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Higher Education Taking Action towards the Sustainable Development Goals:
Perspectives from Asia and Europe

Opinion | Laura Alčiauskaitė

Is Higher Education Really Inclusive for People With Disabilities?

Education for people with disabilities not only gives the possibility to be equitably involved in public life, but is also a fundamental right that is guaranteed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Lithuanian national legislation. Everything looks neat written on the paper, doesn't it?

But is it everything that great in reality? Do you have any student with special needs in your class? Have noticed any person with hearing impairment or a person using a white cane? Have you ever helped someone in a wheelchair? Do you have any representatives with disabilities in your university organizations or student associations? Or – even more – do you have any professors with disabilities giving you classes?

Since the tenth goal of sustainable development promotes reduced inequalities in all the domains of social policy, I believe it is very important to discuss the current situation of disabled students in higher education in my home country and abroad.

Inclusive education at universities and colleges is beneficial for everyone. Higher education helps a disabled person to broaden his/her opportunities for a better job, also increases their self-esteem, social networks, and improves adjustment to disability. Moreover, being the part of inclusive education, non-disabled students enhance their emotional quotient as they develop patience, tolerance and compassion for their peers. They learn to accept the strengths and weaknesses of others.

According to recent statistics, students with disabilities contain less than 1 percent among all the students in Lithuania. The percentage of disabled students in foreign countries ranged from 0.3 to 19 percent, with a tendency to grow. Anyway, the numbers in many cases are too low, keeping in mind that people with disabilities contain about 10 percent of entire population not only in

Lithuania but in the whole world as well.

Despite increasing numbers of disabled students, in practice they face various problems and barriers while pursuing their education. Several studies, analyzing the situation of disabled students, stated that students with special needs encounter the following obstacles in the Lithuanian higher education institutions: a lack of access to physical and informational environment, a lack of flexibility in study organization process, the absence of special services and academic community's skeptical attitude towards their abilities to study.

But not only accessibility of the environment matters. Psychological atmosphere is very important aspect of inclusive university, too. A person with a disability usually faces social challenges as well, especially if his or her disability is easily visible. Trust me, it's not very easy to stand out of the crowd of students. As a person in a wheelchair, I totally know this. You have to cope with all stares, gossip and stereotypes, and sometimes it is really. It takes some time till other students start feeling comfortable around you and consider you as their equal.

Despite my disability, I always wanted to have the same opportunities as my fellow peers. I wanted to feel included not only in the studying process, but in the other activities as well. I wanted to go to out on Thursday night with my friends. I wanted to participate in the festival of non-commercial cinema. I wanted to visit concerts on student's festival.

Unfortunately, it was not always possible because of various reasons. Sometimes I left out because of the inaccessible environment, sometimes because of lack of empathy and willing to help from other people, sometimes because I felt uncomfortable because of the stares.

Several studies have shown that students with disabilities participate in fewer extracurricular activities, like clubs or on-campus events, than non-disabled peers. This is due to a lack of social inclusion, these studies state. Many college and university programs tend to focus mostly on academic and physical accessibility. The social participation of students with disabilities gets less attention. Since many extracurricular activities are student led and organized, it's all the more important to understand how peers with disabilities are being excluded.

In my opinion, we are on a good track by promoting inclusion into our education. But we still have so much to improve, especially in increasing social participation of disabled students. I will provide some recommendations from my personal experience for young leaders and university policy makers how to support students with disabilities and increase their social participation.

Firstly, the university should create a sophisticated office of accessibility with resources for students. Many high school students, who are planning to reach for higher education, struggle with lack of information about the accessibility,

Second, the school shouldn't forget the accessibility to administration units and accommodation. Negative attitudes of faculty and administrative staff may prevent students, especially students with invisible disabilities, from disclosing their disabilities and from requesting accommodations they are entitled to. Personally, I used to live at the accessible dormitory together with other students and I have plenty of great memories from those days.

Educating the students, professors and university staff is another important aspect of successful inclusion. This education might happen through formal trainings or sessions (e.g. during the introduction week when students are provided a session of disability etiquette, as we do it at our university) or non-formal activities, such as informal lectures, visiting the NGOs or doing the Living Library method (if you haven't heard about it already – check it on [google.com](https://www.google.com), it is a really great method of non-formal learning!).

Finally, we all can start from ourselves because every little step matters. You can start by giving yourself simple questions – what can I do to make my university more welcoming and inclusive? Am I friendly enough to other members of my university, regardless of their looks, nationality, disability or cultural background? Do I only discuss about inclusion or do I make some real actions? Would we accept a person who is in a wheelchair to our NGO? What about a person who is visually impaired? A person who is deaf? Or having a psychiatric disorder? Would I think that person as capable as everyone else?

These questions might be a little bit uncomfortable, but it is necessary to have honest answers to them because, as I believe, the process of inclusion starts with honesty. When you honestly work for the inclusion, it happens, no matter is it university of any other social sector.

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