled students, and this means the expansion of this project in any and every direction.

MEET GALINA FROM BULGARIA

My name is Galina. I am 25 years old. One year ago received a Master's degree in Slavic philology at the University of Sofia. This Autumn I will finish my second degree in Balkan history with Greek and Turkish languages

My first participation in international exchanges was in 2005 in Lublin Poland. Then, I took part in a summer school in Polish language, organised by the University Maria Curie in Lublin, Poland. In the summer school there were many representatives from different European countries. I met a Spanish girl, who told me that she had learnt Polish language during her studies in Poland thanks to the programme Erasmus. I decided that first thing back at home, would be to inform myself about how I could be part of this programme. In the following academic year my university announced a competition for students willing to study abroad for some months and I applied immediately.

I am so happy that I decided to fly in the face of myself.

This experience made me stronger, more independent, self-confident and purposeful

In this way I spent one of my best years of my life in Cracow, Poland. I studied at Jagelonian University. Of course, the beginning was very hard! I had problems even to go to the shop, or to find my classroom at the university. But I made a lot of friends very fast, not only Polish,

but also English, Korean and Spanish guys. The university supported me and provided scanned books, a speaking program for my laptop, etc. They also provided me with a trainer to learn how to orientate and move at the university with my white stick. At that time I still hadn't my guide dog and the orientation on new environment was quite necessary, so it was a big advantage to have this support during the 9 months I studied in Cracow. I improved my Polish and English language skills, met many new friends, it was great!

In May 2010 I participated in an international meeting of ESN members in Antwerp, Belgium. Then I learnt about the Exchangeability project. Of course, I held the idea and thought about the way of getting involved in this great initiative. After that I found a call for coordinators of the project at the ESN sections, applied, and now I am part of this strong international coordinating team.

I am so happy that 5 years ago, I decided to fly in the face of myself. This was my own test on myself; it was one of the most important steps of my life. It made me stronger, more independent, self-confident, and purposeful.

Now I am going to give all I can to be useful for other students with disabilities, who are ready to challenge themselves. Listen to your heart!

What do they say about the project?

AURÉLIE BARANGER

EDF YOUTH COMMITTEE MEMBER

Background and relevance of the project towards its objectives

The European Disability Forum has been associated with the Exchangeability project during its first edition, through the members of the EDF Youth committee. The later is a specific committee which is in charge of mainstreaming Youth in EDF work, as well as to raise general awareness of the concerns of Youth with disabilities.

The objectives of the first Exchangeability project were:

- raising awareness about disability and in particular the specific needs of students with disabilities. In order to achieve this objective, an explanatory guide has been drafted and EDF youth committee members animated various trainings.
- During these trainings, some role plays were organized during which participants were able to experience the various kinds of disabilities and gain a better idea of the barriers faced by people with disabilities.

Awareness is definitely a key element to allow more participation of young people with disability in the Erasmus programme, but also more generally in higher education.

Without awareness of the existing barriers and specific needs to be taken into consideration for the inclusion of people with disabilities, it remains impossible.

Moreover, young people with disabilities have to be empowered

and need to be more aware of the existing opportunities to take part in exchange and higher education programmes.

Consequently, the second edition of the Exchangeability project that associates both universities (UNICA) and students (the Erasmus Student Network) is a good way to raise awareness of key stakeholders and stimulate the mobility of students with disabilities. The activities of the project are highly relevant to achieve these objectives.

I will try to go through the main aspects of the project to see whether they were efficient and delivered the expected results.

Quality of the consortium

The consortium of the project is composed by UNICA, ESN, Erasmus Hogeschool Brussel, University of Cyprus, Tallinn University of Technology, Eötvös Loránd University Budapest, Comenius University Bratislava. It therefore allows a good involvement both of university actors and of students.

Statistics were given as regard the participation of students with disabilities in the respective universities taking part in the project:

- ELTE University, Budapest: 30.000 students, 300 students with disability = 1%
- Tallinn University of Technology : 14.000 students, 21 students with disability 0,015%
- Comenius University, Bratislava: 29.000 students, 130 students with disability = 0,4%
- Erasmushogeschool, Brussel: 5000 students, 100 students with disability= 2%
- University of Cyprus, Nicosia: 6000 students, 210 students with disability = 3,5%

This participation is way below the rate of people with disability in the general population.

We can therefore expect that the project can have longer-term benefits not only to increase participation of student with disabilities in the Erasmus programme, but also in higher education in general, and in the universities involved in particular.

Difficulties to be addressed

During the final event held in Brussels, Krisztina Kovács, disability coordinator at the ELTE University from Budapest, gave a comprehensive picture of the challenges faced by students with disability to benefit from the Erasmus programme.

- lack of information concerning disability policies
- absence of relevant information in foreign languages of the universities
- lack of information on extra funds available for EU exchange programmes
- fear of the unknown (people, environment,)
- language dis-ability
- lack of self-confidence and low self-esteem
- accessibility of the city and public transport
- physical barriers at the university
- limited number of adapted learning material
- teachers mindset, and attitude
- limited freedom of choice
- accessibility to the student life
- students with disabilities need extra effort to be integrated as foreign students

The project aimed at tackling several of the difficulties mentioned,

through its various activities, in particular problems related to the lack/absence of information for students with disabilities willing to go abroad to study. Indeed, it was clearly highlighted in the feedback received from participants during the project that students with disabilities are not always aware of the opportunities offered by the Erasmus programme.

It is essential that accessibility criteria are considered for all kind of disabilities, and as mentioned in the feedback and testimonies are adapted to the specific needs of the participants.

Evaluation of the various aspects of the project

The number of evaluation forms received does not allow for a very meaningful statistical analysis, but it however conveys good information for qualitative evaluation.

Site visits

The site visits have been an informative and enjoyable experience for participants. They seem to have reached their objective to make an experience abroad more “accessible” and to raise awareness about the issues faced by students with disabilities at university. According to the evaluations, participants with disabilities were enthusiastic and a majority of them expressed their willingness to take part in the Erasmus programme in the future.

A few remarks have been done:

- For the Bratislava visit, it was advised to give more time to find participants and to prepare for the event with the participants with disability. The time was short due to the winter break (one week), which created a bit of uncertainty and anxiety for some participants. It was also suggested to take more time for networking before the site visits in order to enable participants to get to know each other

better and foster interaction in the group between disabled and non-disabled participants.

- In Bratislava, a participant wished the ‘leisure time’ activities outside of the formal programme would have been more inclusive. Some of the activities planned had to be cancelled due to the weather conditions
- Several participants in the site visits wished the presentations made by some officials during the site visits would have been more focused on the topic of the project. Some presentations were found “too general and not enough concrete.” (Bratislava), other were not focused on the accessibility, but on a tour to the university (Tallinn).

Recommendations

- When planning and implementing the site visits: - take fully into account the needs of students with disabilities, including for the time allocated to activities (PwD may need more time to perform certain activities).
- Design fully inclusive activities in order to avoid that students with disabilities feel “left out” and that the essential part of the experience is spent discussing about disability, and not offering enough space to just socialize like any other student. Provide with enough time for informal contacts and discussion between participants, to allow them to share their experiences.
- Some site visits could have benefited from more involvement of the local authorities in the process. It could have further enhanced their own awareness of the issue and foster more commitment from them. It would be helpful to raise awareness beforehand of all the stakeholders for this kind of meeting, and encourage discussion by suggesting some concrete themes and issues.
- As a result of the site visits, it appears that giving the opportunity of experiencing short-term visits for students with disability before taking a decision is a very helpful initiative. It allows them to gather

information on the study program as well as the accessibility of the universities and the accommodation/ transport facilities. As highlighted in the external evaluation, due to their specific needs in terms of accessibility/assistance, going abroad is an even more stressful experience for students with disabilities than for the others. They therefore need to be adequately supported in that process.

Communication strategy /Dissemination / Final Event

A large number of events were used to disseminate information about the project, notably in the field of higher education. It seems that the various partners really made a good use of the existing opportunities.

The media chosen, i.e. website, videos and social media are efficient to reach out to young people. They can have a great multiplier effect.

The videos are a great tool, their upbeat style makes them really appealing and provide a positive image of disability, without focusing on the disabilities themselves. Their quality won them awards. A positive aspect is also that they have been made on a voluntary basis by students, Lena Dewaegenare and Mathias Ruelle. It should be highlighted because it also contributes to the cost effectiveness of the project.

They are efficient to raise awareness of the challenges but also to encourage more participation of young people with disabilities themselves in the Erasmus programme.

Also, the creation of an accessible website is another positive aspect of the project.

The Final event was a lively and informative moment for participants, punctuated with the screening of the videos and animated by a professional presenter, who provided a dynamic atmosphere. The guest speakers were enthusiastic and inspiring. The buffet-reception also provided a good opportunity for networking and socializing. It should be noted that a band with musicians with disabilities was playing, which is also a good way to promote inclusion and combat stereotypes.

Recommendations;

During the final event, maybe it would have been useful to have a more formal Q&A session. However, this was compensated by the opportunity provided for networking and informal discussions during the buffet.

Conclusions and follow-up of the project

As indicated above, the ExchangeAbility project achieved its objectives and participants provided a lot of positive feedback. However, there is still a lot of challenges to be addressed to allow the full participation of students with disabilities in the Erasmus programme, and this project should be considered as a starting point rather than an end.

Accessibility should be a key element for universities. Higher education is important to have equal access to employment opportunities, and it is highlighted as a priority by the European Union.

As enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of People with disabilities (ratified by the EU in 2010) , art. 24 on Education provides that:

“5. 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.”

Taking part in the Erasmus programme is very enriching from an academic and linguistic perspective. It is also a concrete way to reinforce the European identity. Moreover, it is also a very empowering experience for all kind of students, with or without disabilities. For students it is a way to acquire more independence, to challenge their fear. The soft skills acquired during an Erasmus experience have lasting benefits later on in life, and are a strong asset to access employment.

Being an Erasmus student conveys the feeling that you belong to a wider community. It is important for any students, but all the more for students with disabilities who are more at risk of social exclusion.

The exchangeability project has given an impetus to foster the participation of students with disability in the ESN activities and the Erasmus programme. It should be followed-up and carried on in the future, with the participation of all the relevant stakeholders: students – with and without disabilities - universities and decision-makers.

During the final event, the future prospects and follow-up of the project were evoked. Partners were notably planning to reinforce the cooperation between UNICA, ESN and EDF, and create/sustain working groups devoted to disability in ESN and UNICA. It would indeed allow to take into consideration the needs of students (or anyone involved in higher education with a disability for that

matter) into consideration.

Cooperation on the national level between UNICA, ESN, EDF as well as National Agencies and Higher Education Institutions should be sustained. Policy-makers should also be involved as much as possible in the process, in order to encourage change.

It was also suggested to produce a new edition of the Guidebook «make ESN an accessible organization» for the ESN sections and HEIs including the material from the project. It is necessary to regularly update the guide in order to keep it relevant.

It could also be enriched with examples of best practices as regard accessibility and reasonable accommodation in various universities in order to promote mutual learning. Alternatively a separate compendium of good practices could be drafted.

Universities (and all the related facilities) should become fully accessible for students with disabilities. When considering accessibility of the university, all kind of disabilities (sensory, motor, intellectual, developmental – such as autism, etc), etc, should be taken into consideration, it should encompass not only the need for physical accessibility but any kind of support/accommodation needed by students with disabilities to benefit from higher education.

The recommendations on minimum standards for accessibility at universities adopted by UNICA should be widely disseminated and updated if needed, in cooperation with representatives of people with disabilities.

Persons with disabilities should be closely associated with or

involved in all these activities (nothing about people with disabilities without people with disabilities).

A meeting of the UNICA working group on disabilities and equal opportunities was organised in February 2011. The Executive Director of the European Access Network (Michael Cooper) was invited to attend. The experts in the field from other universities of the network assessed the development of the project and made interesting suggestions and valuable recommendations.

ExchangeAbility was perceived as a very stimulating and promising project, and all the participants were interested in following up its development.

Outcomes and suggestions from the Consortium

The ExchangeAbility consortium advocates the need of legal regulations and support to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with disabilities (ratified by the EU in 2010), quoted as well by our external evaluator Aurelie. As mentioned in the Convention, art. 24 on Education:

“5. 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.”

As far as the services are working on a good will basis, students with disabilities will always feel that they are fighting against the current. When there is a change and it becomes binding, the perceptions change. In addition, in Europe most policies still lack an inclusive approach because in general disabilities are perceived as something separate from the rest. In addition, the social policies and support schemes in the EU are a competence of the member states, and there is no harmonisation. Thus, the current EU social model does not guarantee social rights for all when there is a cross-border mobility of citizens. Every EU member state should be encouraged to ratify the UN convention in order to help overcoming these barriers.

ExchangeAbility promotes inclusive education. The exchange of experience on the accessibility of the educational and social

environment is of utmost importance. The voices of disabled people need to be heard and their human rights must be respected, especially in open-minded environments such as 21st century universities. Students do not have to adapt to the environment, but the environment has to be adapted to the needs of students. However, in many cases the notion of an inclusive learning environment is stuck in words and not enough actions are taken. It is very important to work bottom-up and to establish a dialogue with students, higher education institutions and organisations.

The discussions raised on the occasion of the different site visits have helped identify some of the recurrent barriers to the mobility of students with disabilities:

Physical barriers at universities and other campus facilities

It is a real challenge to adapt old buildings, especially because the financial resources needed are usually very high. Inside most university buildings we can find areas with elevators, ramps and accessible toilets. However not all the itineraries to access the different parts of the buildings are accessible and some elevators and ramps are not really accessible. Three types of buildings can be identified: accessible, semi-accessible and non-accessible. A university cannot be considered accessible if any of its buildings is not.

To solve these problems, personalised study programmes are arranged sometimes, but this is not always the case. It is necessary to increase the number of accessible faculties and university facilities such as student dormitories, sport centres, etc. The accessibility of the physical environment can be somehow overcome with more flexibility to arrange personalised study programmes and accessible classrooms when there are students in wheelchairs in a course.

Non-physical barriers and teachers' mindset

Sometimes human barriers are the most complex ones. Universities have to be accessible from a physical point of view, but also the study and learning environments have to be accessible. The student-teacher relationship is based on good communication, and this is one of the main barriers still to remove. Many professors react to work with students with disabilities, in most cases due to a lack of information and knowledge. Every professor should be aware of the diversity of the students attending his/her lessons. They should be trained with focus on a variety of pedagogical methods, guidance and tools to meet the needs of this diverse population and take their right to learn into account. A mentality change can also be achieved through consultation on the different policy levels. The lessons should have an open learning ambiance and the materials must be accessible for the wide range of students. Working from a universal perspective is less time-consuming, cheaper and benefits everyone. Another good example of non-physical barrier is the electronic system to enrol or to register for exams. Sometimes these systems are completely inaccessible for blind students and it is difficult to make the extract rules more flexible. People with disabilities do not want to be segregated, isolated, but want to share time and experiences with their non-disabled peers. Considering this, the involvement of non-disabled will be felt as a sign of respect and inclusion for students with disabilities participating in the Erasmus programme.

Lack of Accessible learning materials and lectures

There are many aspects to improve in this concern. For instance, in the case of deafness, not all interpreters can interpret in an academic context or specialised fields. Moreover, they cannot be available 24 hours. As far as blindness is concerned, transforming mathematics into braille can be a very challenging issue. Some

symbols and graphs are difficult to translate through screen readers. In most cases the professors do not know how the systems work, that is why it is important to maintain a good communication with them. Individual adjustments are good tools to facilitate the learning process of students with disabilities. Some universities have support centres for students with disabilities and digital libraries, but this is not the case in all the European universities. In many cases NGOs take full responsibility of these issues. However, universities are accountable in assuring equal opportunities and inclusiveness, NGOs can play a supportive role, but should not have full responsibility.

Limited personal assistance and need of intensive assistance

Some students require permanent or intensive assistance. In many cases the family members assume this role, but this become a major issue if a student decides to study abroad. Many students do not participate in mobility programmes because they lack this assistance in the welcoming country, or because they are not available 24 hours. For instance, in Slovakia, disabled people receive financial support from the State; the amount each person is allocated depends on the type of disability and its seriousness. Traditionally universities do not provide support such as interpreters, guides or personal assistants. However, sometimes students with disabilities have not enough support and therefore, in the last two years, the university is starting to provide some aid, such as public transportation. The human support is a factor that also makes the difference, many volunteer students accompany students with disabilities to their lessons in their free time, volunteering should be promoted within the community.

Accessibility of cities and transports

One of the main challenges is the general inaccessibility of public

transports and spaces for certain types of disabilities, and more specifically for students with physical impairment and blindness. The stops are not always accessible and the information is not frequently accessible for visually impaired people. Maybe the museum is accessible, but the streets to get there are not. Universities are located in cities, students have to reach the university facilities and when the public transports and cities are not accessible, attending courses and participating in the social life can become an odyssey. There is some pressure to change this in most cities, but there is still a long way to walk in this respect.

Lack of self-confidence and fear of the unknown

Students with disabilities should be equipped with tools for independent and self-confident life styles. The role of advisors is fundamental to help them create a good image about themselves so that they are able to have a normal life like everyone else. An example is the training of blind students to move in the city and at the university on their own. Many universities already offer this service for blind students; others count on the support of NGOs. This should be an extended practice.

Freedom of choice

More than the actual programme, the most important thing when going to study abroad with a disability is to find an accessible university. This may limit the freedom of choice - a student may go to a university or city not because s/he really wants to study there, but because it is accessible. Flexibility in curriculum adaptation is a good key to provide more freedom to choose, it is principally based on awareness and smooth communication. Students must be given the opportunity to choose, they are intelligent enough to know what they are able to do or not. More cooperation among universities in terms of mobility can facilitate the freedom of choice; a student

may have more possibilities to study at a university better adapted to his/her needs.

Time-consuming preparation

The administrative burden already provides complexity to the process of applying for a programme to study and live abroad. For many students with disabilities this becomes even more difficult, a real barrier. Due to their specific needs in terms of accessibility/assistance, going abroad is an even more stressful experience for students with disabilities than for the others. Therefore, they need to be adequately supported in that process.

Lack of financial resources and financial support

The funds available to adapt buildings and to purchase special equipment are usually scarce. The EU provides some funds, but their availability is decreasing and they are not exclusively addressed to universities. Some universities solved these problems fundraising. For example, IBM Hungary has financed the creation of a support centre at ELTE University and provided the equipment to facilitate learning and language acquisition for students with disabilities, but unfortunately public-private collaborations are not very usual, but can be enhanced. Accessibility and inclusiveness are a matter of rights; otherwise the concept of inclusive education will not be tangible. Students with disabilities do not have to feel their disability at their learning environment; certain barriers are not related to a lack of funds. Reasonable and creative solutions can be found.

Lack of information concerning disability policies

The lack of information is one of the huge barriers still to break down. Most students with disabilities do not know about the policies and regulations concerning disabilities in other countries. Moreover, this information is not usually easy to access and is typically only available in the local language.

Incompatibility of support services in terms of mobility

Many universities refuse students with disabilities due to incompatibility of services or inaccessibility of buildings. For instance, in Slovakia universities do not provide personal assistance, students get allowances from the State. In the Czech Republic it is the other way round, students do not receive the support from the State, but from the university. In the case of Hungary, the funds go to the university budget and not to the student personally, but these funds are only for Hungarian students. The provision of notes by lecturers are not always available and is not regulated in all the European countries. In countries like Slovakia, note taking services must be covered by the allowance that each student receives, which is not the case in every country. The lack of a European framework in these aspects create a significant barrier.

Language dis-ability

Erasmus or any other mobility programme should imply learning the language and exploring the culture of the hosting country. Thus, it is important to be in contact with the local community. The lack of interaction with the local community affects in general all mobility students, however it becomes even more difficult for students with certain types of disabilities such as deafness.

Insufficient supply of study programmes in English

This is a obstacle for mobility in general that becomes even more relevant when we speak about disabled students and the lack of language teaching programmes adapted to their needs.

Difficult communication with the hosting university

Sometimes it is very difficult to find a university ready to welcome students with disabilities from other countries. Before finding

a hosting institution many students with disabilities encounter problems to be accepted as exchange students. The obstacles are not always linked with the lack of adequate infrastructures, but also with a poor communication between the hosting institutions, the sending university and the disabled student. Networks of universities such as UNICA may play an important role in improving the communication channels and supporting mobility.

Lack of information about mobility programmes for students with disabilities

The information available for students with special needs about mobility programmes is not enough, and sometimes does not exist. Most students participating in the project had never considered the possibility of participating in an exchange programme, simply because they had never heard about the existing opportunities. Higher education institutions and the European Commission could carry out a more intensive promotion of the Erasmus programme and other mobility programmes among disabled students.

Employability after studies

Another major difficulty identified is finding a job after the studies. In most countries there is a high unemployment rate among people with disabilities. Many disabled students continue studying after completing their studies due to the lack of self-confidence and job opportunities. Employers might be reluctant to hire a person with a disability because of fear, and an absence of understanding about the liability and cost of the accommodations needed. The transition to the labour market has to be improved and more support while participating in placements has to be provided. According to some national regulations, employers have to hire a certain percentage of employees with disabilities. Sometimes big companies do not find as many disabled employees as they need to meet the requirements. Mobility to the labour market should be promoted among students

with disabilities. The university career guidance officers should be trained to advise these students in their transition.

SOME ASPECTS THAT CAN BE CHANGED

- 1) Accessibility of the physical environment – at least make some reasonable steps to the environmental modification of the university buildings.
- 2) Cooperation of the university with the city administration and NGO's to facilitate the integration of disabled students in the cities.
- 3) Accessibility of the learning material in foreign languages, and in adapted formats. All the courses offered at universities should meet certain accessibility standards.
- 4) Training of sign language interpreters on academic and scientific languages, and in foreign languages.
- 5) Information on disability policies and accomodation possibilities for students with different disabilities in foreign languages on the university website. The university websites and enrolment systems must be accessible for visually impaired and blind people.
- 6) Raising awareness about disabilities among the university staff and other students to remove human barriers, and promoting peer assistance and volunteering.
- 7) Choosing representatives with disabilities in the local student associations and in the ESN sections. Fostering their participation in the local life.
- 8) Special language courses for students with disabilities
- 9) More intensive counselling for students with disability, and training for staff to support these students according to their needs.
- 10) Providing trained personal assistants.
- 11) Giving the opportunity of making short-term visits for students with disability before making a decision.

The last point (11) was addressed to the European Commission representatives as an opportunity that could be included in the

recently presented “Erasmus for All” programme.

Most students that have participated in exchange programmes highlight the importance of mobility for self-realisation, especially when we have a disability. After the project many students with disabilities affirmed feeling more confident than before to participate in exchange programmes. The contacts with other students with disabilities that have already experienced mobility and the short-term mobility promoted through the site visits have had a significant impact on them. Some students have even shown interest in applying for an Erasmus to the university that they have visited.

The European Agency for Special Education allows identifying which universities are accessible and which ones are not through a website (HEAG - Higher Education Accessibility Guide: <http://www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/heag>). It is very useful for students with disabilities going in Erasmus, and it has been promoted during the project. Many students with disabilities going abroad to study find an important source of support in other students. It is also essential to encourage the parents to animate their children to experience a study period abroad. Students with disabilities have to believe that there is nothing impossible, it is all about trying.

ExchangeAbility.eu

Do you want to know more? Do you want to share your experience? Are you an HEI officer willing to foster mobility among students with disabilities?

In any case, the best resource for you is ExchangeAbility.eu

- The website is accessible
- All the presentations held during the site visits are uploaded
- There is a report per each site visit
- Material gathered from other organizations attending the site visits is present
- Interactive... you can still submit your stories!
- All the wonderful videos are on the website. Don't miss them out!
- It's definitely nice and friendly!

The screenshot shows the ExchangeAbility.eu website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for HOME, ABOUT THE PROJECT, BLOGS, EVENTS, and SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCE. A search bar, contact link, and login link are also present. The main content area features a large article titled "5TH EXCHANGEABILITY VIDEO RELEASED: MEET SVEN!" with a sub-headline "ESTONIA SITE VISIT TALLINN: TALLINN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY". The article text describes Sven, a student with disabilities, and his experience at Tallinn University of Technology. Below the text is a "Read more..." link and a social media share bar. To the right, there is a "COLOR SWITCH" section with a dropdown menu set to "Color" and a "Switch" button. Below that is an "ABOUT EXCHANGEABILITY" section with a "read block" link, followed by a paragraph of text about the project's goals and participation statistics. Further down is an "EXCHANGEABILITY VIDEOS" section with a list of video titles: "Meet Lennart", "Meet Pasi Sauri", "Meet Agnès", "Meet Zeno", and "Meet Evert". At the bottom, there is a "PREVIOUS BLOG POSTS" section with a "configure edit view" link and a list of previous posts, including "4TH EXCHANGEABILITY VIDEO RELEASED: MEET ZENO" and "3RD EXCHANGEABILITY VIDEO RELEASED: MEET AGNÈS". The website has a clean, modern design with a pink and white color scheme.

Award Winning... ...Video!

One of the most acclaimed outcomes of the project are the 5 wonderful videos of the site visits.

Meet Lenka, Mei Lan, Sven, Agnes, Zenon and discover these award winning video!

the video of Mei Lan in Brussels was awarded with the 1st place in the EQUINET Competition 2011 (<http://www.equinet.info/equinet-competition-2011/>) and the video of Sven in Tallinn with the 3rd place in the competition "Baltic Sea Region – a good place for living" (http://www.bsssc.com/index.php?system_cms=7&s=41).

The videos were done by students of Erasmushogeschool Brussels, Mathias Ruelle and Lena Dewaegaenere, on a voluntary basis.



Portret of Mei Lan in Brussels (Belgium)

5 months ago



Portret of Sven in Tallinn (Estonia)

5 months ago



Portret of Agnes in Budapest (Hungary)

5 months ago



Portret of Zenon in Nicosia (Cyprus)

5 months ago



Portret of Lenka in Bratislava (Slovakia)

5 months ago

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The project was presented and/or promoted at 78 international events addressing different stakeholders across Europe and beyond. The movies were also screened on numerous occasions and have around 5,000 views on Youtube and Vimeo.

www.exchangeability.eu



Education and Culture DG

Lifelong Learning Programme

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