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EDUCATIONAL INTEGRATION OF DISABLED YOUTH

ABSTRACT

In my summary I aim to elaborate on the living conditions, quality of life, and social status of young students with disabilities, i.e. hearing-, vision-impaired, and physically disabled students, as well as the means for interaction with their own age group available for them. Additionally, I focus on the integration strategies currently being employed in this field.

There has been a measurable increase in the number of disabled young students and young adults participating in some area of the higher education system, either earning a degree or a specialized certificate of high achievement in a field of study. By doing so they attain an elevated social status not merely among the intelligentsia in general, but also among their peers, both disabled and non-disabled, in particular; thereby simultaneously realizing the principles of equal opportunities and acceptance of diverse groups in society.

The study consists of three main parts. Firstly, it examines the conditions facing disabled students in the higher education system in Hungary and their participation in it. Secondly, it surveys upon their graduation the opportunities awaiting them on the job market. And thirdly, it summarizes the support systems and strategies, which played a significant role in the integration, re-integration, and social co-existence in the past few years and generated tangible results.

INTRODUCTION

My study aims to describe the participation of hearing-, vision-impaired, and physically disabled students and young adults in the Hungarian higher education system. The urgency of the topic is in that the already conducted studies in Hungary seldom focus on the situation of the target group under scrutiny in light of higher education.

The realization of the current paper was helped by a research project carried out between 2008 and 2010, which inquired about the chances for social integration among disabled youth and young adults within the context of higher education. That project and the current paper mainly attempt to find out about

the opportunities and challenges awaiting the hearing-, vision-impaired, and physically disabled students entering the higher educational system and then the labor market; furthermore, the extent and nature of support extended by society, state agencies, and NGOs is also examined.

The status of people living with disabilities has radically altered since the regime change, the collapse of communism. Society has become more welcoming, the enhancement of acceptance, or at least tendencies toward it, and the emergence of values and approaches based on diversity spur, even if slow, but tangibly positive changes in the treatment of certain groups, including the disabled. Following a gap of several decades the census of 1990 allowed again the assessment of the number of the disabled; although, the followed means of measurement was that of self-assessment, thereby the final figures may have been partially incorrect, but at least, an until then mostly disregarded, invisible group gained some prominence.

The censuses of 1990 and 2001, although not precise in their entirety, but still list the demographic data of the disabled, including education, living conditions, as well as participation in the labor market. Having factual data on this segment of society meant a notable step in the right direction in comparison with the situation when no figures whatsoever were available. The provision of information on social expectations became an urgent necessity, as in some member states of the EU disability issues occupy an elevated policy area with continuous streams of information available on the topic covering both public and non-state actors.

In institutions of higher learning, except for a few specialized schools, up until the turn of the millennium the participation of disabled students was a rare occurrence. The reason for this could be found in part in the unpreparedness of institutions and academic personnel and in part in the visible and implicit prejudices against the disabled and the prevailing social norms and rules.

Concerning the legal regulations on admittance to an institution of higher learning first Decree 29/2002 (May 17) ME¹⁰ should be mentioned. This regulation establishes from 2002 the scope of admissible students to institutions of higher learning. It defines the category of students living with disabilities, in addition to placing marked emphasis on the complete fulfillment of the rights of admitted disabled students, it also calls for guaranteeing full access to facilities and services such as the compulsory provision of special notes or substituting materials, accommodation of students with special needs, and the definition of

the role of disability coordinators.

Subsection 8 in section 147 of Act CXXXIX. of 2005 regulates the scope of admissible students with disabilities. Thereby, given adequate academic credentials, students with physical disabilities, vision and hearing impairment, speech impediment or with conditions that severely impede the learning process (e.g. dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, and autism) can enter institutions of higher learning. From the 2002/2003 academic year the members of the aforementioned groups were going to gradually enter the system. Although exact figures are not available for students with physical disabilities, or vision and hearing impairment, however, given the data directly transmitted by individual institutions roughly 27 to 35% of all disabled students suffer from physical disability, or hearing or vision loss.

table 1.

year	2002/2003.	2007/2008.	2009/2010.	2010/2011.
number of students	341 187	359 391	328 075	361 347
number of women	104 008	120 278	116 981	199 580
number of students with disabilities	271	1176	1658	2134

Compiled by Laki Ildikó based on data from the HCSO¹¹ and the MNR¹² (2011.)¹³

Coexistence-integration-segregation

„The main obstacle for the realization of equal access is a type of mindset and attitude rooted in mental torpor. This is the consequence of the complacency of people, who prefer to avoid confrontation and tend to follow patterns that do not require independent thinking in order to draw their own conclusions. Rather, they favor easily applicable models of thought, stereotypes, and routinely used clichés without overly concerning themselves with their validity.”¹⁴

Prejudices against the disabled, even if diminishing, however, are still a persistent and functioning mechanism in contemporary Hungarian society. Especially because of it, the role of educational and welfare institutions/organizations has burgeoning importance. As they are not merely tools for integration, they increasingly function as vehicles for inclusion and acceptance. Institutions of

11 HCSO: Hungarian Central Statistical Office (www.ksh.hu)

12 MNR: Ministry of National Resources (www.nefmi.gov.hu)

13 Source: <http://portal.ksh.hu/pls/ksh/docs/hun/xfsp/idoszakit/oktat/okt0910.pdf>. Downloaded on April 27 and June 12, 2011

14 Kálmán Zsófia – Könczei György (2002): *From the Taigetos to equal opportunities*. Budapest, Osiris. p. 495.

higher learning occupy a unique role here, since the educational process and the attendant initiatives for acceptance take place in an altered manner as individuals and groups often form opinions about others within their own environment more rationally and in a less biased way, although still not without preconceived value judgments.

Several factors are responsible for the small number of students with physical disabilities, or vision and hearing impairment in higher education. If we consider the family backgrounds of the youth and young adults, it can be stated that those who are enrolled in institutions of higher learning usually belong to families with higher socio-economic status with parents who have completed their secondary education or earned college/university degrees and are active on the labor market. Consequently, these students enjoy a higher standard of living; not surprisingly the attainment of education and the realization of a quality life with all attendant perks measure high on their agendas. The main motivating factors for excellence include a more lucrative job, elevated social status, and establishment of solid diverse social networks.

From a social/communal aspect the emergence as an appreciated and accepted member of society is significant, acting as a member who is able to make a noteworthy contribution to the whole community. This is further amplified by the type and nature of work carried out. For disabled graduates of institutions of higher learning, in this context, the picture is rather disheartening. The various types of disabilities still register in the labor market as legitimate handicaps; meaning that oftentimes highly qualified young professionals are disregarded.

The survey encompassed those institutions of higher learning where students with disabilities have been present for nearly ten years, but still numerous questions need to be solved. Such challenges to be tackled are the persistent individual prejudices, the more expeditious realization of equal access and integration, and the provision of disabled friendly facilities and communication infrastructure.

The number of institutions of higher learning in Hungary currently stands at 70 (according to a news statement by the MNR it is 69), these include 19 public state universities, 7 private universities, 10 state colleges, 34 private colleges.¹⁵

In nearly one-third of the institutions (21) we can find students with disabilities. The majority of them is enrolled in public state schools (12 schools with 361 disabled students as of June 7, 2011); while a small number is in private institutions (9 schools with 35 students as of June 7, 2011)¹⁶. The problem of wheelchair accessibility of public state schools is largely solved, or is under way of being solved as part of development projects. On the one hand, this implies

¹⁵ Source: www.nefmi.gov.hu. Downloaded on May 25, 2011

¹⁶ The calculation of the figures was based on Ildikó Laki's study on disability coordinators in higher education, conducted between March 8 and May 23, 2011.

the wheelchair accessibility of all the facilities and the buildings on the inside; while on the other hand, it means the installment of the kind of communication infrastructure that guarantees equal access to all students. The presence of disabled students, however, signifies not only the need to make the necessary alterations in buildings and infrastructure, but also a change in the mentality of the various actors in education for the realization of principles of full participation of special students in the education system. The latter is perhaps an even more challenging undertaking than the provision of equal access since it presupposes the modification of deeply ingrained, almost dogmatic, lines of thought in this area, which until the middle of the 1990 was characterized by a lack of progress. Additionally, there is a need to actualize a marked shift besides the academic and administrative staff also among the non-disabled students. The success of integration or the emergence of segregation depends on the rates of acceptance or rejection among the student population.¹⁷ Beyond the social, the institutional initiatives must also be legitimized as they, besides the strengthening of communal bonds, also serve as valuable supporting tools in the entry to the labor market, serving as so-called secondary communities. Thus, this function fulfilled by institutions of higher learning is just as significant as education itself.

However, disabled students still face many undue difficulties. The disadvantages stemming from disabilities often can be considered as genuine handicaps, even if the non-disabled do not consider them as such. This impacts the manifestation of stereotypes and the emergence of inappropriate norms and codes of behavior. In the Hungarian higher education system from 2007 on extra credit was awarded during the admission process for disabilities. This resulted in a backlash and the rise of negative attitudes among non-disabled students.

Simultaneously, the disabled young do not intend to gain undue advantages from their condition. Given the data from the MNR we can state in the 2010/2011 academic year of the enrolled disabled students 42.2% could gain admission without extra credit, while 23.5% could not be admitted even with extra credit.

¹⁷ Laki Ildikó *et al.* (2010): *Youth and young adults living with disabilities in contemporary Hungary. Final research summary.* Budapest, L'Harmattan Publishing house

table 2.

Students living with disabilities	Total number of applicants receiving extra credit for admission	Applicants admitted even without extra credit	Applicants admitted only with extra credit	Applicants not admitted even with extra credit
2007.	1209	535	181	493
2008.	1340	851	325	164
2009.	1802	834	626	342
2010.	1675	707	574	394

Compiled by Laki Ildikó from data provided by the MNR (2011.)

For disabled students educational institutions represent a primary means for possible integration. Higher education is a crucial actor in this process, since by now the number of students in the system has increased manifold, and is rising, as it is seen as one of the optimal means for attaining a higher socio-economical status in society.

Or as the disabled students see it, graduate, then get a decent job, start a family and incidentally prove that one can live a fulfilling and valuable life even with disabilities.

SUMMARY

My brief study gave an analysis of the presence of disabled youth and young adults in Hungarian institutions of higher learning. The study, based on available data and analyses, pursued as its main aim the exploration of the relationship between higher education and the disabled.

The qualitative and quantitative development in higher education must be seen as a positive factor in the educational opportunities and chances for success in the lives of disabled youth and young adults. Through the expansion of higher education and the realization of equal opportunities, by now the disabled students are able to participate not only in specially designed education programs, but also gain admission to a wide array of programs and able to utilize their professional skills and potentials within the wider institutional setting.

Higher education, besides acting as a means for gaining qualifications, also acts as a social venue forming functioning communities in which the majority of the educational institutions themselves play a positive formative role. The push for guaranteeing equal access is a multi-faceted phenomenon, which has been coupled with the emergence of other actors, including disability coordinators,

supporters and advocates of disability rights, equal opportunity commissioners, and protective regulation. All these players and measures combined attempt to ease the tensions arising from the co-existence between disabled and non-disabled students.

Therefore, education is still the main ground for achieving integration. These institutional actors play an elevated role in this area; however, this process must be unceasingly pursued. Among the Hungarian institutions a good measure of progress has been made, nevertheless there are still many issues that need to be tackled in the future.

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