Interview | Conducted by Živa Jakšić Ivačič

Taking Action at Home: SDGs as Core Pillars of University Governance

This interview was conducted by Živa Jakšić Ivačič, student at Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana. As a tutor, student leader and professor of Special and Rehabilitation Pedagogy, Živa is determined to create an inclusive, accepting and diverse higher education, in the hopes of (in one day) creating a more inclusive and accepting society. Živa was interested in finding out how is University of Ljubljana currently fulfilling her vision of inclusive higher education institution and how this is aligned with SDG’s.

This interview was conducted with prof. Milena Košak Babuder, head adviser for students with special needs at University of Ljubljana. Professor Košak Babuder is a Special and rehabilitation pedagogue, teaching at Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana. She plays an important role in creating an inclusive University of Ljubljana by supporting and advising teachers and other university staff on how to teach students with special needs. She is also the head adviser for students with special needs at Faculty of Education and the vice-president of the Commission for students with special status at University of Ljubljana. She is passionate about her work and has one of the best insights on the current workings of University of Ljubljana regarding students with special needs.
1. How do you feel University of Ljubljana provides accessible and quality education for students with special needs?

University of Ljubljana is the oldest and largest higher education and scientific research institution in Slovenia University with its rich tradition was founded in 1919. It has more than 40,000 undergraduate and postgraduate students and employs approximately 5,600 higher education teachers, researchers, assistants and administrative staff in 23 faculties and three arts academies.

The University of Ljubljana has adopted special guidelines regarding university procedures and the study process itself to ensure special needs students have equal rights and access to public information. The Statute of the University of Ljubljana specifies criteria for acquiring the status of a special needs student, the students’ rights, and adjustments which can be made to the study process. The adjustments are based on the individual’s needs and the nature of the study programme.

For questions regarding enrolment, the study process, adjustments to study materials, and study support, special needs students can find help through the university’s tutoring system or by contacting a person responsible for special needs students at the faculty or academy the student is or wants to be enrolled at.

Candidates for the status of a candidate for enrolment with a special status (disability or special needs, chronic illness or the consequences of acute illness, exceptional social circumstances, the best “athlete”) can apply to first-level study programs at all public universities and also to the University of Ljubljana. If they meet the general conditions of enrolment in the study programme and were, during the regular selection procedure are not admitted to any of their chosen study programmes, that they submitted in their enrolment application, will subsequently be placed on the list of admitted candidates if they have attained at least 90% of the minimum number of points required for enrolment.

According to our Higher Education Act (Article 70) students, for justified reasons, may apply for the extension of the student status for justified reasons, but only for one year. Fathers and mothers who are students (and gave birth during the studies), have the right to extend the student status for each live-born child.

2. What challenges are we facing at University of Ljubljana in reaching the SDGs, specifically 10. goal: Reducing inequalities?
In Slovenia, tertiary education is accessible to everybody who is interested and is capable of studying. Conditions to successfully complete their study programmes are provided. According to our Higher Education Act, all students are entitled to free health care, subsidized meals, housing and transport (if they are not employed). Students who come from lower socio-economic background are also entitled to state scholarships and additional monthly allowances for the Erasmus+ mobility programme. Students with special needs can request for additional financial support for Erasmus mobility programmes, if they justify their needs for that.

Recently, special projects are run on a national level, that have been created in order to influence the greater social inclusion of young people with special needs and to create a single supporting environment as an interface between the school and the labour market for the empowerment of young people with special needs in the labour market.

We have targets related to widening participation in higher education - objectives are about widening overall participation, without making reference to specific under-represented groups. In 2019, activities for the preparation of an appropriate regulation - Rules on students with special needs and special status - are continued. With this we want to adopt at the national level a systematic strategy for ensuring equal opportunities for students with special needs and special status in higher education, as well as providing system assistance and support to their students. In March 2019, a working group on this theme was established. The tasks of the working group also include analysing of the situation of students with special needs and special status in higher education and drafting text of the Rules on Students with stakeholders in the preparation of it.

3. What can students and teachers at University of Ljubljana do, to implement the 10th SDG: Reducing inequalities?

The University of Ljubljana as well as other two public universities in Slovenia regulate the possibility of acquiring the status of a student with special educational needs and special status, the terms and conditions for obtaining the status and the rights deriving from them through legal acts (Statutes, Regulations, and Rules). Students who have the status of a student with special educational needs and special status have the right to be subject to environmental adjustments and the method of carrying out studies and adjustments (accommodations) in the performance of the study obligations. Student with special educational needs and special status have the right to the following assistance and adaptation:
- reduction of compulsory attendance and justified absence for study obligation

- adapted deadlines for practical workshops, presentations of seminar work, ongoing examination of knowledge, etc.,

- asserting the extension of the status of a student on the basis of special status, as per the Higher Education Act,

- the possibility of extension of examination deadlines, help and support of the tutor.

4. If you had a magic wand, that could change Slovenian higher education in any aspect, how would you use it?

Setting up a system of support for students with special needs in terms of psychosocial support, skilled professionals and staff at individual faculties for direct assistance to students with special needs (counselling, tutoring, support ...).