



Title of the Case Study: **Higher Education for Students with Disabilities**

DIALOGUE thematic group: Access and Progression

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Abstract:

The case study shows how the decisions of the ULLL policy makers` are related with the outcomes of the research focused on Access and Progression for the Romanian disabled youth, through practical activities involved in a university project. The case study analyses the Romanian project „Development and Implementation of a Pilot Program for Increasing the Access to Higher Education for People with Disabilities”, which aims to optimize the access of the disabled people to higher education. The purpose of the project is going to be achieved by implementing an integrated pilot program in order to assist 300 students from the three partner universities. The assisted disabled students will benefit of mentoring activities, training to use an e-learning platform and diversified opportunities to be employed on the labor market. The research and practice dialogue achieved within the project stimulates the practitioners (teachers in higher education) to adapt their teaching activity to the special needs of the disabled students involved in higher education.

Introduction:

The case study has been selected from the Romanian university projects related with ULLL and Access and Progression issues. We consider this case study is a good example of dialogue between research and practice, as all the activities of the project are based on the findings of a research conducted by experts and university teachers involved in the project team. The dialogue between research and practice generates, in this case, some theoretical materials and also training activities for mentors and teachers in higher education, who work with students with disabilities. The researchers communicate directly with the practitioners through face to face meetings or through media tools. There are also some theoretical materials, which represent outcomes of the research and some practical ICT tools adapted to disabled students` needs. Thus, the case study highlights the value of the direct and indirect links between research and practice, which are perfected when teachers in higher education unite their efforts in order to implement the frameworks of the ULLL and Access and Progression policy makers.



General background:

Social and professional integration of disadvantaged groups, including persons with special needs are important socio-economic measures recommended by the European Parliament and designed by the Romanian authorities in their policy documents. According to statistical studies elaborated by the Romanian National Authority for Disabled People, in 2009, there were about 100,000 non-institutionalised disabled people, aged from 18 to 34. Most of them (about 62%) were suffering from physical disabilities, representing the potential target groups for LLL activities. On the other hand, only 4% from the whole Romanian population is represented by disabled employees. Thus, it is imperative to integrate people with disabilities and to remove their entry barriers in society. The project „Development and Implementation of a Pilot Program for Increasing the Access to Higher Education for People with Disabilities” <http://www.eupd.ro/> is European Social Fund-financed, subordinated to the Sectorial Operational Program Human Resources Development 2007-2013.



The beneficiary, The Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports is the intermediate institution in implementing the Sectorial Operational Program Human Resources Development 2007-2013 in Romania. It is the national public institution that designs and applies the global strategy of education, sets the goals of the educational system as a whole and defines the educational objectives on levels and profiles. The three partner universities include distance and lifelong learning centers to ensure equal access to higher education for everyone, including people with disabilities, socially marginalized or elderly persons. They developed or are developing other resembling projects. Thus, the „Wallachia” University of Târgoviste is developing the project „Development of Professional Skills to reintegrate the Unemployed into Active Life in the South-Muntenia”. Some relevant projects developed by the „Lucian Blaga” University, such as „Regional Development through Flexible and Opened Education; Implementation of a Complex Platform of e-Education”, or the older project named „Accommodative Intelligent Educational Environment for Dyslexic Learners” prove that universities are constantly interested in increasing the use of new technologies by older teachers and by people with disabilities. The National Union of the Students in Romania represents the social partner, while The Red Point Company provides the support to identify the specific IT needs and Gold Agama Consulting Company is media partner of this project.

Objectives and purposes:

The overall objective of the project is „to create opportunities for improving access to higher education (BA and MA levels) by developing and implementing an integrated pilot program to assist 300 people with disabilities”.



Some of the specific objectives are:

- reducing the costs in universities providing course materials appropriate to the type and the degree of the disability that students are suffering of, by optimizing the process of presenting/converting the teaching material;
- providing course materials through an e-Learning system adapted to students' disabilities types, so that they can access resources without much physical effort;
- developing and implementing a training program for 100 mentors appropriate to the specific educational needs of the students with disabilities; training these persons to use the ICT tools;
- providing access to higher education including the use of the new ICT technologies developed in the project by:
 - a. financial assistance through scholarships for 150 disabled people;
 - b. providing effective educational mentoring for the students with disabilities, with trained mentors and volunteers.

Links between Research and Practice:

The needs of the target group have been identified as a result of the feedback received from the higher education system and as a result of prospecting studies at regional and national levels. A research activity has been conducted in the three partner universities aiming the analysis of the current situation on how students with disabilities are supported in their educational process (study programs and materials to be accessed by students with special needs). The research was developed by experts included in the project team. The theoretical assumption of the research was to check the level of the facilities offered by the current university environment to students with disabilities and to improve support of their educational process. The opinions of the teachers included in the target group, as well as those of some disabled students already enrolled in higher education were collected directly through questionnaires elaborated during the research. After analyzing the answers obtained from the questionnaires it was found that:

- more than a half of the respondents believe that people with disabilities have equal opportunities in education;
- the academic staff consider that a person's disability is no obstacle in education; however there are some communication barriers, emotional problems such as the inability to access upstairs classrooms, for people with mobility impairments, visually impaired people unable to study in Braille format, the difficulty to keep a high cadence in knowledge assimilation process or difficulties in keeping attention or concentration;
- most of the teachers appreciate that universities are not properly equipped for the needs of people with disabilities, underlining the lack of necessary facilities such as ramps or parking places;
- the surveyed teachers indicated that they adapted their teaching activities to the special needs of their students with disabilities, by using images during their explanations, teaching by computer, formulating differentiated tasks, integrating



these students into working groups, offering them support for recovery, or by using the ground floor rooms for their courses;

- a very high percentage of the questioned teachers have expressed interest to participate in training courses to develop necessary skills to interact with students with disabilities.

The most important activities included in the project are closely linked with the conclusions of the initial research. They aim to develop and implement software solutions/tools to convert the teaching materials necessary to the students with disabilities, to extend the use of ICT in teaching, to adapt the e-Learning system to those students' needs, or to develop and provide an educational training program for mentors (teachers from the partner universities and members of the social partners in education.)

The Lower Danube University of Galati is responsible for providing the proper implementation of hardware and software conversion tools for the teaching material used by students with disabilities. A theoretical material named „Optimized Ways of Converting «Classical» Teaching Material in Frameworks Accessible to People with Disabilities” has been elaborated. It contains pedagogical but also technical advices for teachers, helping them to adapt their activities to students with different kinds of disabilities. A special Curriculum, „Educational Mentoring. Teacher Training in Higher Education working with People with Disabilities” represents another important material elaborated for the project. Theoretical materials have been posted on the project web-site, in order to facilitate the access of the target group members at expert- researchers` advices. Thus, the findings from the research are indirectly connected to practical activities through the theoretical materials posted on the project website and also directly, through training activities for academic staff mentors.

Linking Researchers and Practitioners:

A campaign to attract people with disabilities to higher education has been conducted in high schools in the residence cities of the partner universities, but also in the surroundings, or even in more remote areas. The authorities and the social partners supported and encouraged the implementation of the project. There were no administrative barriers related to carrying out the planned activities. However, the target group could not be fully realized. Only 60 from the 100 planned students with disabilities were admitted in „Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu, after the admission process, which led to increased efforts to attract such students to higher education.

The communication is effective between the project team (the researchers) and the members of the target group. The project team communicates directly with the target groups through social networking, e-mail or face to face meetings when necessary. The academic staff from the partner universities (researchers and practitioners) shows openness and desire to engage in mentoring program. They are interested in understanding the difficulties faced by people with disabilities and also in finding solutions to adapt their teaching to those special needs. Direct links and changes of information between researchers and practitioners will be facilitated during the activities meant to train mentors who will work with disabled students or teachers in higher education who will use the adapted ICT tools developed within the project.



Some people with disabilities proved that they are interested in continuing their studies in higher education, despite the fact that the environment in universities is not exactly prepared to satisfy their needs, or that general mentality is preventing their participating in higher education. Thus, the dialogue between researchers, those who spread knowledge and those who need it despite of their disabilities is going to be realized.

Transferability of the case:

The objectives of the project could be easily followed by other Romanian or foreign universities to increase the access of people with disabilities to higher education.

The two theoretical materials posted on the project web-site, „Optimized Ways of Converting «Classical» Teaching Material in Frameworks Accessible to People with Disabilities” and the Curriculum „Educational Mentoring. Teacher Training in Higher Education working with People with Disabilities” could be studied and adapted in other universities, in order to facilitate the studying process for people with disabilities and communication between academic staff and the students with special needs.

The converted tools for the teaching materials used for and by the students with disabilities as well as the e-Learning solution developed and adapted for those students` needs could also be implemented in different regional or national contexts, after they will be realized in the project activities.

Recommendations from the case study:

A better communication between the policy makers, researchers and practitioners working with disabled students in higher education could facilitate better results related to ULLL and Access and Progression in Romania.

Implementing the tools to convert the teaching material for the special needs of disabled students and training the teachers working in higher education to become their mentors could be efficiency measures to deepen the ULLL and Access and Progression.

A change in mentality is necessary to overcome the difficulty of attracting disabled students to higher education.

Further Reading:

<http://www.eupd.ro/despre-proiect/rezultate/>.

<http://www.eupd.ro/despre-proiect/grup-tinta/>.

<http://www.eupd.ro/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Curriculum.pdf>.