

The Possibilities of Education of Students with Special Needs at Universities in the Czech Republic Aiming at the University of Ostrava in Ostrava

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present the possibilities to support students with special needs at universities in the Czech Republic. The paper focuses on the theoretical and legislative scope of the issue and it analyses the current situation of students with special needs at universities in the country. It is also referred to the ongoing project at the University of Ostrava in Ostrava which is focused on the active support of the tertiary education of students with special educational needs.

Keywords: *University in the Czech Republic, students with special needs, support, current situation of students with specific needs, project at the University of Ostrava*

1. Introduction

The period of the past 20 years represents significant political and social changes in the Czech Republic. In the context of political changes a strong need emerged to transform the social system, which contains education as its significant part. Until the 90s of the 20th century, the education of individuals with special needs was strictly segregated. However, after the political system had changed, many challenges from abroad came into the Czech Republic. These new opportunities involved integrated education of both able-bodied pupils and students with special needs. We can say that it was the area of education which

pioneered integration. Thanks to parents' intervention as well as involvement of experts and creators of legislative standards, there is the possibility of integrated education for students with special needs involved in the decree regarding elementary schools No. 291/1991 Coll., both through individual and group integration for visually and hearing-impaired, for physically and mentally handicapped and for students with speech disorders. To set up special classes for pupils who are deaf, physically, mentally impaired, and for pupils with speech disorders is also possible. There are specialized classes for students with special needs and behavior. In the last 20 years, the effectiveness of school integration in the nursery, primary and secondary schools has gradually increased.

Students with special needs, who have been involved in integrated education, are currently as old as mature university students and it is necessary to prepare such conditions for them to be able to graduate despite their specific needs.

2. The legislative support for the tertiary education of students with disabilities in the CR

The legislative framework in the area of tertiary education in the CR represents the broadest level, the Higher Education Act No. 111/1998 Coll. It does not specifically aim at the issue of students with special needs, however, it can be inferred from the general definition of the responsibilities of universities. In § 1, letter b) in the preliminary provisions it is focused on responsibilities of each college and university for providing available tertiary education and adequate professional qualification in accordance with democratic principles. We can deduce also the provisions and obligations of universities to enable students with specific disabilities to gain education. In addition, § 21 of that Act generally defines the obligation of public universities to make all possible measures concerning equal study opportunities at universities.

In September 2009, the Czech Republic ratified **The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (The Convention)**, which was approved by the General Assembly of the United Nations (UN) in December 2006. The Convention builds on seven already existing UN human rights conventions. It does not set any new rights, it just enforces implementation of the existing human rights and freedoms aiming at persons with special needs. It recognizes their dignity and equality, the right to autonomy and independence and self-determination.

It also emphasizes the right of people with special needs to have access to tertiary education, and it regards any restriction or exclusion based on health disabilities as

a form of discrimination. It includes all forms of discrimination, including denying of an adequate modification. (The Convention, Article 2)

The Government Board for People with Special Needs as a permanent coordination, initiative, and advisory body to the Czech government, which solves issues of equal opportunities for people with special needs, approved the Strategy for making tertiary education available for students with special needs for 2010-2014 (the Strategy). The Strategy in accordance with The Convention contains a formulation of the vision of system solutions that shift the tertiary education of people with special needs from randomness and an act of good will to the level of human rights realized by the access to their academic qualifications. The Strategy also involves characteristic features of tertiary education, such as a high degree of autonomy of individual universities and universities as a whole, and the specifics of the Czech environment. The prerequisite for fulfilling the above-mentioned objectives is the preparation of a legislative basis that will lead to legitimate security requirements concerning the available tertiary education for people with special needs. That is related to providing information on the availability of university study programs offered to students with disabilities, but also the regulation of financial instruments for the realization of an available tertiary education for students with special needs is referred to.

The key activities have become a part of the Strategy National Plan for Creating Equal Opportunities for Persons with Special Needs for 2010-2014 (the National Plan), which is one of the main instruments of the Government for the realization of human rights in the context of special needs. The National Plan includes system measures regarding individual ministries which focus on ensuring equal conditions for people with special needs in the country to live with dignity. The basis for the new conception of the document is The Convention. The current national plan deals in detail, compared to the previous years, with issues of the tertiary education of individuals with special needs, particularly in relation to achieving a higher level of their professional qualifications.

After numerous discussions held by the experts of universities and colleges and the staff of the Ministry of Education, the Guideline of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports No. 23 728/2011-30 was established. It aims at financing the extra costs of studies for students with special needs resulting from their specific needs (the Methodological instruction). It is also based on the tasks set in the National Plan for creating equal opportunities for persons with special needs for the period 2010- 2014. In accordance with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, also a need is emphasised to create conditions at universities that offer study opportunities to students with special needs.

The primary task in solving the issue was to achieve a consensus concerning uniform terminology. In the current legislation of the Czech Republic, students with disabilities are called students with special needs (the student with SN). On the basis of the Methodological instructions we have created five basic categories which specify which students belong to students with SN.

Table 1. Classification of special needs

Special needs- type	Special needs- degree
Student with a visual special need	Light visually impaired / user of hearing Hard visually impaired/ user of voice/ touch
Student with an auditory special need	Hearing-impaired / verbal language user the deaf/ sign language user
Student with a physical special need	lower limbs (paraplegy) upper limbs (soft motor activity)
Student with a specific learning disorder	
Student with a psychological special need or with a chronic somatic disease	

The Methodological instructions are the individual types and stages of specific needs characterized in detail and universities have to create the following conditions:

- Universities must be able to guarantee the provision of services that meet the specific needs of students. It focuses on personal, technical, and organizational security.
- Universities establish specialized facilities that provide students with SN with the services in the required quality and scope.
- Universities are able to demonstrate the organizational measures taken and services for students with SN.

3. The current status of education of students with special needs at universities in the Czech Republic

Already in the past 20 years, universities and colleges responded to the growing demand for access to tertiary education for students with special needs. Individual universities and colleges established various support centers for these students. The first isolated centers originated in the 1990s.

It is obvious that individual colleges and universities aimed at the issue of disclosure of study for students with special needs in a responsible way. However,

until the academic year 2011/2012 this issue was not addressed in the conceptual framework of the Czech Republic. Individual colleges and universities in recent years have formed their own organizational standards considering the attitudes towards students with special needs.

This situation changed with the adoption of the Methodological instructions of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports No. 23 728/2011-30 for financing the extra costs of studies for students with special needs resulting from their specific needs.

In 2010, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS) placed an order with the Alevia copany on a contract to develop an analysis of the current situation of students with special needs¹ in tertiary education. The analysis is available on the Ministry's website (cf., Internet resources) and contains 4 basic areas:

- the description of universities' state (both public and private),
- the analysis of financial costs and potential funding sources for students with special needs,
- the analysis of legal regulations,
- the recommendations for universities and colleges.

The current situation in the investigation was established mainly by means of questionnaires. The information obtained from questionnaires and interviews was supplemented by the analysis of all available documents. The data were received from 25 public and 26 private universities.

In this paper we focus on the analysis of the information received from public universities and colleges. Given that some universities still do not record the number of students with special needs², the exact number of students was received from 18 public universities only.

In 2010, 1,119 students with special needs were studying at the investigated public universities and colleges, which constituted approximately 0.36% of the total number of students. If we tried to compare these results with other research results, it is obvious that we would come to similar conclusions. The Research Committee of Good Will – The Olga Havel Foundation showed that in the academic year 2008/2009, 523 students with special needs were studying at 23 selected universities and colleges, which comprised 0.2% of all the students. (Granja, 2009).

¹ The term 'specific demands' is considered as the synonym of the term 'special needs', 'special educational needs' and 'health disability'. It occurs in the title of our analysis.

² It is important to take into account that students with special needs are not provided with education at some universities. The reason is the specific difficulty of the study programmes offered.

Due to the low numbers of students with special needs in tertiary education it is significant that the Ministry of Education should start to be involved in the issue of educating the students with special needs and it should be solved conceptually and systematically at all universities in the country. The total financial aid depends on funds, individual universities try to receive money, as well, from other sources. One of these are projects of the European Social Fund (ESF).

4. The Support of tertiary education of students with special educational needs at Ostrava University in Ostrava

In February 2012, the University of Ostrava was granted an ESF project which was focused on the active support of the tertiary education of students with special needs. This is a university project which involves all the faculties of the University of Ostrava. The guarantee for the project is undertaken by the Department of Special Education. Information on the project is available on the website of the University of Ostrava³.

The main project objectives are the following:

- active support of the tertiary education of students with special educational needs through innovation fields of study at the University of Ostrava in Ostrava,
- creating an inclusive environment, through the adaptation of selected subjects,
- adaptation of educational and methodological materials, modification and adaptation of teaching in relation to individual types of disability,
- improving teaching skills of academic staff and university education of other university employees by offering training courses to academic workers and other professionals in Ostrava,
- barrier-free architectural reconstruction of the selected buildings of the University of Ostrava in Ostrava,
- active professional support of students with special educational needs in the form of practical training in potential employers' companies and institutions.

In accordance with these objectives, the project is divided into 5 basic areas:

- innovation of study programs, fields and subjects (Key Activity 1),
- ncrease in the academic workers' and other university staff's professional skills (Key Activity 2),

³ www.projekty.osu.cz/svp

- implementation of the monitoring of the labor market needs of graduates (Key Activity 3),
- architectural accessibility of buildings at the University of Ostrava in Ostrava, students with special needs (Key Activity 4),
- inclusive environment at the University of Ostrava in Ostrava (Key Activity 5).

It can be said that the key innovation is an area of study programs, fields and subjects that are logically connected with the area of increasing the professional skills of academic and other staff. The goal of the Key Activity 1 is to implement adaptation of selected subjects as well as the adaptation of teaching selected subjects and the adaptation of study materials of these subjects.

Due to the low awareness of some academic workers in the field of innovation and adaptation of learning materials for students with SN, they are within two key activities in the project including three courses which are attended by the guarantors of individual subjects. Here is further information on how to apply the innovation.

The innovation of the subjects involved academics from the university who guarantee their upgrading courses in accordance with the requirements arising from the special needs of each type of disability/special need.

There are about 68 sponsors from among the academic staff (numbers of sponsors continue to increase), some of whom upgrade the guarantee for more than one subject. The output of these two activities will increase the competencies of academic staff in the field of access to students with special needs.

During the three years at the University of Ostrava the following innovations have taken place:

- innovative courses for students with special needs,
- study texts in the electronic form, converting the whole texts into the learning support method according to the criteria of the education of students with SN (for students with visual disabilities),
- study support in the paper form,
- e- learning courses,
- adaptation of education using learning CDs- audio and DVDs- a video that will be used as a teaching aid in the innovative subjects,
- methodological recommendations for the formation of innovated subjects,
- methodological recommendations for further re-accreditation management of the selected fields of study programs (innovation adoption procedures, modifications of the SFE, assessment of GMP).

Conclusion

To sum up, the time is ripe enough in the Czech Republic to deal with tertiary education for students with special needs. Necessary steps leading to optimization of university studies for students with special needs have already been taken.

Except for the legislative changes, which have come into force, there are also other significant stimuli. These have to be based on universities and individual academic workers who would teach increasing numbers of students with SN.

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