



Access to Information for People with Special Needs: Experience from Academic Course

TODOROVA Tania (1), EFTIMOVA Sabina (2)

State University of Library Studies and Information Technologies, Bulgaria (1)

State University of Library Studies and Information Technologies, Bulgaria (2)

Abstract

In 2010, the European Union adopted the European Disability Strategy 2010-2020: A Renewed Commitment to a Barrier-Free Europe. The report describes ways for European institutions to meet the terms of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and implies the commitment of each European nation towards achieving a barrier-free participation of its citizens in the economy and community life. Correspondingly, Bulgaria developed the National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (2008-2015; 2016-2020) and the Action Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria to implement the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2015-2020). Accessibility improvements such as distance training for people with special needs and the inclusion of accessibility curricula in appropriate disciplines is now required in Bulgaria's higher education sector. As a result of the strategy, the University of Library Studies and Information Technologies (ULSIT) introduced an Access to Information for People with Special Needs elective course in the professional field 3.5. Public Communications and Information Sciences. This paper introduces the contents, the teaching methods and the student assessment mode applied in the course. Special attention is given to teaching methods that enhance student empathy and motivation and increase student involvement in a variety of extra curricular activities such as volunteer missions that address disability and special needs issues.

Keywords: *people with special needs, higher education, extra curricula activities, Bulgaria, European Disability Strategy 2010-2020;*

1. Introduction

In 2010, the European Union (EU) adopted the European Disability Strategy 2010-2020: A Renewed Commitment to a Barrier-Free Europe [5]. This strategic document sets out the measures for implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) of the United Nations (UN) by the European institutions and suggests the commitment of all stakeholders at national and European level. The term 'persons with disabilities' is defined in article 1 of the Convention and has the following meaning: „Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others“. In accordance with this document, disability should not be considered a reason to compel persons with disabilities to a lifestyle determined by such disability. They have the right to live independently and to take part in all aspects of life: to have their own home like every other member of the society, equal access to everything: transport, education, information, communications, as well as to public institutions and services [4].

In pursuance of its engagements as a EU member state, Bulgaria implements: National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (NSPD) (2008-2015), National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities 2016-2020 and Action Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria on the implementation of the UN CRPD (2015-2020) [6, 7, 2]. The analysis of the legal regulations governing the rights of persons with disabilities in Bulgaria shows that as an EU member state our country has implemented the Community's legal practices in its legislation trying to specify these regulations in accordance with the Bulgarian conditions. Most of the international documents, including CRPD of the UN, are ratified, thus guaranteeing the protection and interest of all citizens, including persons with disabilities, under its jurisdiction. Special legislation is developed, however our general legislation contains provisions aimed at not allowing discrimination. However, despite the modern structure of the laws and regulations, the actual situation in our country *leads to the conclusion of serious discrepancies in the practical application of the legal regulations*, and the main reasons to this end comprise: lack of consistent and targeted investment policy of the government; unnecessary bureaucracy and varied barriers to accessibility in all respects; ineffective coordination with the organisations for persons with disabilities and slow changes in the public mind-set and formation of adequate and modern attitude. In short, we



are of the opinion that we can find effective solutions to these problems only by means of continuous dialogue and targeted joint actions of the executive power, government institutions, organisations and representatives of persons with disabilities, with the active attitude and participation of the civil society.

2. Access to Information for People with Special Needs Academic Course

The implementation of the NSPD (2008-2015) requires to introduce disciplines on this topic in universities' curricula, to improve the access to higher education for all citizens and to ensure opportunities for distance training for people with special needs. The University of Library Studies and Information Technology (ULSIT) has met this need of academic study of students by means of the introduction of such thematic courses. This report highlights a good practice by studying the experience from teaching the elective academic course "*Access to Information for People with Special Needs*" for education and qualification degree "Bachelor", specialty „Library and Information Management", introduced during the AY 2011/2012. The course gives students theoretical and practical knowledge on access to information and education for people with special needs and the role of libraries and other cultural institutions in this process. The discipline studies the problems faced not only by people with different disabilities, but also of other groups of people with special needs, for example, elderly people at the age of 65+, people who are sick or suffer temporary disorders, people in isolation due to different reasons, etc.

Forms of interaction with the organisations of and for persons with disabilities are presented. Knowledge about the following requirements is taught: accessibility of environment; compulsory instructions for the development of adapted services for people with varied disabilities; financial instruments; legal and other aspects of provision of library and information services to people with special needs. Traditional approaches to library and information service of people with varied disabilities are examined, as well as the abilities of advanced information and communication technologies for ensuring equal access to information and knowledge of all citizens.

The curriculum and its topics are updated on annual basis to reflect the changes in the European and national legal regulations, to cover topical matters, while taking into account the interests of the students.

3. Voluntary Initiatives in the Teaching Methodology

Volunteering is cross-sectoral social phenomenon, an exceptional manifestation of civic consciousness, of high ethics and compassion for important causes, people and/or institutions suffering any kind of difficulties. It may be defined as a way of thinking and worldly mind-set to support those in need – without expecting any return. From pedagogical aspect, voluntary work may be considered: as object of study where volunteers learn alone; as subject of study – in this particular case, the volunteer gains knowledge, skills and habits and changes their attitude to the surrounding world through their voluntary activity thus improving themselves as personality.

During the academic course "*Access to Information for People with Special Needs*" classes, in the form of lectures, presentations, videos and materials giving examples from the European Commission's Access City Award, students are provided with theoretical knowledge and information about the practical application of adapted technologies and effective solutions [1]. The lecturers prepare assignments and cases to be solved, good practices of leading Bulgarian and foreign libraries and other cultural and public organisations for provision of access to information, education and culture for all citizens, including for people with special needs, are examined. Exercises are aimed at developing skills to solve problems, to find interdependencies, to analyse and apply acquired theoretical knowledge in new situations.

We applied *an experimental approach* within the frames of the exercises planned for the AY 2016/2017. The third and fourth year part-time bachelor students studying the discipline were proposed to participate in voluntary initiatives for people with special needs. In order to achieve best results, upon giving such kind of assignments students needed to be given clear and detailed information about the opportunities provided by this assignment and about the approaches for its performance. Several working meetings were organised to acquaint the students with the missions they could participate in. They were required to make an online registration on the *TimeHeroes* website [8] and the *ULSIT team* was established. As a component of the assessment of students' knowledge in the discipline, during the examination, every student made a presentation of the voluntary activity they had participated.

The results from the study process are impressively positive. 34th students were involved in varied voluntary activities. Students showed greatest interest to participate in the "*Be My Guide*" initiative,



addressed to improve access to electronic information for the blind [3]. The idea of “*Be My Guide*” was to show blind people the world through the eyes of blind volunteers. Descriptions of different images, pictures and videos, in the form of text, accessible for blind people via screen readers and synthesizer of speech were collected and published on the bemyguide.org website. Participating students created 212 descriptions, being 39% of the entire content of descriptions on the “*Be My Guide*” website at the end of 2017. The categories of literatures, sings, food, animal, flags, nature, tourism, movies, etc., were filled-in most actively. Another project in which the students were involved was the initiative “*Give me a Story!*”. It started in 2014 thanks to hundreds of reading volunteers who put the beginning of a rich supporters’ fund comprising works of varied topics and genres recorded in audio format. People with sight disorders whose access to books in Bulgarian language was quite limited started to use the created audio fund very actively. Volunteers read aloud and recorded in mp3 format poems, stories, novels, articles, research materials or other works that they liked or that were requested by blind readers. The third project with the participation of students were *Wheelmap* [9] that helped people with locomotor disorders to move more freely across public spaces and to have independent way of life. Subject to pre-registration on *OpenStreetMap*, students indicated buildings, establishments, stores, cultural, educational and other public institutions accessible with people with special needs and wheelchairs. We distinguished the contribution of students in the Active Environment blog. This was a non-profit project aimed at promoting civic participation. In the blog we published texts describing the aims and tasks of the active society, as well as materials on personality development and on good practices of other countries. Students created their own texts – stories about the voluntary actions, articles on personality self-improvement and civic society. Volunteering influences the formation and development of spiritual and value mindset of students in library and information science. It helps them to rationalize the new role of libraries as partners in personality development and in facing the challenges of the information society.

4. Conclusions

In the *Access to Information for People with Special Needs Academic Course* special attention is given to teaching methods that enhance student empathy and motivation and increase student involvement in a variety of extra curricular activities such as volunteer missions. Students are given the opportunity to give meaning to the study content by means of practical assignments and to support the enrichment of the information environment of blind people, as well as to make other improvements aimed at reaching the social model of interaction with people with special needs ensuring their full-value integration and equal participation in public life. We could highlights course results and proposes the course as a potential best practice for other institutions interested in meeting the goals of the EU strategy as well as their own national efforts to improve accessibility.

References

- [1] Access City Award, https://ec.europa.eu/info/access-city-awards_en
- [2] Action Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria on the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2015-2020), <http://www.strategy.bg/StrategicDocuments/View.aspx?lang=bg-BG&Id=967>
- [3] Be my guide, <http://bemyguide.org/>
- [4] The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its Optional Protocol (A/RES/61/106), 13 December 2006, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>
- [5] European Disability Strategy 2010-2020: A Renewed Commitment to a Barrier-Free Europe, https://ec.europa.eu/eip/ageing/standards/general/general-documents/european-disability-strategy-2010-2020_en
- [6] National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (2008-2015) <http://www.strategy.bg/StrategicDocuments/View.aspx?lang=bg-BG&Id=445>
- [7] National Strategy for Persons with Disabilities (2016-2020), <http://www.strategy.bg/FileHandler.ashx?fileId=9439>
- [8] Time Heroes, <https://timeheroes.org/bg/>
- [9] Wheelmap – Find wheelchair accessible places, <https://wheelmap.org/>