

Site visit to Tallinn University of Technology 5-6 May 2011

REPORT

Attended: See list of participants in attachment

Reporting: Eva Reina, UNICA Project Manager

Thursday, 5 May

The event starts with a seminar opened by the Rector of Tallinn University of Technology (TUT). He presents the programme and welcomes all the participants. Prof. Andres Keevallik explains that the campus is fully accessible for wheelchair users. We can find elevators, ramps and accessible toilets everywhere. The university has made a big investment in adapting the old buildings and making sure that the new ones are accessible.

The different speakers give an overview of the situation of disabled students in both countries and the existing policies at national level.

The representatives from Tallinn University of Technology provide some information concerning the situation of students with special needs and the existent legislation in Estonia.

The Law of Primary School and Gymnasium defines the pupil with special educational requirements, which includes all types of physical and mental disabilities, behavioral and emotional disorders and extreme brightness. Learning disabilities are not recognized as disabilities under this law. Disabled students are entitled to receive special conditions, adapted study programmes, study support, special permissions concerning, for instance, examination, etc. These measures aim to guarantee the maximum attendance to courses and the individual development of the students.

The Law of Social Support for disabled people does not classify the disabilities into types but according to their degree of severity, which is established considering the need of personal assistance, guidance or supervision. The extent of disabilities is divided into three categories: moderate, severe and profound. According to the law the study support (among other types of help) is foreseen for studies in vocational training and higher education.

The Law on Universities only mentions disabled students in its paragraph about supports: 'If the study curriculum is not fulfilled during the nominal period, disabled students can prolong their study period free of charge.'

Tallinn University of Technology has no special regulations on disabled students. The regulation for admission stipulates that the Admissions' Committee has the right to accept up to 5 extra students in case of disability or orphanage.

Students with special needs can apply for allocations from the state and the municipality (i.e. for transports, etc.). They can also apply to get support from the ESF Primus programme.

Since the Law on Protection of Personal Data prohibits asking any information about disabilities, it is up to the student whether to give the information about their disability when filling enrolment form or not. This means that universities in Estonia do not have proper databases about the number of students with disabilities enrolled.

Some figures could be given concerning the number of students who have received support from ESF Primus programme.

In 2009 the support was given to 26 students, in the academic year 2010-2011 a total of 77 students received support.

- 33 applications concerning the mobility impairment
- 18 applications concerning the visual impairment
- 13 applications concerning the disability to work
- 7 applications concerning the hearing impairment
- 5 applications concerning other special needs

Type of support provided:

- 50 grants for transportation
- 41 grants for multiplying
- 39 grants for personal assistant
- 5 grants for signed language interpreter
- 2 grants for special tools

Since 2009, 21 students from TUT received the Primus grant, 3 out of them use wheelchairs. The number of students with special needs is growing in TUT. The information available has increased in the last few years. Two students in wheelchair will start their studies at TUT in September 2011. There are around 30 students with disabilities enrolled at the university; however, there is no information about their disabilities. TUT takes into account the accessibility of the classrooms in case there are wheelchair users.

- ▶ **Tõnu Karu**, representative from the City Government of Tallinn and external evaluator of ExchangeAbility speaks about the situation that disabled people in Estonia had a few years ago and highlighted how things have improved for them. He has worked to improve the living conditions of

persons with disabilities and for some years and has supported the improvement of the legal frameworks. He contributed to the preparation of the Tallinn Guidelines for Action on Human Resources Development in the Field of Disability (1989) adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 8 December 1989.

- ▶ **Jüri Lehtmets**, Estonian Union of Persons with Mobility Impairment, highlights the importance of having flexible professors. The task of a student is studying, and not fighting for suitable conditions; therefore accessibility is an important requirement to start studying at a university. If there are students using wheelchair in some groups, academic studies should always be moved to wheelchair accessible auditoriums. Educational materials must be available online as long as it is not a substitute for attending courses and socializing. In addition to the provision of information, it is even more important to solve students' daily problems in a fast and effective way. The advisors should try to help find financial support and special learning aids if necessary. In Estonia almost 2000 people need that kind of help. Only 10% from them have higher education. The university advisor's main task is to ensure that the special needs students are covered to smooth away their difficulties to study. 50% of 25-year old and younger people with disabilities have no more than basic education, which is often acquired by studying at home. The need of counting on personal assistants on a daily basis is also an obstacle to start studying in university, and consequently to study abroad.

Wheelchair users with considerable special needs require personal assistant service approximately 720 hours per month. The city of Tallinn compensates personal assistance service 37 hours per month, so 1.2 h per day. Some municipalities have no service at all. Therefore, many young people are living all their lives with their parents or in a nursing home. There are only a few accessible apartments in Tallinn and Tartu (big cities), and in smaller cities the situation is worse.

The lack of funding for assistance services forces many disabled youngsters to move in to student dormitories with their parents. In most cases the parents have to give up their work or way of life. The Law does not require new houses to be built accessible. This situation restricts the independence of young people in wheelchair.

Concerning transportation, it is often too expensive for families to purchase and upkeep personal wheelchair buses. The citizens of Tallinn can use a wheelchair taxi round trip four times a month (max 30 min drive no further than 30 km from Tallinn). Wheelchair accessible, public transportation passes only once every hour. Snowy streets and sidewalks are also a big obstacle for getting on buses.

The Archimedes Foundation programme Primus supports disabled students at university. The programme offers the possibility of applying different grants:

- Personal assistant grant qmax. 95 € per month
- Transport allowance max. 95 € per month
- Reproduction of educational materials max. 30 € per month
- Sign Language Interpreter service for max. 510 € per month

The aid shall be fixed taking into account the need of the personal assistance, student status, for example, if you are already on a academic holiday, you can apply for 8 hours per month for personal assistance service because you can do exams on academic holiday. If you are a full-time student, then you can ask for 40 hours per month, or the maximum amount per month. Part-time students can apply 15 hours per months. Applications can be submitted twice a year – in the autumn and spring or once a year if you know your plan for academic points for a whole year ahead. All physically disabled students get the support. It is possible to apply for temporary support when somebody breaks his/her leg or has a health problem. Primus has many more subprogrammes in addition to the support system for disabled students aiming at making the quality of higher education better for all disabled students in Estonia. The Ministry of Education and Science will take over the provision of services after the EU programme ends in 2013.

The counsellors of disabled students at universities are also funded by Primus. TUT is the only university in Estonia that has a disabled youngster counselling disabled students – something that should be a more common practice.

Jüri plans to create a support network of helpers to take up residence at TUT campus. He believes that his example will open the doors to other young people who are in the same situation. The biggest desire of a young person is to be able to "fly out the nest" and live independent live without depending on their parents.

It is important to monitor the height of the curbs, ramps, door width and ramp angle, also in the classrooms.

- ▶ **Eva Reina**, UNICA project manager, presents ExchangeAbility and highlights the importance of mobility for employability and the necessity of implementing inclusive policies at universities. She underlines the purpose and the strategy undertaken to achieve the objectives forecasted in the project. Eva gives an overview of the discussions and activities that took place in the other site visits. She sums up mentioning the main challenges identified throughout the project and highlights the importance of finding support in other students.
- ▶ **Marco La Rosa**, ESN coordinator of ExchangeAbility, speaks about the tools created in the framework of the project to share best practices and experiences. He also informs about the dissemination activities planned to take place to multiply the effect of the project outcomes across Europe. Marco highlights the importance of involving ESN sections in integration activities and support.
- ▶ **Annelore Schittecatte**, Erasmus Hogeschool Brussel, EhB's policy on disabilities. (See report site visit Brussels)
- ▶ The **students of EhB** introduce themselves and speak about their experience at EhB. Most students from EhB participating in the site visit have learning disabilities. Learning disabilities are not recognized as disabilities in Estonia.
- ▶ **Sven Kõllamets**, student at TUT and counselor of students with disabilities & **Christel Sogenbits**, student at TUT, speak about the needs of young

people with disabilities and their experience at the university, the support they have and the obstacles still to be removed. All the students share their experiences and reflections.

- ▶ **Mari-Liis Täht**, student of Tallinn University, apologizes for not being able to attend the event.

After the event the visiting group goes to the city centre by public transport. They visit the old town and a museum and have a dinner in with all the participants. Both local and visiting students attend a party organized in the framework of the Student Days in Tallinn.

Friday, 6 May

The second day starts with a visit to the different faculties and the library of the University. Tallinn University of Technology has invested in making its buildings as accessible as possible for students with mobility impairment. They are planning to make the university more accessible to students with other types of disabilities, but this is still work in progress.

In the afternoon, the students from TUT organize a workshop entitled 'Challenge Your Senses'. Some of the activities organized are listed below:

- facing obstacles' course
- wheelchair and stairs
- moving with a wheelchair
- learning sign language
- using crutches on slippery floor
- wearing glasses that change the sight, eating, pouring liquids and acting without seeing
- lifting a person effortlessly
- hanging out with a guide dog

The main objective of the workshop is to raise awareness on the needs of students with disabilities, especially among other students and university staff. All the disabled students talk about their lives with humour and ease. The event turns to be very interactive and entertaining. The main radio and TV stations of Tallinn interview some of the students and participants.

Steering Committee

The members of the steering committee meet to discuss the outcomes of the site visit. Marco will send an online evaluation form that will be filled out by all the participants, including the invited speakers and evaluator. The students are encouraged to participate in the blog and the Facebook group. A story competition will be launched with a prize.

Some suggestions are made to prepare another project on disability issues addressing matters such as employability, entrepreneurship. The participants speak about possible sustainability strategies and future dissemination activities.

Regarding the financial aspects, the hosting university will send a financial report to UNICA including all the invoices related to the organization of the event. UNICA will process the payments as soon as possible. The university coordinators are encouraged to send their timesheets to the project coordinator.

The participants thank the Tallinn University of Technology and the local students for the interesting activities and the warm welcome. The site visit to Tallinn University of Technology is the last one in the framework of the project. All the partners present and the students highlight the importance of the project and the fruitful collaboration and mutual learning.