

Site visit to Erasmushogeschool Brussel 15-16 February 2011

REPORT

Attended: See list of participants in attachment

Reporting: Eva Reina, UNICA Project Manager

Tuesday, 15 February

The event starts with a speed dating activity in the RITS Café of Erasmushogeschool Brussel(EhB). All the participants get to know each other and speak about their experience and background.

The site visit of the buildings starts in the RITS campus of the university. **Mei Lan Ng**, ExchangeAbility Ambassador, shows the building where she studies. The group then moves to the Dansaert campus of EhB. Students with disabilities receive a training to learn how to move at the university when they begin their studies. We can find elevators, ramps and accessible toilets.

Helga Stevens, Member of the Belgian Senate, shares her experience with the participants. When she decided to study Law, there were no cases of deaf students studying Law in Belgium. There was only one example in Sweden in 1986. She decided anyway to study Law and enrolled in the University of Leuven where she received support of somebody who would take notes for her. She then went to study in Washington DC at Gallaudet University <http://www.gallaudet.edu/>, the only university in the world where lectures are given in sign language. She explains that 25 years ago in USA a deaf student could have a full time interpreter, which is not the case in most European countries today, including Belgium.

Helga explains that Erasmus must be about learning the language of the country you live in, but this is a big barrier for deaf people. However, she encourages students to believe that there is nothing impossible, 'it is all about trying and if you fail, at least you tried.'

Deafness is an invisible disability and this has its advantages and disadvantages. There are still many things to change to fight discrimination. According to her, the European social model does not guarantee social rights for all yet. This is a bit contradictory if we take into account the social security and the welfare state

models that prevail in Europe. The culture and mentality in Europe has still to change. Being a Republican President, George H. W. Bush pushed for the enactment of a law for disabilities in the USA. In Belgium most politicians perceive disabilities as something separate from the rest. That is why most policies do not have an inclusive approach. 'In USA you have disability, so what?' There is a shared responsibility, and this is according to Helga what has to change in the European mind-set. This is maybe due to the fact that in Europe there is no culture of going to the court in case of discrimination.

Helga highlights that people with disabilities are too good, they do not go to the streets to protest and this makes social changes slower and not enough. She thinks that if universities are not responsible for equal opportunities and this matter is transferred to the NGOs there is a problem.

She stresses that the key aspects to make things improve are based on respect, diversity and inclusiveness. Many deaf people prefer to develop their lives within the deaf culture. For her it is all about two languages to communicate that create somehow two different worlds. She prefers to live in both worlds; but it is difficult to interact with the non-deaf world because interpreters are not available 24 hours. However, when you succeed, it is very gratifying. It is a matter of individual choice. Her kids are bilingual because they are being educated in two languages.

Pawel Wdowik, Disability officer at the University of Warsaw and external evaluator of ExchangeAbility, stresses that legal regulations are needed. As far as the services are working on a good will basis, it will always be about fighting against the current. 'When there is a change and it becomes binding, the perceptions change. Students must make their choices, they are intelligent enough to know what they are able to do or not. The UN convention should be ratified to help the situation. However, there is a difference between reality and theory.'

The contribution of Helga is highly appreciated by the students who positively feed the discussion by posing numerous questions.

After lunch the group visits some historical parts of Brussels. The accessibility of the Grand Place for wheelchair users is put into question. The intention is to go to the European Parliament using the public transports to test them, however due to a strike in this service, the activity has to be cancelled.

A Greek Cypriot guide welcomes the group in the European Parliament. He provides information about the functioning of the EP and its role. The students ask many questions about the decision-making process and the place of disabilities in this process. The guide provides an overview about the work of the Committee for Employment and Social Affairs, which takes care of disability matters. All the discussions that took place in the Committee can be found on the website of the EP

http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/organes/empl/empl_7leg_meetinglist.htm

Following a policy of reasonable accommodation, the European Parliament is constantly monitoring accessibility and is taking steps to improve the accessibility of its buildings and services. Most of its facilities are accessible.

The group leaves the Parliament to go around the European neighbourhood. After some rest the group meets for dinner and attends a concert in the RITS Café of EhB.

Wednesday, 16 February

Annelore Schittecatte, International Relation Office of the Erasmushogeschool Brussel, chairs the seminar. It starts with some presentations and roundtable discussions. The different speakers provide with an overview about the situation of disabled people in both countries and at European level.

- ▶ **Eva Reina**, UNICA project manager, presents ExchangeAbility and highlights the importance of mobility for employability and the necessity of extending inclusive policies at universities. She underlines the purpose and the strategy undertaken to achieve the objectives forecasted in the project.
- ▶ **Marco La Rosa**, ESN coordinator of ExchangeAbility, speaks about the online communication tools available for the project partners to share best practices and experiences. He also explains the dissemination actions that the partnership will implement to multiply the effect of the project outcomes across Europe.
- ▶ **Annemie De Rouck** (EhB) and **Sofie Giets** (Sovehb) explain the policy of Erasmushogeschool Brussel on disability matters. Since the academic year 2004-2005 there is a special statute for students with disabilities aiming at facilitating and increasing their participation in higher education. This has led to an integration of disability issues in the educational regulations and the design of a diversity plan. The statutes include the following types of disabilities:
 - Mobility impairments
 - Hearing impairments
 - Visual impairments
 - Chronic diseases
 - Psychiatric disorders (including autism / ADHD)
 - Learning disorder

The procedure is initiated by the student and it counts on the support of the student counsellor of the department concerned and the student psychologist of social services. They analyse the elements that make it difficult to follow the chosen courses, the facilities needed and they check the attestations. The application has to be approved by the department

council and is followed up by the student counsellor. The professors are informed and a meeting to evaluate the facilities and eventually to adjust them is organised. Since the statute was enacted the number of students applying for it has progressively increased. Today around 100 students have apply for it.

The service does not provide a standard package for all types of disabilities, but a personalised assistance service.

Some examples of support provided:

- Movement disability (*e.g. writing difficulty*)
Student may use a laptop during his/her exam.
- Auditory disability (*e.g. students with a reduced hearing*)
The teacher doesn't use tape record for listening tasks.
- Visual disability (*e.g. students with a reduced visibility*)
Examination papers are offered in a larger size.
- Chronic disability (*e.g. students with Crohn's disease*)
Student may leave the examination room to go to the toilet.
- Psychiatric disability (*e.g. ADHD*)
Student may leave the classroom when attention drops.
- Learning disability (*e.g. students with dyslexia*)
During exams no points are deducted for spelling.

However not all the applications can be approved, for example:

A student with dyslexia that follows the course 'Journalism' does get a reduction in points due to spelling errors. This is because the standard of the course has to remain the same for all students. If spelling mistakes would be accepted, the standard would decrease.

There are 3 criteria to determine if the support can be approved:

1. **Feasibility:** a support service aims to make it feasible for students with a disability to attend classes or to take examinations. Students with a disability must have equal opportunities as any other student.
2. **Acceptability:** the support service must be acceptable for the teacher. A task or examination should have the same standard, regardless of the support granted. The skills or knowledge that are pursued may not change, only the way in which the skills or knowledge are acquired can be different.
3. **Justifiability:** a support service must be justifiable to other students. Other students may not feel penalized in proportion to the student with support.

So far the Erasmushogeschool Brussel has no experience in sending disabled students and only welcomed once a student with a visual impairment. She was accompanied by a fellow Erasmus student and Erasmushogeschool Brussels called upon the help of the 'Braille ligue' for familiarising her with Brussels. Visiting students with disabilities can also apply for the special statute granted to home students with special needs.

- ▶ **Christina Matsouka-Andreaou**, Social Support Officer at the University of Cyprus, presents an overview of the services offered to students with disabilities at her home institution. This presentation is very useful in order to compare policies and services of the two participating institutions. Further information is provided in the report of the site visit to Cyprus.
- ▶ **Raf Devos**, Chief of the Cabinet of the Flemish Minister of Education & Equal Opportunities, addresses some words regarding the actions programme of his administration. He lists the key points on which the Flemish administration will focus to guarantee a better access to education for students with disabilities.
 - 1) Mapping obstacles of students willing to participate in mobility programmes. The student population must reflect society and this is directly related to the social dimension of higher education. The participation of students with disabilities in higher education is still very low in Belgium. The Flemish government wants to increase the figures and data on mobility of disabled students in higher education.
 - 2) Promoting inclusive education. Students do not have to adapt to the environment, but the environment has to adapt to students. Accessibility and inclusiveness are a question of rights, not of money; otherwise the concept of inclusive education will not be tangible. Students with disabilities do not have to feel their disability.
 - 3) Research for extra financing for international mobility. Higher education in Flanders is financed according to the student points. For people with disabilities the institution gets more finances than for a student without disabilities, institutions get more money that they are meant to receive if they are inclusive, this money has to be used to adapt facilities and to provide adequate services.

Raf also stresses that there are still many deficiencies and weaknesses in the policies carried on by his own administration in the last few years.

- ▶ **Christian De Strycker** and **Veerle Vaereberg**, representatives of MIVB/STIB (Brussels public transports service), explain to the participants what are the main services that the public transport system of Brussels is currently able to offer to people with disabilities. Public transportation in Belgium is a regional competence and it is difficult to approach it when there are 19 municipalities, as it is the case in Brussels. The MIVB/STIB transports around 500.000 people every day. The system offers special public transportation for residents who need it. The requests must be sent the MIVB/STIB and the user must accredit that s/he has a special need. The STIB arranges regular transportation for the user with special needs at the same price as a normal public transport ticket. The network counts:
 - 329 trams out of them 124 lower and 105 with ramp.
 - 621 buses all low floor and 210 provided with a ramp.

- 18 specialised minibuses for deeper special needs, same prices as any other service.

Since one year ago, there is a strong commitment to improve the accessibility of the network. The regional mobility commission section PRM deals with the accessibility issues in public transportation. There is a common global look on accessibility of transportation in Belgium and a common action plan. The MIVB/STIB shares good practices with other cities in Europe that encounter the same problems.

48 projects applicable to the STIB are currently running, they are based in the following methodology:

4 accessibility axis

- Access to the information
- Access to the infrastructure
- Access to the rolling material
- The human factor

3 broad outlines

- Bringing accessibility into play on the network
- Maintenance of the accessibility
- Long term action for the gap's reduction

9 approached themes

- PRM policy
- Traveller information
- Blind and visually impaired people
- Buying and validation of transport ticket
- Bringing accessibility into play
- Maintenance of the accessibility
- Gap reduction
- Assistance to PRM customers
- On demand transportation

Mai Lan Ng, ExchangeAbility Ambassador from EhB, questions the usability of installed signs in braille in the metro. The speakers explained that NGOs pressures 25 years ago supported the placement of these signs. Mei Lan informs that they are not very used by the blind people, when they do not find the way they just ask somebody. The MIVB/STIB is nevertheless thinking about other systems such as the provision of hearing information, remote control or recognition of language and location for the owner of the device who will always carry it with him/her. The presenters underline that many efforts are being made to improve the quality of already existing services, but it is work in progress.

- ▶ **Nicolas Marichael** presents USE-IT, a non-profit TOURIST OFFICE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE in Brussels. USE-IT provides maps and guides of several cities made by the locals who know better what is going on in the city. Young people with disabilities have things in common with other young people, more than with older people with disabilities. USE-IT has developed a guide to discover Brussels on a wheelchair. Maybe the

museum is accessible, but the streets are not, so it works with maps. Volunteers have checked and tested the accessibility of the streets in the city centre. They use 3 colours to identify accessible spots, streets where the person needs the help of somebody and the non-accessible areas. Both sides of the streets can have different colours. This is a pilot project that for the moment has only been developed in Brussels.

- ▶ **Marc Stockmans** presents the non-profit association Quartier Latin, which was jointly set up by all of the Dutch-speaking colleges of higher education and universities in Brussels. Quartier Latin helps students at Dutch-speaking institutions find their bearings in Brussels. Quartier Latin has one central accommodation service where students can gain access to an extensive database of student accommodation in the private sector (more than 4000 private student rooms are available). The organisation also provides a forum where both tenants and landlords can find information and seek mediation. Moreover, Quartier Latin itself owns a large number of student rooms (almost 500) available for rent in the centre of Brussels. Their website is accessible and provides information about the accessibility of housing. They have around 700 rooms accessible for everybody in the database. But there are not many questions about accessibility matters. Mei Lan who lives in a room of Quartier Latin suggests to establish certain rules in the student houses concerning the support for students with disabilities living in the building. The students moving to one of the houses should be asked to help the students with disabilities living there. This Project is not happening in Brussels at this moment, but it would make life easier. The representative of Quartier Latin explains that nothing has been done on this respect because no requests have been received so far.

- ▶ **Karen Leyman** and **Debbie De Neve** from SIHO (Support Centre for Inclusive Higher Education) show their initiative, which aims to promote equal opportunities and full participation in higher education for students with disabilities. They explained that SIHO is specialized in taking actions to remove any obstacle, which undermines the full participation of any student. This means that SIHO encourages disabled people to make the most of their living, learning and employment opportunities.

- ▶ **Sander Van der Maelen** presented the VVS – Association of Flemish Students. This association is the official umbrella organization of the student councils in Flanders, expressing the opinion of students about education and subjects related to education. The main aim of VVS is defending the rights of the students in the framework of the democratization of education. That means giving everybody the same opportunity to go to school, without any discrimination. They promote inclusiveness in all levels of student participation, decision-making and support to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Currently VVS is running several projects:

- The Research concerning the participation of students with a disabilities
- Best-practices manual
- Negotiating a global vision and approach to students with a disability in Flanders

Steering Committee

The members of the steering committee meet to discuss the outcomes of the site visit. The officers from each university will write a short report for the project records. They will ask the support of the ExchangeAbility ambassadors who will provide their impressions and views.

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. A story competition will be launched with a prize.

Pawel Wdowik will provide an evolution report highlighting his impressions and with some recommendations.

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. UNICA will process the payments as soon as possible.

The participants thank EhB for their warm welcome and wonderful organization. The next site visit will take place in Budapest on 24-25 March and will count on the participation of the Slovakian delegation.