

**Site visit Comenius University Bratislava
30 January - 2 February 2011**

REPORT

Attended: See list of participants in attachment

Monday, 31 January

The event starts with a visit to the Rectorate and Faculty of Law and Faculty Philosophy of Comenius University Bratislava. The building is semi-accessible and wheelchair users have to enter through an specific door. Inside the building we can find areas with elevators, ramps and accessible toilets, however not all the itineraries to access the different parts of the building are accessible. It is a real challenge to adapt old buildings and to make them accessible. The financial reasources needed are very high.

The group is welcomed by the vice-rector for intenational relations who introduces the university and its main achievements. All the participants visit the Aula magna of the university and other facilities.

The meeting starts with a tour de table. Lukas Dvonc (ExchangeAbility ambassador) introduces the programme of the site visit. A map with all the faculties and institute is included in the material provided to all participants. One of the main challenges is the general inaccessibility of public transports for disabled people and more specifically for students with physical imparement. There is some preasure to change this. Some bus lines are accessibles, but trams are not.

Elena Mendelova (Support Centre for Students with Special Needs) speaks about the opportunities and challenges for students with disabilities at Comenius University. Each faculty has a disability coordinator who provide support, help to break barriers and raise awarness on disability matters. The Support Centre for Students with Special Needs was spefically designed for students with visual impairment in the past (since 1993). At present it offers services for students with different disabilities.

Some services provided by the university for students with disabilities:

- preferential allocation of room on campus

- barrier-free room in student dormitory
- accommodation for personal assistant free of charge
- transportation service for students with physical disability
- extension of study period for free
- sign language or articulation interpretation
- problem-solving assistance

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 or guides. 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. Sometimes the university also provides interpreters, but it is hard to find good sign language interpreters for scientific studies. These services are starting to form. Guidedogs can enter the university and also the dormitories.

Academic support received by students with special needs:

- guidance/ co-operation with the applicants in advance
- entrance exams provision
- introduction to the academic environment
- reasonable adjustments during study
- individual study plan

Students with disabilities do not have to pay extra for prologation of studies. At the University there are around 130 students with a declared disability. There are still a lot of barriers to the mobility of students in wheelchair. Three types of buildings can be identified:

- Accessible
- Semi-accessible
- Non-accessible

It is necessary to change this and to increase the number of accessible faculties. To solve this problems, sometimes some personalised study programmes are arranged. Blind students receive a very intensive mobility training when they start their studies at Comenius University.

Technical support provided for students with disabilities:

- computer room
- development of technical skills
- transformation of study texts for the blind
- breaking down barriers
- Accessible rooms in dormitory
- mobility training and guidance

Some figures are presented:

Outgoing Erasmus students with disabilities from the Slovak Republic and Comenius University

2006/2007 - 4 students from SR, 3 of them students of CU

2007/2008 - 2 students from SR, 1 from CU

2008/2009 - 5 students from SR, 4 z CU

2009/2010 - 6 students from SR, 5 from CU

2010/2011 - 2 students from SR, 1 from CU

In-coming Erasmus students with disabilities at Comenius University

Two students with severe disabilities in last 3 years

2008/2009 - 1 student with visual and physical impairment (Portugal)/ FMFI - applied informatics

2010/2011 - 1 student with physical impairment, wheelchair (Poland)/ FSES

The group moves to the Support centre for students with special needs (SEN Centre) which is located at the Faculty of Mathematics, Physics and Informatics. All the computers are equipped with braille displays and screen reader JAWS, a software that allows blind people accessing the information presented in electronic form. One of the students from Tallinn University of Technology is impressed by the system to transform graphs into tactile form. There is no similar centre in Tallinn University of Technology. Transforming mathematics into braille can be a very challenging matter. Some symbols and graphs are difficult to translate through screen readers. Lambda is a special software for mathematics that translates them for blind people, it was developed through a EU project. In most cases the professors do not know how the system works, it is important to involve them. The faculty already count on a library of digital books. Blind students can have an individual training at the support centre.

The Faculty of Mathematics is visited. The building has been adapted to allow the access of wheelchair users. There are automatic ramps and elevators. However, some elevators and ramps are not really accessible. The group meets some staff members with disabilities at the Faculty of Natural Sciences. They speak about the accessibility of the building and the services available for students with disabilities.

In Slovakia there are no secondary schools for blind people. Students usually learn in mainstream secondary schools and must follow additional special training. It is highlighted the necessity of teaching blind students to be independent to move in the city and at the university. There are many things to be changed in terms of accessibility, for example, the electronic system to register for exams is completely inaccessible for the blind and it is difficult to change it. Sometimes human barriers are the most complex ones, not only the university

has to be accessible from a physical point of view, but also the study and learning environment have to be accessible.

Some students take with them some examples of graphs in braille to show them in Estonia at the faculty of mathematics. The accessible diagrams have different levels of tactile sensitiveness that correspond to different colours or 3D representations.

After lunch the group attends a seminar organised by the hosting institution in the framework of the ExchangeAbility site visit. The title is 'Studying abroad with a disability – When Dreams become reality'. The event starts with an opening speech by vice-rector Peter Osusky. The different speakers gave an overview about the situation of disabled people in Bratislava and Tallinn. The students with disabilities contributions about their own experiences gave courage to others to continue studies abroad.

- ▶ Jozef Jurkovic, representative from the Slovak Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport presents the general policy of Slovakia vis-à-vis people with special needs. He informs that the Government will reform the funding of social support for tertiary education students and their sports and cultural activities in such a way that the funds are linked to the student, enabling him/her a free choice of a service provider, and reflect the student's dependence on social support. The Government will also support the establishment and development of assistance centres for university students with disabilities and to train staff.
- ▶ Marian Miskanin, representative from the municipality of Bratislava speaks about the policies of the city to increase the accessibility of public spaces and the creation of services for people with special needs. In terms of transportation (MHD – Municipal Mass Transit), the city counts on buses, trams and trolleybuses that are not fully accessible. The stops are not always accessible neither. The municipality has the intention of changing this situation and is starting to introduce the barrier free and universal design concepts. Some of them have already been applied in certain areas of the city: Tactile paving, automatic doors, low-floor buses, etc. A lot of work is still to be done.
- ▶ Eva Reina, UNICA project manager presents ExchangeAbility and highlights the importance of increasing trans-European cooperation among students with disabilities.
- ▶ Marco La Rosa, ESN coordinator of ExchangeAbility discusses the online communication tools available for the project partners to facilitate the exchange of best practices and experiences. He also explains the dissemination actions that the partnership will implement to multiply the effect of the project across Europe.

- ▶ Elena Mendelova speaks about the Support center for students with special needs and services offered by the hosting university (see above).
- ▶ Sven Kollamets, ExchangeAbility ambassador from Tallinn University of Technology gives a presentation titled 'Who are the young people with disabilities?'
- ▶ Kadi Säreava, ExchangeAbility ambassador from Tallinn University of Technology speaks about her experience as an exchange student in Sweden. She explains that this opportunity changed her life and was very rewarding. She encourages other students to participate in mobility programmes.
- ▶ Veronika Vojtechovska, former student of Comenius University Bratislava, represents the organization Myslim, centre for Deaf culture. She illustrates the audience telling her story as an Erasmus student in Czech Republic where she studied Special Education. Veronika explains that she found a lot of support from in the Charles University Prague, where she was able to have a sign language interpreter for all the courses. She stresses that more than the actual programme, the most important thing when going to study abroad with a disability is to find a university without barriers.
- ▶ Darina Ondrusova, ExchangeAbility ambassador and PhD student at Comenius University Bratislava tells her experience as Erasmus student in Germany. She stayed with a host family during her period abroad. Darina stresses the importance of being close to the local people in order to get to know about the culture and the language. She found a lot of support at the hosting university to cover her needs as blind student. Darina recommends all the students to take the opportunity to go and study abroad.

The group meets at the UFO restaurant to meet a team paraolympionists who tell their stories and explained how sports changed their lives. This meeting gave the impression that nothing is impossible. Their example of how to reach the high goals despite of the disabilities gave lot of thoughts and admiration for everyone.

<http://cezap.sk/projekty/exchangeability/site-visit-bratislava/our-paralympionists/>

Tuesday, 1 February

The group is welcomed by the Dean of the Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences (FSES) and by the Dean of Faculty of Philosophy. Two vice-deans from the Faculty of Education participate in this meeting as well. The building of FSES is completely new and accessible. It has ramps, elevators, automatic doors. The installation was made a couple of months before. The participants visit the canteen, some classrooms and the computer room. Sven Kollamets realises that the way the tables are set does not allow a wheelchair user getting a place in front of a computer. The deans and rest of staff are informed and take note to redistribute the tables.

There are four study programmes in the Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences with a large number of visiting students. There is a student from Poland in a wheelchair doing his masters at the faculty. Darina Ondrusova is doing her PhD at this faculty and shows around the building. She explains that the new faculty has made her life much easier.

Sometimes it is very difficult to find a university ready to welcome students with severe disabilities from other countries. Before finding a hosting institution many students with disabilities encounter problems to be accepted as exchange students. Elena Mendelova gives examples of students with visual impairment who were refused in several European universities before being accepted as Erasmus student. It is not the only case, many universities refuse students with disabilities due to incompatibility of services or unaccessibility 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.

HEAG is a website from the European Agency for Special Education that allows identifying which universities are accessible and which ones are not. It is very useful for students with disabilities going in Erasmus. Many students with disabilities going abroad to study find the support of other students. It is also important to encourage the parents to leave their children going to study abroad. (HEAG - Higher Education Accessibility Guide: <http://www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/heag>)

The event finishes with a visit to the city centre of Bratislava and a lunch in a restaurant. The activity with tasks in the city centre is cancelled due to the weather conditions, it is snowing. In the evening a Slovak party is organised by ESN Comenius University. All the students eat typical food from Slovakia and dance with a band. Some sensitization activities are organized.

Steering Committee

The members of the steering committee meet to discuss the outcomes of the site visit. Everybody found it very interesting and fruitful. The officers from each university, hosting and visiting, will provide UNICA with a short report speaking about their impressions. They will ask the support of the ExchangeAbility ambassadors.

Some conclusions regarding the reasons for low participation of students with disabilities in mobility programmes are outlined:

- time consuming preparation
- need of intensive assistance
- fear of the unknown (people, environment,...)
- lack of self-confidence

- problematic communication with the host university
- absence of relevant information
- language dis-ability
- incompatibility of support services
- insufficient supply of study programs in English
- attractiveness of the country

ESN will send an online evaluation form that will be filled out by all the participants, including the invited speakers. The students are encouraged to participate in the blog and the facebook group.

Regarding the financial aspects, the hosting university will send a financial report to the project coordinator including all the invoices related to the organization of the event. The university officers of Tallinn University of Technology provide the project coordinator with the per diem forms of the visiting group. UNICA will process the payments as soon as possible.

There are no questions regarding the work plan or the evolution of the project.

The participants thank Comenius University Bratislava for their warm welcome and great organization, and especially Elena Mendelova, Magdalena Belkova and students. The next site visit will take place in Brussels on 15-16 February and will be count on the participation of the Cypriot team. All the partners will be able to follow the preparation through the Google group mailing list. This may help other site visit organisers to get ideas. An external evaluator will be invited to the following site visit.