

IS HIGHER EDUCATION ACCESSIBLE FOR THE DISABLED IN LITHUANIA?

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A authors' Comment

Lithuanian National Union of Students presents publication “Is Higher Education Accessible for the Disabled in Lithuania?”.

In Lithuania, students with disabilities became identifiable as a specific social group only in 1999. Attention then was focused on the insufficient response to the needs of disabled people in the created social welfare state. Today, we can observe a more positive situation: over a period of eight years, the number of disabled students has increased from 100 to 700, the right and opportunity of disabled people to seek higher education is no longer questioned, relevant attention is paid to the actions concerning the improvement of higher education accessibility and the implementation of special services enabling a young disabled person to seek higher education independently and with dignity.

According to Myriam Van Acker, the Director of Students' Counselling Department and the Working Group Coordinator of Disabled Students at the Catholic University of Leuven (Belgium), who played a key role in the field of higher education accessibility for the disabled in Belgium, “accessibility for people with disabilities to higher education is not a “luxury” but a duty for the society that offers everyone equal rights”. Supporting this attitude, the Lithuanian National Union of Students encourages higher education institutions, Students' Representations and organizations for the disabled in Lithuania not only to understand the needs of the disabled and the necessity to satisfy them, but also to start putting that into practice. It is vital to integrate different needs of students in the strategies, procedures and practices of higher education institutions paying respect to the international students' exchange programmes, practical trainings and probations.

This issue overviews the situation of higher education accessibility in Lithuania in accordance with the legislative framework and recent researches. For the sake of comparison, the example of the United Kingdom is introduced as the UK has over several decades of experience in the field of higher education accessibility. The innovation of the issue is that it includes stories of Lithuanian disabled students revealing the practical side of this problem and showing the actual “price” of the higher education diploma. Finally, the issue provides with the recommendations for higher education institutions on how to improve higher education accessibility for the disabled.

Lithuanian National Union of Students

1. Overview of Situation

1.1. Legislative Framework

A thorough analysis of legislative acts applicable in the Republic of Lithuania leads to a conclusion that, formally, our state offers favourable conditions for disabled students to seek higher education. However, we still lack an efficient practical mechanism that would ensure equal opportunities for the disabled to study in higher education institutions as well as the provision of special services, if needed.

The overview of the basic laws of the Republic of Lithuania related to the studies of the disabled, first of all points to the Regulation set forth in *the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania (1992)* providing that “higher education shall be accessible to everyone according to their individual abilities”.

The Law on Higher Education (2000) emphasizes that one of the main objectives of the University is to create conditions for an individual to obtain higher education, qualification and the research degree that are based on scientific research and conform to the contemporary level of technology, culture and science.

The Law on Education (1991) sets forth that every person has an inherent right to learn, and that one of the basic principles of the education system is equal opportunities for everyone, i.e. the educational system is socially correct as it ensures equality for individuals irrespective of gender, race, nationality, language, origin, social position, religion, beliefs or convictions.

The Law on Special Education (1998) stipulates that vocational, post-secondary and higher education institutions create conditions for individuals with special needs, who have acquired necessary education, to obtain education and profession in accordance with their abilities, and establishes the principle of equal opportunities stating that individuals with special needs enjoy equal opportunities for development and self-education alongside other local community members.

The Law on Social Integration of the Disabled (1991) emphasizes that all the disabled have a right to be educated despite the level of their disability or working capacity. The Law also highlights that the disabled are educated at schools



and other institutions providing educational services, with regard to their special self-education needs, abilities, and their physical and mental state. Under the Law, the responsibility for the quality of education of the disabled lies on the Ministry of Education and Science as well as other state and municipality institutions and establishments within their competence.

The newly adopted *Law on Equal Opportunities (2003)* sets forth that educational establishments, science and academic institutions must ensure equal opportunities for individuals regardless of their age, sexual orientation, disability, racial or ethnic origin, religion or beliefs when admitting to schools of general education, vocational, post-secondary and higher education institutions, and when assessing knowledge.

The objective of *the National Programme of Social Integration of the Disabled for 2003-2012* is to create conditions for equal participation of disabled people in social life ensuring the continuity of rehabilitation (medical, professional, individual skills, psychosocial); meeting the special needs of the disabled by social services; improving the environmental accessibility (public, housing, information); guaranteeing development and education for disabled children, youngsters and adults, ensuring employment in the free labour market or the work therapy as well as organization of general occupation, education of the society on the issues of disability, and participation in cultural, sports, recreational activities.

According to the *Construction Technical Regulation (2004)*, buildings and premises for public purpose must be adjusted so as to meet the needs of disabled people.



The Decision of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania *“On the Supply of Financial Aid for the Disabled Studying in Higher Education Institutions” (2006)* regulates the allocation of financial aid for the disabled, studying in higher education institutions, and accounting for the utilized funds. Under the Decision, financial support shall be provided for the disabled who meet the following requirements: the level of disability is 45 % or less (according to the previously applied procedure this corresponds to the Group 1 or Group 2 disability); for the first time study according to the non-university, first or second stage university or integrated university study programmes; do not have debts and any disciplinary punishments in the study programme they have taken.

It is worth noting that financial support is provided regardless of the study form chosen by a disabled person. The disabled are provided with the following financial aid: in order to meet special needs, a target allowance of 50 % of the basic pension of the state social insurance (currently amounting to 133 LTL) is paid on a monthly basis; students admitted to state higher education institutions in partially funded places from the national budget of the Republic of Lithuania or non-funded places are granted a target allowance of 3.2 of the minimum standard level of living (*Lith. MGL*) of the Republic of Lithuania for each semester to partially cover the study costs (3.2 MGL currently amount to 416 LTL). Funding is coordinated by the Department for the Affairs of the Disabled under the Ministry of Social Security and Labour, which signs agreements with higher education institutions for provision of financial support for the disabled, allocates funds for financial aid needed by the disabled, and controls the utilization of the provided funding.

1.2. “Students with Disabilities in Higher Education Institutions of Lithuania in 2006–2007”

The research was carried out in order to analyse the current situation of students with disabilities in the higher education institutions in Lithuania, i.e. what problems students with disabilities face seeking for higher education; how many students with disabilities study in higher education institutions; what types of disabilities prevail, etc. The research also provides with the information if disability is registered in any form when admitting students to higher education institutions. The research shows what bodies in higher education institutions are in charge of the coordination of affairs of disabled students, what services are available for such students, and what environmental adaptations have been made. The interviewees have been questioned on the mechanism of financial support and benefits for the disabled. Finally, the research analyses the future plans of higher education institutions in Lithuania to increase higher education accessibility for the disabled.

The research results have been compared to the data of the research “Students with Disabilities in Higher Education Institutions of Lithuania in 2005–2006” carried out by the Lithuanian National Union of Students.

In the academic year 2006–2007, 36 out of 50 higher education institutions of Lithuania provided data for the research. Generalization of the research results shows that 28 out of 36 higher education institutions have students with disabilities; in 2006–2007, there were 640 disabled students in Lithuania. In comparison to the academic year 2005–2006, the number of disabled students has increased by 23 % in the following year.

Higher education institutions are not yet fully equipped to accept students with disabilities; however, the situation has been steadily improving and actions to pay respect to disabled students have already been taken. Students with disabilities are provided with financial and moral support, and the range of special services has recently increased. Though higher education institutions still lack environmental adaptation, majority of them have incorporated that in their future plans, as in the examples of the Continuing Studies Institute of Klaipėda University, Šiauliai University and its Library, Vilnius Gediminas Technical University, Faculty of History of Vilnius University, Kaunas Colleges, Utena College, etc.

Under the Decision No. 831, dated 29 August, 2006, of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania, (<http://www3.lrs.lt/pls/inter3/dokpaieska.show->

doc_l?p_id=281953&p_query=&p_tr2=), all higher education institutions provide support for the disabled. Best conditions for the studies of the disabled are provided in state higher education institutions; they feel the rapidly improving situation best.

Growth of the Number of Students with Disabilities

In the academic year 2006–2007, 640 students with disabilities studies in higher education institutions of Lithuania. Universities provided studies for 349 disabled students, and colleges had 291 disabled students. State universities had 342 students, non-state universities had 7 students, state colleges had 202, and non-state colleges had 89 students with disabilities. The highest number of students with disabilities is in Vilnius, i.e. 267. There are 183 disabled students in Kaunas, 52 students in Klaipėda, 81 students in Šiauliai, and 26 disabled students in each, Marijampolė and Utena. The highest number of disabled students – 75 – study at Vilnius College of Business and Law. Kaunas University of Technology has 61 students, Šiauliai University – 51, Vilnius University – 50, and Vytautas Magnus University – 41 students with disabilities.

In the academic year 2006–2007, likewise in 2005–2006, the majority of students with disabilities studied in higher education institutions of Vilnius (267 students) and Kaunas (183 students). It is worth mentioning that the number of disabled students in some higher education institutions has significantly increased. For example, in 2005–2006, Šiauliai University had 11 disabled students; meanwhile, currently there study 51 students with disabilities. Respectively, the number of disabled students at Kaunas University of Technology has increased from 40 to 61 students, at Utena Collge – from 14 to 26, at Mykolas



Romeris University – from 14 to 29 students with disabilities. This increase in the number of disabled students can be partially explained by the disclosure of disability in order to get financial support.

What Types of Disabilities Prevail among Students in Higher Education Institutions of Lithuania

In the academic year 2006–2007, higher education institutions of Lithuania had students with different disabilities. The majority of students had motor, visual, hearing, internal impairments (oncological diseases, diabetes, kidney diseases, cardiac and neurological dysfunctions).

Registration of Disability on General Admission to Higher Education Institutions

The research disclosed that disability is generally registered on admission to a higher education institution; filling in the General Admission Application Form



for admission to a higher education institution, entrants are requested to indicate their disability level. In this way entrants are able to disclose their disability. It should be noted that until 2007, only the ones who had the Group 1 disability were able to mark their disability level on that same Application Form.

According to the research data, several higher education institutions offer free admission for the entrants with Group 1 disability, as in the examples of Klaipėda University, Vilnius University, Mykolas Romeris University, Kaunas University of Medicine, Vilnius College, the Žemaitija College, and the Lithuanian University of Agriculture; moreover, the latter adds an extra mark to the disabled on their admission. Several higher education institutions admit disabled people without competition, such as Marijampolė College and the College of Social Sciences. Some higher education institutions do not register disability cases, as in Vilnius College of Construction and Design, Vilnius Design College, the College of Management, Law and Language of Šiauliai Region, etc.

Responsible Bodies for Coordination of the Disabled Students' Affairs in Higher Education Institutions

22 out of 28 higher education institutions accepting students with disabilities claimed having specialists, departments or persons responsible for the coordination of the disabled students' affairs.

For example, Klaipėda University has the Department of Studies that takes care of students with disabilities; in Lithuanian Academy of Physical Education, Deans of corresponding Faculties, the Coordinator of the Affairs of the Disabled and the Pro-Rector for Academic Affairs are in charge of the disabled students; Vilnius University has the Coordinator of the Affairs of the Disabled, the Department of Students' Affairs, the Students' Representation; in the Lithuanian University of Agriculture there are Deans of Faculties, the Department of Studies, the Students' Representation that are responsible for the disabled students; in Mykolas Romeris University there is the Assistant of Housekeeping Department for Social Affairs; Vytautas Magnus University has the Service of Students' Affairs and the Students' Representation; Šiauliai University has the Service for the Affairs of the Disabled, the Department of Studies, the Housekeeping Service, and the Students' Representation; Kaunas University of Technology has the Service of Academic Affairs and the Service of Students' Affairs; Kaunas University of Medicine has the Coordinator of the Disabled and a specially formed Committee; Vilnius Gediminas Technical University has the Group for Students' Affairs of the Studies Direction, the Administrators of the Deans of Faculties, and the Department of the Employees Safety and Health Care; Vilnius Academy of Fine Arts has the Department of Social Welfare; Vilnius International Business School has the Coordinators of Pro-

grammes; Klaipėda Business and Technology College has the Deputy Director for Academic Affairs and the Deputy for Infrastructure who are in charge of the disabled students' affairs; in Marijampolė College the administration takes care of the disabled; Kaunas College has Deans, the group tutors, and Heads of the Courses; Vilnius College has the Deputy Manager of the Service of Studies, Heads of the Departments of Studies of the Faculties, and tutors; Utena College has the Head of the Department of Adult Studies and Heads of the Departments; Šiauliai College has administration, the Career Centre for the Disabled, and the Department of Studies Accounting; in Kaunas College of Wood and Environment Engineering, Deans are responsible for the disabled; Vilnius Co-Operative College has Heads of the Departments and the tutor of Physical Training to handle the affairs of the disabled; in Vilnius Design College the responsibility lies on teachers and administration; and in Vilnius Law and Business College – on the Career Centre.

In conclusion, most frequently Deans of higher education institutions are responsible for the coordination of affairs of disabled students. A tendency can be observed to transfer this competence to the Departments of Studies (in nine higher education institutions). Four higher education institutions have appointed the Coordinators of the Disabled Students' Affairs to handle the matter, and four other involved the Students' Representation to take care of students with disabilities.

In the academic year 2005–2006, only 3 out of 16 higher education institutions appointed particular responsible persons to coordinate the affairs of students with disabilities. In the current year, mainly Deans and Departments of Studies are in charge of the coordination of the disabled students' affairs.



Services Provided to Students with Disabilities

Higher education institutions in Lithuania provide different services for students with disabilities. Vilnius University has a special e-mail box for general use by the Society of Visually Impaired, and has acquired and installed special software “JAWS Pro for Windows”; moreover, one workplace has been created for disabled students in the computer hall. Furthermore, the Competence Development Centre for Disabled People “Odisėjas” operates in the University Library. The Centre has four computerized workplaces: 2 for the visually impaired, 1 for the blind, and 1 for students with minor motor impairments. The Centre offers the Internet facilities as well as other available electronic resources of the library, including the electronic catalogue of issues. The disabled also have access to an electronic magnifier, the blind reader of prints, and the printer. In the Central Library of Vilnius University, disabled students of the Vilnius University community can borrow the final copy of a book for home study for the period of two weeks, and in the Faculty Libraries of Vilnius University – for up to 5 days.

Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas has a rehabilitation room where the Internet facilities are available. There are training equipment and a massage chair. The University provides accommodation for disabled students in the students’ hostel to live together with a chaperon.

Lithuanian Academy of Physical Education organizes extra activities for the disabled with hearing impairments, provides recreation and sports facilities for students with physical impairments.

Šiauliai University informs about the environmental accessibility. For the events organized by the disabled, the University provides with the premises, necessary equipment, and attending staff free of charge.

In Vilnius Academy of Fine Arts, students with disabilities may attend classes according to an individual timetable upon the approval of teachers.

For the second academic year in succession, Minor Academy of Theatre at Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre organizes non-consecutive studies for the theatre troupe “Lašai” of the Union of the Disabled People of Vilnius Region. This troupe involves young people with motor and visual impairments.

During the lectures, students with hearing impairments of Faculty of Pedagogy of Vilnius College are assisted by students of Sign Language study programme or interpreters from the Sign Language Interpreting Centre. Students are released for treatment in a sanatorium, if needed; their exam session may be prolonged. Students with hearing impairments study according to individual study programmes (practical assignments of subjects on music are modified and changed). The College implements the programme of the Basic Professional Studies “Massage” in the Health Care Faculty of Vilnius College. Near the Cen-



tre, the traffic-lights at the crossing are equipped with sound signals, the staircase is marked, and in the Library, there are magnifiers for reading, digital magnifying equipment, and special software adapted for visually impaired people, i.e. “JAWS” software synthesizer.

Kaunas College organizes individual studies for the disabled.

Šiauliai College provides information and individual consultations. On the initiative of the Career Centre for the Disabled, disabled people are provided with the opportunity to develop the quality of their professional rehabilitation and promote their integration into the labour market. The Centre is equipped with the software adapted for visually impaired students.

The College of Management, Law and Languages of Šiauliai Region provides extra consultations for the disabled students on their request, and serves them in the College Library out of turn.

Vilnius Design College provides disabled students with free printing and copying services as well as the necessary material for studies.

Vilnius Business and Law College provides the following extra services: free attendance of the disabled in different events, assistance for the first year disabled students, study material, lectures delivered with regard to the capability and working tempo of the disabled. The disabled are also assisted by the Students’ Representation, consulted by a psychologist, provided with information on career opportunities and seminars on self-cognition, consulted individually on career planning issues, job search strategies and tactics, assisted in finding places for practical training and employment. They are also provided with free blind reading services, individual attendance of classes, flexible forms of knowledge check, extra time for tests.

The overview of the information leads to a conclusion that the provision of



services for the disabled students depends on a higher education institution. In summary, it is possible to state that Lithuanian higher education institutions provide disabled students with the services of studies individualization and adaptation, as well as special computer techniques and software, consultations for teachers and disabled students, blind reading, and printing services.

Lithuanian higher education institutions provide disabled students with more and more services of studies individualization and adaptation, special computer techniques and software, consultations for teachers and disabled students, blind reading, and printing services. The blind and visually impaired are supplied with more technical aid facilities.

In terms of the analysed aspect, it becomes obvious that the situation has not improved significantly since the academic year 2005–2006. The research data leads to an assumption that the provided financial support for the disabled, in fact, did not solve the problem of students with disabilities because no new special services have been introduced or specialized staff hired for taking notes, reading or assisting as chaperons – these roles are further played by relatives or course mates.

Environmental Adaptation for the Disabled

Adaptation of physical environment to meet the needs of people with disabilities is one of the most significant and, likely, most expensive factors determining the access to higher education.

According to the data of the research carried out by the Lithuanian National Union of Students, Vilnius College of Law and Business, Faculty of Philosophy of Vilnius University, and the Institute of International Relations and Po-

litical Science are among the most accessible higher education institutions with respect to adaptation of physical environment for people with special needs. The Continuing Studies Institute of Klaipėda University, Vytautas Magnus University, the Chamber of Electronics of Kaunas University of Technology, and Šiauliai University should also be mentioned in this respect.

The majority of higher education institutions in Lithuania are more or less adapted to the needs of the disabled, i.e. they are equipped with wheelchair ramps, staircases, handrails, sanitary units. The environment, however, lacks warnings on the surface; the surface of the floors is not adjusted; and the shortage of lifts, elevators as well as adjusted entrances and classrooms is evident. The access to other floors of a higher education institution is still problematic. Obviously, the adjustment of wheelchair ramps in certain places does not meet the quality standards or, paradoxically, though some sanitary units are properly adjusted, too narrow entrances are left; still other objects are only partially adapted.

Positively, several higher education institutions can offer not only accessible physical environment but also ensure access to the information environment for the blind and visually impaired (e.g. Vilnius University, Faculty of Health Care of Vilnius College, Šiauliai College), and the assistance of sign language interpreters, as in Vilnius College.

Nevertheless, it is rather difficult to provide exact information about the environmental adaptations and compare it with the data of the previous academic year because of the different number of the responding higher education institutions. At any rate, projects for the environmental adaptations in the academic year 2007–2008 have already been developed by the Continuing Studies Institute of Klaipėda University, Lithuanian Academy of Physical Education, Kaunas College and Utena College. Moreover, the currently restored Faculty of History of Vilnius University will be adjusted for the disabled. The Lithuanian University of Agriculture will also have a reconstructed 5th students' hostel of the University; furthermore, new constructions have been started for the building of the Agricultural Science and Technology Park. Šiauliai University Library is also under reconstruction and plans have been developed to improve the accessibility to the Central Chamber of Šiauliai University. Vilnius Gediminas Technical University plans to be equipped with a wheelchair ramp and a hoist. The new faculty of Alytus College will also be adapted for the disabled as well as the newly built premises of Vilnius Co-Operative College.

Benefits for Students with Disabilities

One of the means of integrating people with disabilities into higher education is a system of objectively reasoned benefits. According to the data of the research carried out by the Lithuanian National Union of Students, different forms of

manifestation of such systems are also evident in Lithuania.

Lithuanian Academy of Physical Education, Vytautas Magnus University, Mykolas Romeris University have reduced the admission fee for the disabled. They also reduce the accommodation costs for the students' hostel. Students with disabilities, having filled an Application Form in Vilnius Gediminas Technical University, are exempt from the admission fee and granted allowances, on request.

In Klaipėda Business and Technology College, disabled students are exempt from the initial tuition fee.

Since 2007, Vilnius University intends to make amendment to the Rules for Admission, i.e. to exempt individuals from the admission fee if they have Group



1 and Group 2 disability or the level of disability is 45 % or less.

Marijampolė College reduces the tuition fees for part-time (extramural) students: individuals with Group 1 disability or people with adequate percent of working incapacity shall be exempt from the tuition fee; individuals with Group 2 disability or people with adequate percent of working incapacity shall pay 50 % of the tuition fee; individuals with Group 3 disability or people with adequate percent of working incapacity shall pay 75 % of the tuition fee.

Under the Regulations of Scholarships, Allowance and Bonuses, Vilnius College provides benefits for the disabled, such as a possibility to be granted a single allowance, social scholarship, a scholarship based on the study results, a bonus for active participation in the activities of the faculty. Students with disabilities have a priority right to be granted a state loan to cover the cost of living. In exceptional cases, disabled students are exempt from the tuition fee; their accommodation costs in a students' hostel are reduced or fully covered. In the event of equal number of accumulated points during the admission, the disabled are given a priority. The Žemaitija College is guided by the same rule for admission.

Students with disabilities at Utena College are provided with financial aid to meet their special needs and to cover the tuition fees, and granted a single allowance. Individuals with Group 1 and Group 2 disability do not pay for accommodation in a students' hostel. The 1st year students are provided with free methodical material for studies. Individuals with Group 1 disability are exempt from the admission fee.

In the Navigation College of Lithuania, the disabled have a possibility to be transferred from the marine service to the coast, on request.

The College of Social Sciences reduces tuition fees only for particular disabled students.

Vilnius College of Law and Business reduces the tuition fees: individuals with the level of working capacity up to 45 %, pay 50 % off the tuition fee; individuals with the level of working capacity over 46 %, pay 30 % off the tuition fee. Student showing good performance are granted allowances. Student with disabilities are exempt from the initial tuition fee if their level of working capacity is up to 45 %.

In summary, it is possible to state that Lithuanian higher education institutions provide the following benefits for the disabled: exempt from or reduce the tuition fees, grant allowances or scholarships, accommodate in the student's hostel fully covering or reducing the accommodation fee, and provide other services, on request.

Nearest Plans to Improve the Accessibility to Education for the Disabled

One of the most important aspects of the research carried out by the Lithuanian National Union of Students includes the nearest plans of higher educa-

tion institutions related to the improvement of higher education accessibility for the disabled. This indicator is significant in trying to perceive the readiness of higher education institutions to change the current situation and to analyse the steps that are planned ahead. 24 out of 36 higher education institutions participating in the research named the nearest plans in the aforementioned field. 15 higher education institutions plan to carry out projects of environmental adaptation; the remaining ones take into consideration the affairs of the students with disabilities, organize educational activities for the academic community, and carry out surveys.

The Continuing Studies Institute of Klaipėda University prepares a project for the installation of lifts on the first and second floors, and plans to arrange special classrooms and toilet facilities. The reconstruction is due in 2007–2008.

The Lithuanian Academy of Physical Education, Kaunas College and Utena College plan the environmental adaptation for the disabled in the nearest future.

Vilnius University is currently renovating the Faculty of History, which will also be adjusted for students with disabilities.

The Lithuanian University of Agriculture is currently renovating the 5th students' hostel of the University where special environmental adaptations will be arranged for the disabled students (since the autumn of 2007); the newly built premises of the Agricultural Science and Technology Park will be equipped with special facilities for the disabled (the object is due for exploitation in 2007); the constructed multipurpose indoor hall will be equipped with facilities for the disabled (since the autumn of 2007).

Mykolas Romeris University plans to install two lifts and arrange toilet facilities in the First Chamber, six special workplaces in the Internet Room, and six special workplaces in the University Reading-Room.

The Service of Academic Affairs in Vytautas Magnus University analyses if all the study programmes are accessible for the disabled students.

Recently, Šiauliai University, in line with the ongoing reorganization of administration, plans to establish the position of a Coordinator. The Faculty of Social Sciences is completing the lift installation work and arrangement of toilet facilities. The environmental adaptation projects for the disabled have been developed in the Faculty of Humanities. The University Library is under reconstruction. The Central Chamber of the University is planned to be better equipped.

The nearest plans of Kaunas University of Technology include the improvement of the infrastructure, adjustment of the learning resources, and provision of financial support for students with disabilities.

Kaunas University of Medicine plans to promote the dissemination of information for disabled students on the available support and to focus on the environmental adaptation.

Vilnius Gediminas Technical University (VGTU) plans to equip the approach road / ramp for wheelchairs at the entrance to the Central Chamber of VGTU (located at Saulėtekio al. 11), and arrange the wheelchair hoist in the entrance hall of the Central Chamber of VGTU to facilitate the accessibility to the lifts.

The LCC International University plans to install a lift.

The recent plans of Vilnius International Business School include finding of workplaces for the graduates with disabilities.

Marijampolė College plans to increase the number of subjects delivered in the distance-learning environment, to install the wheelchair ramps at the entrances where they have not yet been installed, and to arrange sanitary units adjusted for the disabled.

In 2006–2007, the Faculty of Pedagogy of Vilnius College modernized 2 classrooms adjusted for the implementation of the Sign Language study programme. The equipment used in this classroom is also intended for the general use by the students with hearing impairments. Plans have been developed to improve the accessibility for the disabled to the students' hostels, to equip several special rooms, and encourage the activity of the Students' Representation concerning the problems of students with disabilities.

Šiauliai College plans to carry out the assessment of the needs of disabled students; a project is being implemented to solve the problem of environmental adaptation for the disabled.

The new Faculty of Alytus College will be adjusted for the disabled as well as the newly built premises of Vilnius Co-Operative College.

Vilnius College of Law and Business plans to train teachers to work with the disabled, arrange the parking lots for the disabled, establish the position of a Coordinator to handle the affairs of disabled students, and keep informing the academic community on the matters.

The future plans of higher education institutions participating in the research are mostly related to the adjustment of physical environment for people with motor impairments. Several higher education institutions mentioned the improvement of study conditions for visually impaired students or those with hearing impairments, i.e. creation of special workplaces in the Internet Room and Reading-Room in Mykolas Romeris University, modernization of classrooms adapting them for the Sign Language study programme in Vilnius College. Other higher education institutions mentioned the establishment of the position of a Coordinator to handle the disabled students' affairs, information dissemination facilities, and increase in the number of subjects available for studies in the distance-learning environment.

1.3. Education Accessibility: Example of the United Kingdom

Higher education accessibility for the disabled is a rather new topic in Lithuania. Seeking to ensure the most appropriate educational conditions for students with disabilities in Lithuania and guarantee an efficient operation of the support system, it is worth considering the best practices from abroad. This part of the issue analyses the successful practice of the United Kingdom on how to improve higher education accessibility. It is worth mentioning that certain methods have already been applied in practice by the Lithuanian National Union of Students; for example, higher education institutions of Lithuania are encouraged to create Disability Statements that determine rights of students with disabilities and duties of a higher education institution, available study adaptation services, and to develop the Disability Equality Schemes and Action Plans.

General Information

The majority of higher education institutions of the United Kingdom have been providing support and services for disabled students since 1991 (OECD, 2003; cited Ruškus et al., 2007). Higher education institutions also use an Admission Application Form where disabilities of the would-be students have been registered since 1993 (Aune, 1993; cited Ruškus et al., 2007). In 1995, 3.8 % of disabled students studied in the United Kingdom (OECD, 2003), and in 1999, there were 4.5 % of students with disabilities (Adomaitienė, 2006).

National Bureau for Students with Disabilities SKILL

A non-government organization SKILL (the National Bureau for Students with Disabilities) is established in the United Kingdom. The main objective of the Organization is to create conditions for the disabled to acquire professional / higher education and facilitate the integration into the labour market. SKILL disseminates information, organizes trainings, consults and provides with methodical material on disability and higher education as well as the issues of employment.

The Organization also arranges and funds conferences, carries out social researches, disseminates the examples of best practice, and cooperates with the bodies able to have a direct influence on the situation of the disabled. The Organization creates regional organizational networks in order to solve the prob-



lems of people with physical, sensory, learning disabilities and emotional disorders (OECD, 2003). The Organization is guided by the principle that education is the key factor to a comprehensive and independent life for most of the disabled people. SKILL was established in 1974 on the initiative of teachers and students.

Funding of Students with Disabilities

The creation of appropriate educational environment for students with disabilities is assured by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). The purpose of the Fund is to promote higher education accessibility for the disabled and fund the programmes devoted for the expansion of participation of disabled students or students with learning disability and provision of necessary services. The Government of the United Kingdom provides financial support for student with disabilities in order to meet the special needs occurring during their studies in higher education institutions. Higher education institutions are also obliged to take into consideration the affairs of disabled students: they must provide disabled students with services and support. Students with special needs, like other people in the cases of material deprivation, may receive financial aid to cover the insufficient cost of living. Special benefits for disabled students are also available; these are divided into four groups: equipment allowance (for computers, software, dictaphones, hearing helper personal FM systems, etc.), non-medical personal assistance (sign language interpreters, notetakers, chaperons, etc.), disability-related travel costs, and general allowances (for copying, learning material) (OECD, 2003; cited Ruškus et al., 2007). Since 1990, the Government of England has increased funding for the

studies of the disabled by three-times in comparison to the studies of any other student and provides it via the Higher Education Foundation (Hurst, 1993; cited Ruškus et al., 2007).

Disability Discrimination Act and Disability Equality Scheme

According to the data obtained by the Lithuanian National Union of Students, one of the basic legislative acts for people with disabilities in the United Kingdom is the Disability Discrimination Act (1995). In 2006, the Act was supplemented by a new part (i.e. Disability Equality Duty (DED)) establishing the duty to ensure equal social position for the disabled in the labour market and public life. The supplement of the Act was prepared by the Disability Rights Commission. The DED, established as a new legal requirement, ensures better disability equality results by committing public entities to organize activity based on the principles of social justice. As a result, by 4 December 2006, over 45 000 public institutions of the United Kingdom (central and local governmental institutions, educational, health care institutions, etc.) had to develop and announce special Disability Equality Schemes for their activities, backed up by the participation of the disabled themselves.

The DED is relevant to many spheres of life: the equality requirement must be observed in the relations of employment, budget preparation, providing different services, implementing strategic planning. According to the new DED requirements, the special Disability Equality Schemes must be implemented in the activities of all educational institutions, including higher education institutions. The Disability Rights Commission gives public recommendations for the managers of educational institutions, management bodies, employees, i.e. the entire academic community, on the implementation of the requirements in educational processes.

If a higher education institution does not observe the requirement of the Disability Equality Schemes in its activities, it may be liable for prosecution. In such cases, legal measures are taken by two authorized national commissions carrying out the duty of the observation of the system implementation, i.e. the Disability Rights Commission and the Commission for Equality and Human Rights. All the Universities and Colleges of the United Kingdom, having prepared and announced the Disability Equality Schemes by 4 December 2006, must submit annual reports and review the Scheme every three years to improve it, if needed and reasoned. The Schemes and relative documents are placed on the Internet websites of higher education institutions. Over the period until the submission of the report, higher education institutions must observe and register achievements of disabled students, assess the study process in terms of meeting the needs of the disabled. When preparing the Schemes, it is recommended to consider

the availability of places for practical training and employment, the possibility for students with disabilities to integrate into the academic life of a higher education institution, and students' satisfaction in the provided studies.

Every higher education institution, despite the size, origin and level of accessibility, may flexibly implement the adopted Disability Equality Scheme. The implementation of the Scheme usually starts by organizing training for the staff of a higher education institution. The attention is focused on the employees working in the field of admission to a higher education institution, as they are the first people to welcome the disabled who are willing to seek higher education in a particular higher education institution.

Trainings acquaint staff with the legal requirements on the improvement of higher education accessibility for the disabled, teach the disability etiquette. Later, attempts are made to make access for disabled students to all the basic information related to the studies: implement different virtual reality development projects, organize and coordinate the dissemination of information in other forms. Specific problems of academic community relations are also solved by implementing the Disability Quality Schemes. Attempts are made to reduce harassment and abuse of people with disabilities by means of forming the culture of academic etiquette; different equality and tolerance promotion campaigns are supported and the acts of harassment are registered. The problem of the activeness and integration of disabled students into the academic life is solved by employing people with disabilities in higher education institutions and enabling their active participation in the activities of different committees, clubs and other organizations.

Official information on the undergoing changes in the situation of disabled people in the universities and colleges of the United Kingdom, determined by the new DED requirement system, will be obtained in 2008. Then a plan has been laid down to prepare and publicly announce a national report which will be backed up by the highest authorities of relevant spheres.

Counselling Centres for Students with Disabilities

Counselling Centres for Students with Disabilities have been established in The United Kingdom as an active measure to solve problems of students with disabilities and meet their special needs in order to have equal opportunities for education. For example, the University of Cambridge has the *Disability Resource Centre*, the University of Lancashire – the *Disability Advisory Service*, the University of Birmingham – the *Student Support and Counselling Service*, and the Sheffield Hallam University – the *Disabled Student Support Team*. The latter was established at the University ten years ago as one of the Departments and initially had 4 employees; currently it employs 24 specialists. Judging from the data of 2006, about 70 students with disabilities regularly use the services provided



by the Team. A tendency can be observed that while expanding the activities of the Team, the Sheffield Hallam University annually admits more and more students with disabilities. In the academic year 2007, the University provided services for 960 students with disabilities, i.e. for two hundred of students more in comparison to the academic year 2005-2006. One of the basic tasks of the Disabled Student Support Team is to provide services that are necessary in order to organize studies of equal opportunities, such as notetaking, ordinary notetaking (handwritten), electronic notetaking, sign language interpretation, reading, assistance of a personal chaperon. Mentally disabled students are provided with an attendant, if needed. Apart from 24 regular employees of the Disabled Student Support Team, fifty more people are involved for ordinary notetaking services, and six people for recording information on electronic media. The Team also has twelve tutors, seven regular sign language interpreters and twenty teachers to provide learning support.

Though the United Kingdom has been taking care of students with disabilities for over several decades, the country still faces a problem that disabled students find it difficult to meet formal requirements in order to receive financial aid to satisfy their special needs for education; the state financial support for the higher education institutions that provide services for meeting special needs is still insufficient (Aune, 1993; cited Ruškus et al., 2007). Anyway, the situation for the disabled in England should steadily improve because the document *Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People*, enacted by the Government of England in 2005 (2005, p. 6), proposes that “by 2025, disabled people in Britain should have full opportunities and choices to improve their quality of life and will be respected and included as equal members of society”.

1.4. Statistics in Lithuania

In fact, Lithuania does not have exact statistical data or a list of students with disabilities studying in higher education institutions (Ruškus, 2007). According to the data provided by Amrukaitis (2001), Adomaitienė et al. (2004), in the academic year 2000–2001, there were 193 disabled students, and in the academic year 2004–2005, 204 disabled students in the university-type higher education institutions of Lithuania. The Department of Statistics provides with the data (2004, 2005) that in the academic year 2003–2004, 293 disabled students (73 at the College level, and 220 at the University undergraduate level of studies) with Group 1 and Group 2 disability studied in Lithuania. In the academic year 2004–2005, the number of Lithuanian disabled students with the same groups of disability slightly increased and comprised 328 students (109 at the College level and 219 at the University undergraduate level of studies). The newest data of the Department of Statistics (2006) provides that in the academic year 2005–2006, the number of disabled students at the Colleges and Universities of Lithuania still increased (52 and 34 students, respectively). The data of the research carried out by the Lithuanian National Union of Students in the academic year 2005–2006, provides that Lithuanian higher education institutions admitted 530 students with disabilities.

According to the data of the Lithuanian National Union of Students (2007), in 2006–2007, Lithuanian higher education institutions provided services for 640 disabled students. 349 of these have studied at the university and 291 at the College level. Vilnius had the highest number of students with disabilities, i.e. 267 students, Kaunas – 183, Klaipėda – 52, Šiauliai – 81, and Marijampolė and Utena provided services for 26 disabled students each. In the academic year 2006–2007, likewise in 2005–2006, the majority of students with disabilities studied in higher education institutions of Vilnius (267 students) and Kaunas (183 students).

It is possible to presume that recently the number of the disabled students at higher education institutions is steadily increasing in Lithuania. This assumption is based on the demographic statistics showing that at present higher education in Lithuania is being sought by the first and second year students in comparison to the fourth and fifth year students with disabilities. The most popular fields of studies among the disabled are social and biomedical sciences. The results of the majority of students with disabilities (two thirds) are good, very good or excellent. The results of every tenth student with disability are satisfactory or worse. 70 % of Lithuanian students with disabilities have acquired the secondary education in ordinary schools (high schools or gymnasiums), 12 % – in the Internet-type schools, 9 % of disabled students studied subjects delivered at high schools either at home or specialized schools.

1.5. Other Initiatives of Lithuanian National Union of Students

The Lithuanian National Union of Students has been developing the activities in the field of integration of people with disabilities in higher education for several years. This part briefly highlights the most distinguished initiatives of recent years.

The Research of Equal Opportunities in the United Kingdom (2007)

In January-May 2007, the Lithuanian National Union of Students carried out the research of equal opportunities in the United Kingdom. The objective of the research is to find out the results of implementation of the principle of equal opportunities for disabled students in the system of higher education.

During the research, the legislative framework has been analysed, the representatives of the Students' Self-Governments and the Disabled Students' Forum have been interviewed, the employees of the Disabled Student Support Team and the Career Centre at the Sheffield Hallam University have been questioned, and the representatives of the National Bureau for Students with Disabilities (SKILL) have been visited.

The research revealed that the principle of implementation of equal opportunities is the result of a complex of activities, i.e. the laws ensure the conditions for the implementation of obligation of higher education institutions and provision of conditions for the disabled to seek higher education. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) promotes higher education accessibility and funds programmes for the expansion of participation and provision of necessary services for physically disabled students or students with learning disability. The non-government organization SKILL (the National Bureau for Students with Disabilities) is in charge of the promotion of higher education accessibility to the disabled and creation of standards for its implementation.

International Seminar "The Power of Difference – Alliance. Disabled Student in Higher Education: a Privilege or a Right?" (2007)

The Lithuanian National Union of Students in association with the European Youth Campaign "All Different, All Equal" implemented an international project "The Power of Difference – Alliance", where participants from Slovenia, Hungary, Germany, Belgium, Italy and Spain, who work in the field of higher education accessibility, took part.

The participants had an opportunity to exchange their practical experience in the field of work with disabled people and present methodologies on the measures to ensure higher education accessibility and equal opportunities for the disa-

bled in local realities. The future cooperation projects were developed to increase higher education accessibility for people with disabilities Europe-wide.

On 24 May 2007, a social movement *“A Day When You Can Choose”* was organized in Vilnius Teacher’s House Yard. It helped to inform the society on the issues of disability and higher education. The participants of the project presented a Photo Gallery reflecting different aspects of life of people with disabilities. Moreover, during training, a film *“Disability and Higher Education”* was created, where realities of people with disabilities, higher education accessibility and approach to the discriminated groups of the society, revealed through discussions with students, have been depicted in a humorous light. The society was also educated by a special interactive “Forum Theatre” performance about a disabled student and his experience in the library. One more goal has been achieved, i.e. integration of the activities of the campaign *“All Different, All Equal”* in the study programme. Alongside, the initiative *“Live Library”* of the campaign *“All Different, All Equal”* took place in the social movement.

Such training focused the attention of the society and the press on the stereotypes and the problem of integration of people with disabilities in the society. An international training, devoted for the analysis of higher education accessibility for the disabled and competence development of people working in this field in Lithuania, was organized for the first time.

National Conference “Is Higher Education Accessible for the Disabled in Lithuania?” (2006)

On 30 May 2006, the Lithuanian National Union of Students organized a conference “Is Higher Education Accessible for the Disabled?” in the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania. For the first time, an event was organized to discuss the situation of students with disabilities in higher education of Lithuania among the highest level of politicians, academicians, public figures, representatives of the Self-Governments of different national higher education institutions and students with disabilities themselves.

The objective of the Conference was to present in detail the problem of higher education accessibility for students with disabilities, name the main aspects, and mutually seek for specific advanced solutions approved and successfully applied in the practices of foreign countries.

The attention was focused on dissemination of experience of cooperation between the Administrations of higher education and the Students’ Self-Governments, discussion of the issues of support for disabled students, and forecasting of possible changes in the future.

The participants were introduced to the initiatives of Šiauliai and Vilnius higher education institutions as well as the Lithuanian National Union of Stu-

dents programme “Higher Education for All” devoted for the improvement of the integration of students with disabilities.

To generalize the results of the period, the first information issue “Is Higher Education Accessible for the Disabled?” was published.

Programme “Higher Education for All” and Action Plan (2006)

A detailed analysis of the problems that students with disabilities face in Lithuania was followed by the programme “Higher Education for All” and the action plan for its implementation. The latter identifies the main groups of problems and foresees steps and partners for each of them.

This programme was prepared in association with the biggest organizations for the disabled in Lithuania (The Society for the Physically Disabled of Lithuania, the Lithuanian Association of the Deaf, the Lithuanian Association of the Blind and Visually Impaired, the Lithuanian Association of People with Impaired Spine) and presented in the Vilnius City Municipality.

Later this programme was promoted as the address to the relevant institutions. The Ministry of Education and Science integrated several parts of the programme in its activities. This Programme or the Action Plan may also be used as recommendations for higher education institutions seeking to ensure their accessibility for people with disabilities (see Part 3 of the issue).

Seminars “Students’ Representation Gets Closer to the Disabled” (2006)

Seeking to rally student-volunteers for the activity in the field of students



with disabilities, to acquaint them with the current problems and the possibilities of their solutions as well as to encourage them to take actions at the level of the Students' Self-Governments, the Lithuanian National Union of Students organized training for the members of the Students' Self-Governments of Lithuanian higher education institutions in March, May and November of the year 2006. The training took place in the cities of Vilnius, Kaunas and Klaipėda.

During the training, the most active representatives of the Students' Self-Governments of Vilnius, Kaunas and Klaipėda higher education institutions discussed the attitude of the society to disabled people and analysed the stereotypes. In the theory lecture, the concept of disability and its change were analysed, as well as the forms and types of disabilities; practical advices were given on treatment of people with disabilities. Team-work helped to find measures on how the Students' Representation could contribute to the improvement of the situation of people with disabilities in higher education institutions. The idea on establishment of the Counselling Centres for disabled students was introduced.

The result of the participants' work was a planed activity where the Students' Self-Governments would be able to take an active part. One of these includes a change in the registration procedure of students with disabilities, information on the environmental adaptation and study facilities, organization of festivals, art projects. For instance, as a form of dissemination of the training, an event called "Feel the Disability", organized by the Students' Representation of Vytautas Magnus University, took place in the University, where students and teachers were invited to accomplish specific tasks in order to "feel" different disabilities. Moreover, an auction "From Heart to Heart" was organized; it helped to collect 10,000 LTL, intended for the environmental adaptations.

Visits to Higher Education Institutions (2005–2006)

The objective of visits to higher education institutions is to get a direct understanding of the situation of higher education institutions where students with disabilities study. The main objective is to analyse in practice the environmental adaptation of higher education institutions, to find out about the available services, attitudes and plans of the Administrations of higher education institutions on improvement of higher education accessibility for the disabled.

The following higher education institutions of Lithuania were visited: Vilnius University, Vilnius College, Mykolas Romeris University, Kaunas University of Medicine, the Lithuanian University of Agriculture, Vytautas Magnus University, Vilnius Gediminas Technical University, Vilnius Pedagogical University, Vilnius College of Business and Law, Šiauliai College, Šiauliai University.

Participants of the visits to higher education institutions included: Liutauras Kazlavickas, the Vice-President of the Lithuanian National Union of Students;



Rūta Ruolytė, the Lithuanian National Union of Students Project Coordinator for Students with Disabilities; Danutė Vainickienė, the Manager of the Department for Social Integration of the Disabled in the Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania; Vilma Karosienė, the Chief Specialist of the Department for Social Integration of the Disabled in the Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania; Teresa Aidukienė, the Chief Specialist of Special Education Sector in the Ministry of Education and Science; Vytautas Šimėnas, the Coordinator of Environment and Housing of the Society for the Physically Disabled of Lithuania; Rasa Kalinauskaitė, the representative of the Department for Affairs of the Disabled under the Ministry of Social Security and Labour; Egidijus Jagminas, the representative of the Lithuanian Association of People with Impaired Spine; Robertas Šimonis and Jurga Paulavičiūtė, Vilnius University students with disabilities.

Visits to Disabled School Students (2006)

In 2006, the representatives of the Lithuanian National Union of Students organized meetings with disabled school students and encouraged the senior scho-

ol students through informal discussions to seek the Higher Education Diploma. In view of the research data, the representatives of the Lithuanian National Union of Students also consulted school students on the opportunities of higher education nowadays.

Initial Researches (2005–2007)

Prior to the activity of integration of people with disabilities in higher education, the Lithuanian National Union of Students started to investigate the contemporary situation. Three main researches were carried out: “Students with Disabilities in Lithuania in 2005–2006”, “The Need of the Disabled to Study in Higher Education Institutions”, “Higher Education Services for Students with Disabilities Abroad”, and the study “The Counselling Centre for Disabled Students and Possibilities of its Establishment”.

The research “Students with Disabilities in Lithuania in 2005–2006” helped to realize the exact situation and admission problems of disabled students in Lithuanian higher education institutions. By that time, no information was available on the exact number of students with disabilities in Lithuanian higher education institutions, the types of disabilities that prevail, the responsible bodies for disabled students, the provided services, and the level of environmental adaptations in higher education institutions. To observe the undergoing changes in the situation, in 2006, the research “Students with Disabilities in Higher Education Institutions of Lithuania in 2006–2007” was carried out.

The research “The Need of the Disabled to Study in Higher Education Institutions” helped to observe the tendency of students with disabilities to continue studies in higher education institutions.

The research “Higher Education Services for Students with Disabilities Abroad” was carried out in order to find out how the problems of students with disabilities are solved in different foreign countries.

The study “The Counselling Centre for Disabled Students and Possibilities of its Establishment” helps to investigate the potential activities of the Counselling Centre for Disabled Students in a higher education institution, i.e. the target groups of the Counselling Centre, available services, the composition of staff, and the funding mechanism for the existence of the Counselling Centre.

2. Stories of Students with Disabilities

2.1. Silvana Hacking (Graviškytė) Vilnius Pedagogical University



I was born, grew up and lived in the Soviet Union.

In fact, it was a terrible period, as people with hearing impairments did not enjoy all the basic rights existing in the society. People with hearing impairments then were unable to seek secondary education, not to mention higher education. If you managed to finish the basic school, the only possibility left is a trade school.

At that time only three schools for the deaf existed in Lithuania: in Vilnius, Kaunas and Telšiai. The school for the deaf, though, did not provide with secondary education.

It should be noted that I had moderate hearing in my childhood, therefore, the Commission of doctors and teachers recommended me to Kaunas school for People with Hearing Impairments (as it was called then). But there were no vacancies at that time, and I had to wait for two long years until a vacancy occurred in the first form. I started to attend that school at the age of nine.

But the actual goal of my life was higher education.

On my way to achieve the goal, I have graduated from many schools.

Firstly, I have finished an 8-year school; then an evening high school followed accompanied by the infinite variety of courses. And only when Lithuania re-established its independence, I was able to seek higher education.

I was encouraged to enter a higher education institution by the School Director Girdutė Lepėškienė. She told me: “Silvana, you must study at the University.” I was just taken aback: I am deaf! How could I possibly study at the University? The blood froze in my veins and the only idea was whirling in my head: “I am deaf. Deaf! Deaf!”. Meanwhile, my heart echoed the words of the School Director: “You will manage. You will manage!”

And I did manage.

Inasmuch as I loved to, and as people would say, had a good hand for drawing since my childhood, I decided to study fine arts.

In fact, the first year at Vilnius Pedagogical University was difficult: I did not understand what teachers say and what they speak about. I would read their lips. However, it is not always possible to read them. While speaking and explaining, the teacher frequently turns to the window, to the board, bends to read a text – then you cannot rely on lip-reading. Only much later my course mates found out about my deafness and lent me a helping hand. Some helped to take notes of the classes; others explained the meaning of concepts and expressions. And one of my course mates even learned the sign language for my sake and this helped me not only to study fine arts but also to feel as an equal group member.

Meanwhile, teachers neither beat me, nor flattered. My study results completely depended on my knowledge.

I did not participate in the public life of the University or any other activity as I was busy working as a school teacher of the sign language and fine arts. I did not pay for my studies because I studied in the state-funded group. Furthermore, when I studied for the Masters’ Degree, I received financial support from the Lithuanian Association of the Deaf.

Thus, struggling and surmounting, I have achieved my goals: I have not only finished studies at the University but also obtained the Master’s Degree in Educology.

And now I work as a Senior Teacher of Fine Arts at school.

Today, when I look back at the six preceding years, when I first stepped

through the doorway of Vilnius Pedagogical University, I recall with love and respect the names of the teachers who supported my wish to develop and create. Naturally, I won't mention all of them, but I will always keep in my recollections the dear names of Professor Ričardas Bartkevičius, Lector Giedrė Riškutė, Professor Jonas Gudmonas, Dr. Assoc. Prof. Kristina Kaluinaitė.

I don't have much free time. I need to prepare for the classes. If you want to teach – you must constantly develop yourself.

I paint a lot and organize painting exhibitions. The exhibitions are on different topics.

When I held my first exhibition, Professor Ričardas Bartkevičius wished me: “Even a thousand-miles-long road starts with the first step. And you are already on the way. Express yourself boldly in colours and lines.”

I also recall the words of Artist Vytautas Vanagas: “She has a painter's hand, boldness, a wide stroke of the brush, innate colour hearing, and above all, controls the mood.”

I feel especially grateful for Lecturer Giedrė Riškutė. She encouraged me to introduce myself in the publicity and to organize my first brand exhibition.

Dr. Assoc. Prof. Kristina Kaluinaitė, the Advisor of my Master's Thesis, is still another important person in my life.

Professor Jonas Gudmonas taught me not only to think in a creative manner but also supported me spiritually in every possible situation. I will always feel grateful for him.

God gave two knees for a human: one is for kneeling in front of a TEACHER, another – in front of a Doctor.

Today I can work and create.

It means – I live.

I wish luck for everyone!

Pull out all the stops and you will be happy!

Silvana Hacking (Graviškytė)

2.2. Rūta Kupčinskaitė

Vytautas Magnus University

3dr year student of Bachelor's studies in Sociology



I have chosen this speciality as I was eager to get through the human psychology and perception as well as empathy cooperating and being among the disabled.

The difficulties I have faced when entering the University included the lack of information on high education institutions, their accessibility and infrastructure. Having entered the University, I found out that there were no people for coordinating the affairs of the disabled. The Students' Representation did not have a person who would represent the interests of the disabled; I lacked information on the possibilities, benefits, and the flexibility of knowledge check.

At the beginning, I was ignored by the course mates and teachers. Having faced the inaccessibility of the infrastructure I understood that this is completely a business of my own; and it cannot be changed or adjusted in terms of the University administration. I lacked information on the study regulation for the disabled, their rights and duties.

The support that I have finally attained was the Dean's positive approach to my wish to study, the Dean's concern about my problems and a positive ap-

proach to the problems that may be avoided. Then, course mates showed their good intentions to help me gain access to the classrooms, to take me upstairs to the classrooms and make me comfortable, and help when looking for study material in inaccessible libraries.

Studying, I use the provided transportation service. I discuss with teachers the possibility of changing the classrooms that are accessible for me. The inaccessible study material is placed in the system “First Class”, which may be used by all the students or staff of Vytautas Magnus University. The student’s hostel has a room adjusted for a person with motor impairments.

The support I have obtained is the benefit to meet the special needs, i.e. 1 MGL, and funding for studies, i.e. 3.2 MGL.

In my free time from studies I spend time on my favourable hobby – to thread beads. Moreover, I participate in seminars organized by the academic community of the University; together with the course mates we plan social activities related to our speciality.

The most challenging positive experience I had at the University was handling of the staircases due to the lack of environmental adaptation as this could have been done only with the assistance of the course mates; each time I had to ask the guys to lend me a helping hand, and they willingly did me a favour when I asked them with a smile in a humour manner: “Well, guys, shall we try today your physical fitness”.

The most challenging negative experience I had at the University was an unfavourable acceptance into the academic community, when a disabled person is considered to be unfit to study and act, when it is doubted if he or she is able to overcome the difficulties.

Studies at the higher education institution provide me with everything that any student can obtain, i.e. involvement, cooperation, integration in the society, knowledge and ability to apply it in practice, skills to communicate not only with the course mates but also with other people, freedom, belief in the future prospects, assured employment opportunities and being one of the others.

I would recommend other students to overcome fear to study and seek their goals; everything starts with small achievements, later big deeds follow that you can overcome and achieve. Don’t be afraid to ask and represent your interests, you are one of the students, and you have the same freedom of choice as they do.

3. Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions

3.1. From the Position of Lithuanian National Union of Students Regarding the Reform of Higher Education

In the opinion of the Lithuanian National Union of Students, it is necessary to focus attention on the integration of people with disabilities when making reforms to the studies and education within the state. Therefore, a significant part in the position on the main issues of the reform of higher education prepared by the Organization is devoted for solving the problems of integration of people with disabilities. The position proposes constructive suggestions on the improvement of higher education accessibility for the disabled.

“Seeking to ensure higher education accessibility for people with disabilities, the Universities and Colleges must create conditions for education of the disabled. Each higher education institution should feel responsibility creating, supporting and systematically improving the possibility to study for people with special needs. To implement the aim, complex decisions are required: adjusted physical environment of a higher education institution and a students’ hostel; ensured information accessibility for people with different disabilities; meeting the special needs (provision of an assistant, chaperon, reader, notetaker, sign language interpreter and/or technical aid), and regular education of academic community on the issues of disability. To regulate the recommended measures, each higher education institution should prepare a “Disability Statement for Students with Disabilities” or other similar internal acts, which clearly set forth the admission rules for people with disabilities, their rights and duties, funding and infrastructure in a higher education institution. To achieve these aims, the support from the EU structural funds should be received in line with the special attention of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania. Seeking to implement the changes, it is necessary to prepare the “Action Programme of Higher Education Institution Adaptation for Students with Disabilities” that would be prepared in

cooperation with disabled people, the representatives of the Administration of a higher education institution and the Students' Self-Governments. The functions of the implementation of the programme should lie within the competence of the Coordinator of Disabled Students' Affairs of a higher education institution or the Counselling Centre for Disabled Students. The role of the promotion policy would become the prerogative of the Students' Self-Government".

3.2. Implementation Plan of Lithuanian National Union of Students Programme "Higher Education for All"

The Lithuanian National Union of Students in association with experts from the organizations for the disabled and the state institutions, guided by the laws of the Republic of Lithuania and the National Programme of Integration of People with Disabilities for 2003–2012 of the Republic of Lithuania and recommendations of the research "Factors that Influence the Studies of People with Special Needs in Higher Education Institutions" (2006) carried out by the Ministry of Education and Science, created a Programme "Higher Education for All" and its Implementation Plan. The vision and aim of the Programme "Higher Education for All" are to ensure equal rights and opportunities for disabled students to study in a higher education institution.

This Programme was created to solve the main problems that students with disabilities face, such as lack of physical, information and housing (students' hostels) environmental adaptation and special services with respect to a disability, as well as an intolerable attitude of some members of the academic society. To solve the problems, the Programme "Higher Education for All" distinguishes between three different trends, i.e. physical and information environmental accessibility; meeting the special needs; and an intolerable attitude to the disabled.

The Implementation Plan of the Programme "Higher Education for All" is one of the measures to improve higher education accessibility for the disabled.

I. Physical and Information Environment Accessibility

The Implementation Plan of the first part of the Programme "Higher Education for All" provides details on the improvement of physical and information environmental accessibility in higher education institutions of the state.



This type of accessibility is important trying to ensure that students with disabilities could study in a higher education institution independently and with dignity. For that purpose, first of all, the need of the disabled to study should be identified in line with the specialities available for the disabled according to their special needs. The aim is to start planning where exactly the environmental adaptations should be targeted, and try to save the time of the disabled.

Talking about the adjustment of higher education institutions, first of all, each higher education institution must identify the environmental accessibility for the disabled to a higher education institution and the priority spheres of the environmental adaptation; prepare a project of environmental adaptations in every higher education institution; and finally, to prepare a National Project of Environmental Adaptation for the Disabled in Higher Education Institutions. It should not be forgotten, that the environment can be adjusted not only for people with motor impairments but also for those with visual and hearing impairments. Moreover, the environmental adaptation is helpful not only for the disabled but also for other people.

Inasmuch as studies in higher education institutions is a complex phenomenon, it is essential to make students' hostels accessible for the disabled, to adjust the physical environment of a hostel and to accommodate at least several special rooms.

The disabled students themselves admit the importance of information accessibility and adapted literature resources. In order to set certain standards

as a guide for higher education institutions, it is recommended to carry out a study “Adaptation of the Study Material for Students with Disabilities” and later present it and implement the adaptation of the study material in higher education institutions.

Another significant aspect is the individualization of the study plan. With regard to the type of a disability, it is important to create appropriate conditions for studies and, without providing any special privileges, to meet their special needs.

II. Meeting the Special Needs

The second part of the Implementation Plan is meeting the special needs of the disabled. What is it, and what should be started with?

First of all, higher education institutions would be advised to find out the number of the disabled students in a higher education institution, i.e. the total number of the disabled students, the faculties they are studying in, the specialities they are choosing, as this is a prerequisite for systematic and efficient planning; moreover, having the contacts of the disabled students, they may be supplied with actual information and provided with services. A higher education institution could judge what special services should be available for the disabled, with respect to the type of a disability. It is important not only to meet the special needs of disabled people but also to combine interests, i.e. preparation of Disability Statements defining the issues of the disabled in higher education institutions, establishment of the Committees/Councils of equal opportunities for the disabled. For example, each higher education institution could prepare a special document where the rights and possibilities of the disabled would be defined as well as the opportunities provided and undertaken by the higher education institution.

It is also advisable to establish the regulations of equal opportunities for the disabled and other socially vulnerable groups in the main legislative documents of a higher education institution. Higher education institutions are recommended to create “Disability Statements” that would define the rights of disabled students and the opportunities and obligations of a higher education institution. Such practice is successfully established in the Universities of Great Britain; moreover preparation of such documents reduces the possibility of misunderstandings and both, the staff of a higher education institution and disabled students, clearly know what services can be provided and obtained.

A lot of different factors influence the studies of disabled students, thus, in order to create an accessible study process in a higher education institution, it is recommended to establish a special work team or Committee for the Affairs of the Disabled comprised of the Administration of a higher education institu-

tion, the Students' Representation, representatives of the organizations for the disabled and the disabled students themselves. It is also essential to involve the disabled people when making decisions regarding the affairs of the disabled. This would encourage the participation and activeness of the disabled as well as ensure more professional and comprehensive decision-making. To ensure similar processes within the whole of Lithuania, it is recommended to establish the National Council for the Coordination of the Activity of the Groups for the Harmonization of the Interests of the Disabled in Higher Education Institutions under the Ministry of Education and Science.

To establish the system of representation of disabled students and conditions in a higher education institution, it is essential and necessary to establish a new position in a higher education institution, such as a position of the Coordinator of the Affairs of the Disabled or the Coordinator of Equal Opportunities for the Disabled. It is important to have a person in a higher education institution who could be referred to by disabled students or their relatives as well as who would discuss such issues as the individualization of a study plan with teachers, etc. The establishment of such positions would ensure a long-term process instead of single-time assistance.

The higher education accessibility for the disabled requires huge assets; therefore, first of all, the scientific study should be carried out in order to determine the most efficient forms of financial aid to higher education intuitions and their implementation in the future. This would ensure the implementation of the principle of higher education accessibility and equal opportunities for disabled students.

Finally, in order to ensure the efficient study process, it is essential to disseminate best practices of foreign and Lithuanian higher education institutions regarding the assurance of equal opportunities for the disabled.

III. Attitude to the Disabled

The Implementation Plan of the third but not least part of the Programme "Higher Education for All" is the attitude to the disabled as the essential prerequisite for the social integration in the society. In this respect, the key role is played by education and dissemination of best practices. Thus, the Programme "Higher Education for All" includes training for students and their organizations, which facilitate the activities dedicated for solving the problems of disabled people through mutual cooperation of the disabled and healthy students. The Students' Self-Governments are advised to establish the initiative, interest representation and self-help groups for disabled students; develop the competence of interest representation, leadership and social activeness of students with disabilities. Furthermore, to develop the competence of the repre-

sentatives of the Students' Self-Governments and that of the disabled, and expand the activities intended for the disabled students.

Another important aspect is education of the academic community. In most cases, inadequate behaviour with respect to the disabled occurs from the unawareness how to behave with people having different disabilities. Moreover, the disabled are surrounded by myths and stereotypes; ostensibly, if you are physically disabled, your mental state is questioned too, etc. Therefore, in order to inform the Administration and teachers of a higher education institution or other people, who are in direct contact with the disabled, it is advisable to prepare publications on the disability etiquette that would thoroughly acquaint with different types of disabilities and provide practical recommendations where to focus one's attention when communicating with the disabled. Education could also be organized in practice, i.e. providing training for teachers. They would take the form of consultations on the issues on how to organize the study process if classes and seminars are attended by the disabled, and what best methods would be to convey information.

The Implementation Plan recommends carrying out a long-term research on the attitude to the disabled students and the attitude of the disabled to the ongoing processes of social integration. This would also help to meet the special needs of the disabled and ensure the process of consistent integration in higher education institutions.



3.3. Higher Education Accessibility: Insights and Practices in Foreign Countries

Two parameters of higher education accessibility can be distinguished: the access to higher education and accessibility in higher education, i.e. support in the comprehensive participation in the course of studies. It should be noted that disabled students should be supported before entering a higher education institution and on admission. In order to find out what target support is required, the evaluation of the needs and the mechanism of orientation to the labour market are necessary.

Position of the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (SENDA)

The European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (SENDA) distinguishes between several levels of responsibility. A **higher education institution**, first of all, should find out about people with disabilities while keeping confidentiality. The Disability Statements or Action Plans should be created for the disabled students, which would define the available services and obligations. Furthermore, the support services should be provided or a special establishment, team or responsible person should be available for coordination of the affairs of disabled students. The recommended types of support include academic support, assistance, housing, health care, psychological and financial consultation services. What is the responsibility of a **disabled student**? Students with disabilities should participate in the decision-making processes regarding their studies and assume responsibility for the decisions related to their future. **Teachers** should be encouraged to be concerned not only with the needs of disabled students but also to support all the students. Moreover, other teachers and the Administration should be motivated and encouraged to assume the responsibility and manage to meet the needs of disabled students. It is recommended to provide necessary study material in an accessible form and employ alternative methods of knowledge check. At the **national level**, the umbrella-type, national or the so-called integrated organizations in the higher education departments or the support centres for disabled students should be established; general education on the issues of the rights of the disabled should be carried out as well as the international cooperation among the Coordinators of the disabled should be promoted. What is the **overall policy** of higher education? From the very start, the needs of all the would-be students should be analysed. The overall policy should be intersectoral, based on the philosophy of meeting the needs of all people, should ha-

ve a long-term vision but manage to realize the contemporary needs. The SEN-DA distinguishes between the following phases of development of higher education accessibility for the disabled: short-term, i.e. when special activity plans and strategies are recognized; medium-term, i.e. a part of general strategic plans; and long-term, which is natural and unquestionable.

Higher Education Accessibility Based on the Stages

- Before and on admission.

Information provided before entering a higher education institution must be as understandable as possible, correct and detailed; accessible and rendered in different forms, including the Internet websites of higher education institutions.

- Disability disclosure.

Higher education institutions should encourage students to disclose their disabilities and inform on their special needs for studies, as this is the only way to plan efficient and quality support during studies in a systematic and methodical manner. Being acquainted with the special needs of a disabled student, it is recommended to cooperate with different organizations for the disabled in order to ensure equal opportunities for studies. Still, this information should be confidential.

- Programme and course structure.

Talking of the assessment of the special needs, it is worth mentioning such aspects as attendance, outside assignments, places of practical training, laboratory assignments, group work; special technique and technologies. Inasmuch as the study programme adaptation is concerned, the essential elements that will remain unchangeable should be determined. (Hurst, 2007).

- Tool for teachers!

Radomskis (2007) created the criteria that enable to determine how much a disability could influence the participation of a disabled student in different courses. For example, a teacher, knowing that his subject will be heard by a student with cerebral palsy or hearing impairments, and willing to evaluate the availability of the discipline, should answer the following questions (see Table No. 1). The criteria are more relevant to technical specialities.

Table No. 1

Disability type	Questions for the evaluation of study programmes
Mental disability	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Does the course require special focus of attention? 2. Could the course cause different phobias, for instance, agoraphobia, claustrophobia? 3. Could the tendency to emotional disorders hinder from participating in the course?
Hearing impairments	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Is hearing necessary to understand and realize this course? 2. Is it possible to substitute the hearing ability by visual ability?
Speech disorders	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Is inter-personal communication indispensable to realize the course?
Visual impairments	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Is good eyesight necessary to understand the course? 2. Does the course have a negative impact on the eyesight? 3. Would it be possible to attend the course with the help of supplementary technique or an assistant?
Motor disorders	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Does this course require locomotion? 2. Could the course be realized by using crutches? 3. Could the course be realized by using a wheelchair? 4. Is the course aimed at training to move in special technical conditions?
Physical impairments	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Does the course require bigger physical activeness than servicing or use of a computer keyboard? 2. Could the course be realized with the help of an assistant? 3. Is the course aimed at training physical work skills in special technical conditions?
Cardiac and respiratory dysfunctions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Is there a possibility that materials irritating airways will be used during the course? 2. Does the course require bigger physical activeness than moving?
Metabolic or oncologic disorders	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Does the course require bigger physical activeness than moving? 2. Does frequent non-attendance (over 50 %) enable to realize the course programme?

- Classroom.

Teachers or staff of a higher education institution should consider the barriers occurring due to the chosen teaching and learning methods; the unplanned barriers, work in groups of different sizes.

- Knowledge check.

A teacher having a disabled student should be flexible, creative and cooperating. At the very beginning students must be clearly introduced to the requirements for the form and assessment criteria of knowledge check. Alternative knowledge check methods should be considered.

- Careers counselling.

It is essential to orient students with disabilities to the labour market. They should be counselled on the issues of career planning and orientation. The careers counselling is especially important for students with disabilities. Individual consultations on personal profession-related issues could also be provided via the Internet or telephone. These services could also be provided by the volunteers or students who have their practical training in the Departments for Disabled Students Support. Special experts or psychologists could also be hired. In case disabled students feel the need for interpersonal communication, it is recommended to establish self-help groups (Bera, 2007).



3.4. The Counselling Centre for Students with Disabilities and Possibilities of Establishment

Higher education institutions seeking to improve higher education accessibility for the disabled are recommended to establish an extra position in the Administration, i.e. the Coordinator for the Disabled. Having taken first advanced steps towards the coordination of the affairs of disabled students, it is advisable to establish the Counselling Centre for Disabled Students or to establish a separate department to deal with the issue. Such practice is implemented in many Western European states.

In 2006, the Lithuanian National Union of Students carried out a study “The Counselling Centre for Students with Disabilities and Possibilities of Establishment”. The research results show that such Centre or Department could provide services such as rendering of information for disabled students on higher education accessibility and available studies, leisure activities; acquaintance with the environmental adaptation of a higher education institution; preparation of study material in an accessible form; mediation between a disabled student and the Administration of a higher education institution; placement of information regarding the adaptation of a higher education institution and provided social services on the Internet website specially adapted for the disabled; preparation of volunteers for work with disabled people, sign language interpretation services for students with hearing impairments; consultation of employees in the places of practical training (see Table No. 2).

The staff of the Counselling Centre for Students with Disabilities should include the following specialists: a social worker and a social educator, volunteers, a sign language interpreter, a psychologist, a manager, an organizer. Volunteers could be chaperons for the people with motor and visual impairments, readers, notetakers; meanwhile sign language interpreters should have a special preparation.

A possible funding mechanism for such a Centre could be the following: one third – funded by the founder, one third – charities and subsidies, the remaining part – personal funds and a student’s fee for the obtained services.

Table No. 2

Services provided by the Counselling Centre for Students with Disabilities
Counselling for disabled school students on the issues of choosing a speciality and selecting a higher education institution.
Informing of disabled school students about the accessibility for the disabled to a higher education institution.
Psychological preparation of disabled school students for higher education studies.
Consultation of parents of disabled school students on the issues of studies.
Consultation of parents of disabled students on the issues of studies.
Services of a chaperon (attendant) in a higher education institution and the place of residence.
Personal assistance of a chaperon (attendant) with a severe (complex) disability (for getting dressed, preparing food, shopping, etc.)
Transportation services for those with motor disorders.
Services of a chaperon (attendant) to accompany to and inside a higher education institution.
Mobility training in a higher education institution for the visually impaired.
Preparation of study material in an accessible form (larger print, in Braille, recorded, assistance in formatting a document, book recording and blind reading, digital publications).
Reader's services for the visually impaired.
Writing of a dictated text for the visually impaired.
Assistance in filling in the forms for the visually impaired.
Notetaking for the hearing impaired.
Sign language translation services for the hearing impaired.
Information on the studies in a higher education institution and leisure activities.
Acquaintance with the environmental adaptations of a higher education institution.
The mobility scheme of a higher education environment and premises.
Psychological assistance for disabled students.
Information on the possibilities of meeting the special needs.
Arrangement of a flexible timetable.
Adaptation of exam tests (prolongation of time, alternative assignments, etc.)
Rent / provision of technical aid.
Individual training on how to use technical aid.
Preparation of the disabled to represent themselves.
Mediation between a disabled student and the Administration of a higher education institution.
Placement of information regarding the adaptation of a higher education institution and provided social services on the Internet website specially adapted for the disabled.
Consultations for teachers on work with disabled people.
Training on the issues of disability etiquette and work with disabled people.
Education of the society and the higher education institution on the issues of disability.
Consultation of employees in the places of practical training for the students with disabilities.
Training of volunteers to work with disabled people.

About the Lithuanian National Union of Students



The Lithuanian National Union of Students, established in 1991, is a national, democratic, independent, non-government organization, representing the interests of Lithuanian students and uniting the Students' Self-Governments of Lithuanian higher education institutions.

The Students' Representations of higher education institutions are conducted by the Presidents who are elected by students. They comprise the Council of the Lithuanian National Union of Students that forms the policy of the Organization. The Students' Representations also delegate representatives to the supreme authority of the Lithuanian National Union of Students – the Conference, which is summoned every year to assess the activity of the headquarters, elect the President of the Lithuanian National Union of Students who is assisted by the Presidium, which accompanies the President when implementing the aims of the Organization.

The Lithuanian National Union of Students represents and protects Lithuanian student at the highest level when the problems of social and economic welfare, academic and other issues of interest for students are discussed.

Implementing its objectives, the Lithuanian National Union of Students organizes national and international events and movements, seeking to focus attention of the society on the existing problems, to create and develop education policy, to promote international and intercultural cooperation, to develop students' image in the society.

The Lithuanian National Union of Students keeps and develops contacts with the decision-making governmental institutions, Lithuanian and international youth, students', school students' and other organizations and education institutions.

The Organization prepares and carries out projects to improve students' academic and social situation; organizes training, seminars, forums; provides consultations for the members of the Students' Self-Governments.

The Lithuanian National Union of Students works to prove that education is a right, not a privilege!

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