



Offices for Students with Disabilities: From addressing individual special needs to increasing public awareness towards disability

Olga Meier-Popa^a, Alina S. Rusu^{b,c}

^a *Disability Office, University of Zurich, Rämistrasse 71, 8006 Zurich, Switzerland*

^b *Office for Students with Disabilities, Babeş-Bolyai University, Student Campus Haşdeu, Cluj-Napoca, 400371, Romania;*

^c *Department of Psycho-Pedagogy, Faculty of Psychology and Sciences of Education, Babeş-Bolyai University, Kogalniceanu 1, Cluj-Napoca, Romania*

Authors note

Olga Meier-Popa (special needs educator and physician) runs since 2003 the Disability Office at the University of Zurich, (disabilityoffice.uzh.ch). Before that, she had worked as a physician in her homeland, Romania. She has studied Special Needs Education at the UZH and worked as a carer for people with severe disabilities and also as counsellor for the staff in special institutions. Her research interests are reflected in title of her PhD thesis: “Studying with Disability. Developing Theory and Practice towards Access to Higher Education for People with Disabilities”. The thesis reports about the action research at the UZH, based on the social theory (Giddens) and the organizational learning Theory U (Scharmer).

Alina S. Rusu (biologist and psychologist) is currently Associate Professor at the Faculty of Psychology and Sciences of Education (Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania). She has received her PhD title in Natural Sciences in 2004 at University of Zurich, Switzerland. Since 2014, she is the coordinator of Office for Students with Disabilities of Babeş-Bolyai University (centre.ubbcluj.ro/bsd) and member of the Doctoral School Education, Reflection, Development, with a habilitation title in the field of Psychology. Her research interests are very interdisciplinary ones, such as applied ethology, animal-assisted activities and therapy and evolutionary psychology (including educational evolutionary psychology).

Abstract

In this paper we aim to analyse in a comparative manner the structure and the activities of two European Offices for Students with Disabilities (OSD), which, although similar in goals, differ at the level of preponderance of their activities: one is assessing and implementing reasonable accommodations for the students with disabilities (i.e. Disability Office of University of Zurich, Switzerland), while the other one (i.e. Office for Students with Disabilities, Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania) is currently more focused on organizing activities and events aiming to increase the level of awareness towards disabilities and access (social and physical) of the academic personnel and students with and without disabilities. Several factors will be discussed below, such as the legislative frames specific for each country, the level of preparedness of each University in terms of access and education (attitudes and knowledge) regarding disability, history of the OSD, number of students with special needs and types of activities offered by the two Offices. The analysis concludes that the different approaches are comprehensible in the view of the specific legal and institutional contexts. Both OSD work with the human rights approach to disability provided by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. They use an interactional understanding of disability, offering not only services for the students but acting also to reduce the social and physical barriers. Such an OSD should be operating at each Higher Education Institution that aims to enhance the full participation of students with disabilities.

Keywords: equal rights; equal opportunity; students with disabilities; office for students with disabilities; access; reasonable accommodation; accessibility; awareness rising; inclusion.

Zusammenfassung

Der vorliegende Beitrag strebt eine vergleichende Analyse der Strukturen und Tätigkeiten zweier Europäischen Beratungsstellen für Studierende mit Behinderung (BSB) an, welche – trotz ähnlichen Zielen – den Schwerpunkt auf unterschiedliche Aktivitäten setzen: Die BSB der Universität Zürich, Schweiz, klärt individuelle Situationen von Behinderung ab und setzt Massnahmen für Nachteilsausgleich um, währenddessen die BSB der Universität Babes-Bolyai von Cluj-Napoca, Rumänien sich zurzeit mit Aktivitäten und Veranstaltungen zwecks Sensibilisierung für Behinderung und Zugang (auf physischer und sozialer Ebene) bei den Universitätsangehörigen sowie Studierenden mit und ohne Behinderung beschäftigt. Folgende Aspekte werden erörtert: die spezifische Gesetzgebung in den zwei Ländern, die Bereitschaft der o.g. Hochschulen in Bezug auf Behinderung und Zugang (Wissen-Wollen-Können), die Geschichte der Beratungsstellen, die Anzahl der betroffenen Studierenden und die Tätigkeiten der zwei BSB. Die Analyse kommt zum Schluss, dass die unterschiedlichen Schwerpunkte sich durch die spezifischen rechtlichen und institutionellen Bedingungen erklären lassen. Beide BSB arbeiten mit dem Menschenrechts-Ansatz der UN-Behindertenrechtskonvention und einem relationalen Verständnis von Behinderung, deshalb bieten sie beide Dienstleistungen für Studierende an und engagieren sich zugleich für die Verminderung und Beseitigung physischer und zwischenmenschlicher Barrieren. Solche BSB sollten an jeder Hochschule, die sich für die volle Partizipation der Studierenden mit Behinderung zum Studium einsetzt, eingerichtet werden.

Schlüsselworte: Gleichstellung; Chancengleichheit; Studierende mit Behinderung; Beratungsstelle für Studierende mit Behinderung; Zugang; Nachteilsausgleich; Barrierefreiheit; Sensibilisierung; Inklusion

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1. Introduction

Based on the World Report on Disability (2011, www.who.int), education brings a significant contribution at building the human capital, by being a key component of the personal wellbeing. The facilitation of access to education of the youth with disabilities is often considered as a shared responsibility of the society, while the exclusion of disabled young persons from education and employment might bring relevant social and economic costs. Thus, World Health Organization (2011) reports that adults with disabilities tend to have a higher level of poverty compared to those without disabilities, but education can decrease this relation of association between disability and poverty. In this light, we consider that, in any European Country that has signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities UN-CRPD (www.un.org/disabilities/), the development of special structures addressing the special needs of students with disabilities (i.e. Offices for Students with Disabilities, OSD) should be seen as a necessary strategy for the facilitation of access to education of this category of students, in the direction of improving their quality of life and the development of their individual potential for the benefit of the society they are living in.

This paper is analysing in a comparative manner the structure and the activities of two European Offices for Students with Disabilities, which, although similar in values and mission, have different development approaches to the enhancement of the participation of students with disabilities. On one hand is the Disability Office of University of Zurich, Switzerland (founded 1976), which is assigned to assess and implement reasonable accommodations for the students and attempting to mainstream the disability topic. On the other hand the Office for Students with Disabilities, Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania (founded 2013) which is currently more focused on organizing activities and events aiming to increase the level of awareness towards disabilities and access (social and physical) of the academic personnel and students with and without disabilities.

Several factors will be discussed below, such as the legislative frames specific for each country, the level of preparedness of each University in terms of access and education (attitudes and knowledge) regarding disabilities, history of the OSD, number of students with special needs and types of activities offered by these two Offices in relation to the requests coming from the students and the academic personnel. The comparison aims to understand the challenges, which confront each of the two OSD in their efforts to provide equal opportunity for students with disabilities. Accounting for the different positions of the OSD in the structures of HEIs and for the specific social and political contexts, there is the great chance to learn one from another and develop joint solutions for the best future.

2. *The Disability Office of University of Zurich, Switzerland*

The Disability Office of the University of Zurich (UZH) was founded in 1976 at the Institute of Special Needs Education (SNE) and it was the first OSD in the German speaking European area. We present bellow a short outline of its history and of the social and political background, the latter reflected in the legal provisions regarding disability.

2.1. A parallel history of the disability office at the UZH and Swiss legislation regarding disability

From 1976 to 2002, the Disability Office (from now on OSD or OSD-UZH) operated at the Institute of Special Needs Education, Zurich, Switzerland (SNE). One of the teaching and research assistants was assigned 40% part time employment (PTE), i.e. 2 days a week, to take care of students with special needs. The average number of students was 18 per year, mainly persons with motoric, visual and hearing impairments and several with chronic conditions. As there was no specific legislation regarding the rights and responsibilities of the students with disabilities, the OSD had to campaign for individual solutions, search for financial support, request that study materials be adapted and make exam accommodations. In addition to these tasks, the OSD aimed to increase the awareness of the university staff by organizing activities and events which contributed to social integration (e.g. the monthly Wednesday Meetings for students with or without disabilities). Counselling of the students was based on the principle “helping people to help themselves”.

The first university guide for students with disabilities, describing access to buildings and services was published in 1984. The guide moved online in 1999, and was redeveloped in 2013 as uniability.uzh.ch.

In 1996, the OSD held an international conference entitled “Disabled Students – Disabled Studies”. Both disability experts and students with disabilities were invited to exchange their experiences and generate knowledge for the future. One conclusion of this conference was that all of the participant countries were offering similar support services, even when the entitlements were different. Countries like Austria, Germany and the United States already had advanced legal provisions related to disability. The lateness of Switzerland might be explained by the fact that public encounters with people with disabilities were rather rare – it had no war wounded, and had a developed inclusive system of institutions for children and adults with disabilities.

In 1999, the new Federal Constitution was finally put into force. Article 8, “Equality before the law”, forbade discrimination “in particular on grounds of origins, [...] physical, mental or psychological disability” and enabled it to be subject for a legal claim. The Constitution also stipulated that further laws at a federal, cantonal and communal level would have to be created in order to eliminate the disadvantages which may affect people with disabilities. During this time, the Institute of SNE was negotiating with the University about the integration of the OSD into the Central Services of the UZH, an assembly of technical, administrative and counselling offices. The integration took place in 2003, a few months before the enactment of the Federal Law on Equal Rights (FLER, in effect since January 1st 2004). This law, although not directly applicable to the situation of students with disabilities (because UZH is a cantonal institution and thus under the cantonal law), played a major role in improving the situation of students with disabilities at the UZH since Article 2 of FLER contains definitions of the notions Disability (showing an interactional point of view), Person with Disability, and Disadvantage. In combination with the Non-Discrimination Article 8 of the Constitution, this offered the OSD an excellent basis for explanation, clarification and requesting individual accommodation for students with disabilities, as well as the alleviation or elimination of barriers in the environment (i.e. architecture, infrastructure, information and communication technologies – see 2.4).

Between 2003 and 2006 the number of students with disabilities had constantly increased, at an average of 30 students per year, and the first students with learning difficulties such as dyslexia, attention deficit syndrome and Asperger syndrome have started to request support at the OSD. The number of students with chronic conditions and mental health issues was also rising. The restructuring of all the study programs through the Bologna reform led to an increase of up to 120 students per year from the period 2007 to 2013. The new programs, with their frequent examinations and attendance requirements,

generated additional barriers for the students with disabilities, as indicated by their increasing number of requests regarding the examinations, after the implementation of the Bologna system.

2.2. Findings of the Swiss National Survey 2001-2005 regarding student numbers and barriers

The enactment of the constitutional Non-Discrimination Article was followed by a series of research projects focusing on groups of persons who might be subject to discrimination. One of these projects was “People with Disabilities in Swiss Higher Education Institution”, a complex research project with a multi-stakeholder approach, based on the WHO concepts of ICF (International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health) and Quality of Life.

The student survey was led at three Swiss HEIs, one of them being the University of Zurich. Some of the findings still maintain their relevance, such as:

- 12% of the students declared a chronic condition (health problem) or functional impairment; a sixth of these (i.e. 2% of all students) specified a classic disability (motoric, visual or hearing impairment).
- Half of the students with a disabling condition (i.e. 6% of all students) a detrimental effect on the relevant activities for studying (according to the ICF definitions) caused by the impairment or chronic condition. Interestingly, there was no correlation between the severity of the impairment or health problem and the level of detrimental effect on learning/participation in studies. A further conclusion of the survey was the significance of the students’ personal coping strategies on the one hand and of the support systems on the other, with the students’ parents and sometimes teachers being their main motivators and strugglers in childhood and youth.
- Students with disabilities indicated the existence of multiple social (attitudinal), physical, organizational and administrative barriers regarding access to higher education.

Findings of the survey at the HEI, of the interviews with experts (i.e. students and graduates with disabilities), and of surveys at organizations offering support (such as the counsellors of the Invalidity Insurance and of technical aids) may be summarized as follows:

- The HEIs were not prepared for students with disabilities, even though higher education is taking place in inclusive settings. Preconceptions, prejudices and fear of the quality of the higher education, and also of the required resources, were showing in the answers from HEIs.
- *Primary disadvantages* in accessing higher education were often mentioned, especially by students with visual or hearing impairment who had attended special institutions during their primary and secondary education (in order to develop skills to compensate for/manage the impairment using assistive technologies etc.). As the learning requirements at the mentioned institutions were lower than the requirements for applying to a HEI, these students had to catch up by self-study.
- The different support systems (medical, educational, legal and financial) had different approaches and definitions of disability, which meant complicated bureaucracy.

The situation has improved incrementally over the last ten years. For example, almost all of the Swiss HEIs now offer support services for students with disabilities. Also, inclusive classrooms can now be found in every primary or secondary school, and the relational definition of disability given in the ICF and the FLER penetrates all the support systems.

2.3. Key issues in enabling access to higher education for students with disabilities

The findings and recommendations of the research project mentioned above paved the way for the

development of the conceptual approach and practical solutions currently to be found at the OSD-UZH. In order to analyse and improve the situation of the students with disabilities at the university, in 2006, several research actions were initiated at the Disability Office of University of Zurich, starting from problems in the social field, involving the research subjects as equal partners and directly implementing the results in the social field. As there was no assignment for this project and hence no special resources at the OSD, these researches were included in the structure of a PhD thesis (Meier-Popa 2012).

The starting point consisted of the following three key issues:

- The definition of the group “students with disabilities”.
Question: Which **concept of disability** allows/leads to the reduction of disadvantages and to the enhancement of access? It is clearly a relational concept, centered on the interaction between an individual and their environment, but what else should we consider in terms of access to higher education?
- The highly social and dynamic complexity of the situation in a large institution as the UZH
Question: How can institutional change happen when there are so many stakeholders and the situation is changing almost constantly? Speaking about situations with disruptive changes, the MIT specialist Scharmer speaks of situations with **emerging complexity** (Scharmer, 2007, 61).
- According to the recommendations of the UN (2007), top-down strategies (mainstreaming) and coordination (a no-gap policy) are required.
Question: What is the **role of the OSD**, when there is no other official party to advocate for equal opportunities for students with disabilities?

2.4. First act: a Disability Statement

Based on the definition of disability in the FLER (see 2.1), in 2006 the OSD and the Academic Disability Commission of the UZH adopted a Disability Statement which clarifies the interactional understanding of disability and names the most frequent types of causation: “*Disability*, as defined in Swiss law on equal rights for people with disabilities, is a phenomenon reflecting complex interactions between a particular feature of a human being and features of the society he or she lives in. Impairments in physical mobility or a person's ability to see, hear or speak reduce his or her ability to participate in social, professional and educational settings. Chronic illness, a mental disorder or a learning impairment such as dyslexia, Asperger's or attention deficiency syndrome all detracts from an individual's ability to participate fully and effectively” (Disability Statement 2006).

In addition to this specification, the Disability Statement indicates three main action fields in order to implement equality of rights and to enable access for students with disabilities: “Facilitating inclusion in education and professional environments represents a decisive step toward widening participation and creating equal opportunity. At the University of Zurich, the process of removing disadvantages plays a major role in ensuring fair conditions and helping people with disabilities reach their full potential. Measures taken comply with the Federal Law on Equal Rights (in effect since January 1st 2004) and the Constitution of the Canton of Zurich (in effect since January 1st 2006) and include:

- Ensuring general building accessibility,
- Creating digital accessibility, and
- Reasonable adjustments in teaching, studying and working conditions” (Disability Statement 2006).

2.5. Concepts for disability and access requiring a dual approach

In the course of the action research we gathered the following significant features for a Disability Concept in higher education:

- Disability is a characteristic of a **situation** and not of a person.
- As the result of the interaction between a person and the environment, disability is a **relational and action requesting** issue.
- Disability requires **identification and action** in order to be diminished/eliminated. Prevention is the golden rule!
- Instead of taking action against disability situations, it would be better to focus/to act toward **access as the positive result** of the interaction between individual and environment. “Access” and “disability” are the two sides of the coin (Fig. 1).

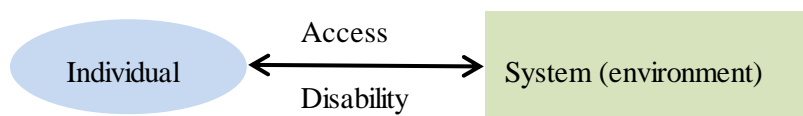


Fig. 1. Representation of the interactional model applied to OSD.

- Strategic and day-to-day interventions must take **three levels** into consideration: individual, environmental and the level of interaction between individual and environment, which means a dual approach for the OSD (see 2.6).

An important result of the action research was the development of a specific Access-Concept (with 7 As) for the higher education, based on the Access-Concept (the first 5 As) of the United Nations:

- (1) **A**vailability, i.e. coordinated support systems
- (2) **A**ccessibility of the environment (architectural, digital, learning /teaching, administrative)
- (3) **A**ccommodation, meaning that individual needs must be met. The assessment for reasonable adjustments is considered the (individual) key to access to HEI; however, it is the main challenge at the OSD because it requires time and capacity in terms of
- (4) **A**ffordability of material and human resources, which means that students with disabilities must declare their condition in order to be registered
- (5) **A**ceptability of persons with disability as part of the diversity at the university
- (6) **A**gency, meaning that persons with disability participate and reflect their actions changing the environment
- (7) **A**ccess to self, which refers to how the challenge of living with an impairment is consciously reflected

2.6 Our fields of activity. Number of currently supported students

Given the interactional view of disability and access, the activities of the OSD have to cover two action fields:

Field 1: Interventions in individual situations of disability, aiming to reduce/eliminate the disadvantages and offer students equal opportunities – the goal is to enable the students. Such interventions include:

- Informing about rights, counselling in difficult situations
- Assessment of special needs, which means issuing a Certificate for Individual Reasonable Adjustment (CIRA), which will be submitted, to the faculty or institute. The OSD helps staff to

organize the required adjustments, e.g. by organizing and surveying the exams for the students with special needs (over 50 exams per year in the past five years)

- Assistive services provided by other students with or without disabilities
- Peer counselling
- Acquisition of adapted study materials
- Various services such as reserving seats in the classroom, the disposition of accessible rooms for wheelchair users, assisting by the negotiations with assurances etc.

In 2014, the number of students supported by the OSD reached a record number of 280 (i.e. 1.1% of the students registered at the UZH). In the spring term of 2015, there were more students than last year, which will probably mean a new record at the end of the academic year. As the support of the increasing number of students demands a large part of our resources, the activities in the (following) second field of activities are reduced to a lower scale.

Field 2: Interventions in the environment, which aim to create an accessible architectural, digital, and teaching/learning environment – the goal is to enhance accessibility.

- The OSD initiates the improvement of the accessibility in the domains mentioned above, working together with the persons with authority at the university and with the specific NGO.
- Training sessions for staff are held regularly (currently only once a year due to limited resources) on topics like digital accessibility (together with the Web Office UZH), reasonable adjustments, and inclusive teaching (together with the Department for Teaching in HEI).
- The online guide Uniability UZH offers information about access and infrastructure in over 60 buildings on the three campuses of the university.

Furthermore, the OSD has cooperated with a variety of NGOs and with the OSDs from other HEI.

2.7. Challenges

In 2012, the action research mentioned in 2.2 described the following challenges (7 Cs), with the aim of widening participation of the students with disabilities and creating equal opportunities:

- (1) The **Concept of Disability**: the manifoldness of *disability situations*
- (2) The emerging **Complexity**, which demands awareness raising and mainstreaming. Concerning this matter, in 2009 the Academic Disability Commission UZH adopted a paragraph on Equal Rights in the University Regulations, followed in 2014 with Strategic Goals for the Implementation of the Rights of People with Disabilities at the UZH. The authorization of these documents will mean that the UZH has a top-down strategy regarding disability and access.
- (3) **Criteria** for identification, intervention and monitoring
- (4) **Coordination** is required for transference of support, etc.
- (5) **Competence** in the field of *Disability/Access* to higher education
- (6) **Communication** between people with and without disabilities, NGOs and HEIs (because the stakeholders and interest groups are extremely widespread)
- (7) **Cooperation**, a) as *shared responsibility* between all interest groups and b) interdisciplinary

3. Description of the Office for Students with Disabilities of Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

3.1. Legislative frame supporting the development of structures for students with disabilities in Romanian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

In Romania, the development of the structures supporting the students with disabilities (i.e. Disability Offices) is currently in line with the National Strategy for the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities 2014-2020. Thus, the National Education Law (1/2011) stipulates and guarantees “...*equal rights for the access of all the Romanian citizens to all the levels and forms of education, including the lifelong learning programs, without discrimination*”. The idea of *Access for all* (at physical, social and informational levels), as promoted by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (www.un.org/disabilities/), is reflected in the concepts of participation, accessibility, adaptation and equity, which are presented in the National Law Regarding the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Disabled Persons (448/2006), the National Law of Education (1/2011), as well as in the Code of Student Rights and Responsibilities (Order 3666/ 2012). For example, within the Romanian legislation frame cited above, adaptation is defined as the process of transforming the physical and informational environment, of the products and systems, with the purpose of making them available to all the persons, including to those with disabilities. The concept *Access for all* (which is based on the idea of Universal Design, i.e. the design of all the spaces and products in an a manner accessible to all the users, without the need of special adaptations; Bremer et al., 2002) can be found in the Romanian legislative frame in the articles 61, 62, 64 is 65 of the National Law Regarding the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Disabled Persons (448/2006), which are referring to the specific recommendations regarding the facilitation of physical, informational and communicational access for persons with disabilities.

A look at the current definitions of disability and handicap in the Romanian national legislation reflects the interactional approach to these concept (individual-environment), in the way it is promoted by **the Social Model of Disability** (Oliver, 1996), which states that social barriers such as attitudes and behaviours towards persons with disabilities are significant components of these concepts. In the case of students with disabilities, the study environment is represented by the study conditions (physical space, study materials, technological infrastructure, IT etc.), and by the academic personnel (other students, teaching staff, administrative staff). The process of individual adaptation should be approached through all the components of the interaction person-environment. The simple fact that a student with disabilities starts asking questions about his/her special needs during the study semester or about the difficulties that might appear during the final tests is already a start in the process of interaction between the student and the educational environment. The National Romanian Law on persons with disabilities (448/2006) indicates that the main mode of responding to the physical and informational dimensions of the environment is through reasonable adaptation, which is defined as the process of transformation of the physical and informational environment, of the products and systems, to make them available to all the persons, including those with disabilities.

Another favourable element for the development of the inclusive structures targeting the students with disabilities is the attention and the recommendations formulated by the National Alliance of the Romanian Student Organizations (ANOSR) regarding the equal rights to education of students with disabilities. Hence, in their annual report (*Equity in Education, 2011*), based on the data provided by the General Directorate for Social Assistance and Child Protection. This report indicates that approximately 3% of the Romanian population is registered with a certain type of disability. Among these persons, 10.22% is represented by the category of age from 18 to 29 years. ANOSR points out the need of active measures (in terms of equity and access to education) in order to adjust the population dynamic of the persons with disabilities to the population of students of the Romanian HEIs, in which the average number of students with disabilities represents 0.5% from the total number of enrolled undergraduate and graduate students. Although this analysis of the proportion of students with disabilities in the Romanian HEIs is a valuable one in terms of reflecting the real-time situation, most of the international Disability Offices recommend rather a qualitative analysis of the situation of the students with disabilities (e.g. type

of disability, identification of special needs, possibilities to offer reasonable accommodation etc.), rather than a quantitative one. Such a qualitative analysis might allow for an optimal level of preparedness of the Romanian HEIs to manage the special needs of their students with disabilities, in terms of their participation to the study programs they are enrolled for and in the direction of prevention of the school dropout.

However, even though the legislative frame for this type of structures is a supportive one at national level, Romania has only one Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD), i.e. OSD of Babes-Bolyai University (UBB), which has a total number of 21 faculties and it is currently ranked as the largest University in Romania in terms of number of enrolled undergraduate and graduate students.

3.2. History and functioning of the Office of Students with Disabilities of Babes-Bolyai University

The Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) of Babeş-Bolyai University was founded in 2013, with the purpose of ensuring equal opportunities for all the UBB students (Annual Rector's Report for 2014; ubbcluj.ro). OSD of UBB is directly subordinated to the Rector's Office and it functions as a centre for inclusive services for students with disabilities, in accordance to the National Code of Students Rights and Responsibilities and the National Education Law (1/2011, art. 118). As pointed by the Rector of the UBB in his annual Report on the state of the University in the academic year 2014-2015, the mission of OSD is to ensure equal opportunities to education and potential development to all the students currently enrolled in all the study programs of the University (undergraduate and graduate levels). In line with this mission, the activity of OSD in the academic year 2014-2015 was an intensive one, consisting in 18 awareness-type activities (workshops in collaborations with specific NGOs and specialists in the field of accessibility and services toward persons with disabilities, student-for-student types of events, community-oriented activities etc.; centre.ubbcluj.ro/bsd), with a total number of 595 participants (students with and without disabilities, academic personnel, Alumni of Babes-Bolyai University etc.). Also, during the academic year 2014-2015, five students (out of 63 currently registered students with disabilities) were involved in individual psycho-pedagogical counselling addressing their learning difficulties. Specialists from the Special Education Department and Social Assistance Department of Babes-Bolyai University performed the counselling in a collaborative manner. As a result of these awareness-type activities, OSD was nominated in 2014 at the National Gala for Persons with Disabilities, at the Category Open Doors (Institutions promoting accessibility).

We present below the types of **inclusive activities** (awareness-type activities) organized by the Office for Students with Disabilities (UBB) in the academic year 2014-2015. Besides the activities aiming to increase the visibility of OSD to the students and the academic personnel of the University, five out of 63 currently enrolled students with declared disabilities have individually approached the Office with specific requests related either to their learning difficulties, planning of the semester exams or to physical accommodation of the classrooms and entrances to specific buildings of the institution.

1. **Providing the students with disabilities with information on the University inclusive policies, and on their rights and responsibilities (i.e. National legislative frame):** Information was offered either on the site of the Office for Students with Disabilities (centre.ubbcluj.ro/bsd), during group-informational sessions organized at the OSD, or on individual meeting bases, upon request. Also, upon request, the students were given information on the degree of accessibility of specific buildings of the University, and, in collaboration with Motivation Foundation Romania, the students and the academic personnel were informed about the needs and solutions for independent living of the persons with motor disabilities, especially wheel-chair users (www.motivation.ro).
2. **Providing students and academic personnel with information about local, national**

and international NGOs and institutions functioning in the area of accessibility (workshops on the missions, values and activities, seminars on the preparedness for independent living, visits at NGOs etc.). The main idea behind this type of activities is to increase awareness toward the institutions and NGOs that are preoccupied to facilitate the participation to society and to education of the persons with disabilities, i.e. **Accessibility = Shared responsibility**. Examples of this type of activities of OSD of UBB in the academic year 2014-2015 are: visit at the High-school for the Visually Impaired Cluj-Napoca, meeting of Motivation Foundation Romania (seminar on elements for preparing for independent living of persons with motor disabilities), workshop on Accessibility in University (invited speaker: coordinator of Disability Office of University Zurich, Switzerland), visit at the Regional Centre for Community Services Cluj-Napoca, workshop on communication with and about persons with disabilities (in collaboration with specific departments of the University, such as Department of Special Education), presentations of professional counselling centres, presentations of mental and physical health programs offered by local NGOs (e.g. Minte Forte, Estuar, Romanian Association of Psychology Students) etc. These activities were addressed not only to the students with disabilities, but also to the academic personnel and to the volunteers of the OSD (students and Alumni of UBB).

3. **Facilitation of the direct interaction with persons with disabilities** (Live Books, social and cultural events with persons with disabilities). During the academic year 2014-2014, OSD of UBB has organized a series of Live Book presentations, i.e. persons with visible and invisible disabilities (mainly Alumni of Babes-Bolyai University, who are currently employed) have presented their own biographies, indicating the barriers they perceived during their professional and social development, as well as solutions for accessibility in education of persons with disabilities. Another activity aiming to increase the level of direct interactions with persons with disabilities is the Program *Be active together*, which brings together students with and without disabilities and it includes elements of sport, such as sitting volleyball (in collaboration with the Faculty of Physical Education and Sport of UBB) and para-agility with therapy dogs (in collaboration with local Dog Training schools, such as Pet Joy Cluj-Napoca). Also, within this Program, the volunteers of OSD of UBB (students with and without disabilities) had the chance to practice and participate together in a disability-awareness flash-mob (on the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, i.e. the 3rd of December), together with children diagnosed with Autism and Down syndrome from different local NGOs. The idea behind these activities comes from the literature in the field of Special Education, which acknowledges that the direct contact with persons with disabilities is a crucial variable of the process of developing and shaping inclusive attitudes and behaviour in humans.
4. **Fund-raising activities aiming to facilitate the participation of students with disabilities in the academic community:** In the academic year 2014-2015, OSD of UBB has motivated the participation of academic personnel and students without disabilities in several community-oriented activities with fund-raising character (i.e. activities addressed to the students with disabilities of UBB), such as: Swimathon 2015 (the project Student-4-Student: Swimming for students with disabilities) and a project dedicated to the physical accessibility of the University building, which is currently visible on the crowd-funding platform of the University (<http://crowdfunding.alumni.ubbcluj.ro>).
5. **Annual statistics regarding the situation of students with (declared) disabilities**

currently enrolled in the study programs of UBB (number of students, types of disabilities): With the collaboration of the Secretarial Offices of each of the 21 Faculties of UBB and based on the official letter emitted by the Rector's Office, OSD was able to summarize the number and the types of disabilities of the students who have declared them at the beginning of the academic year. Upon request, this data can be made available at institutional level. OSD of UBB indicate a percentage of 0.5% of students with disabilities (years 2013-2014 and 2014-2015) from the total number of students enrolled at the undergraduate and graduate study programs of Babes-Bolyai University (Rector's Annual Report on the situation of Babes-Bolyai University for the year 2014-2015). Although this percentage is low compared with other European universities (e.g. City University of London has 5% of students with disabilities reported the total number of students enrolled, while University of Edinburgh has a percentage of 8.09% students with disabilities), a qualitative analysis of the data reflects the fact that disability prevalence reported in foreign universities is given by learning difficulties (invisible disabilities). In Romania, the data offered by OSD indicate that students tend to declare in the moment of their admission at a specific HEI only those disabilities that are medically diagnosed through the standardized system of the Romanian National Minister of Labour, Family and Social Protection (OM 2298/2012), which also involves a registration and assessment through General Directorate for Social Assistance and Child Protection and of the Superior Commission of Evaluation of Adults with Disabilities. In other words, the real number of Romanian students with disabilities could be higher than the one indicated by the date collected and summarized by the Office for Students with Disabilities or other structures dedicated to them. Thus, each Romanian HEI should be aware of the fact that most of the students might not decide to declare their disabilities (i.e. due to personal reasons and/or to avoid the potential negative or positive discrimination) or they might not be aware that they have learning difficulties in the moment of admission. Therefore, the Offices for Students with Disabilities (such as OSD of UBB) can continuously update the database on the students with disabilities, by including those who are identifying their educational needs during the study semester and are requesting information and/or specialized help from the Office for Students with Disabilities.

6. **Periodical assessment (i.e. surveys) of the needs of the teaching staff regarding their knowledge and attitudes toward persons with disabilities:** Such an assessment was performed at the beginning of the academic year 2014-2015 through an online survey by the Office for Students with Disabilities of UBB. The survey, which was approved by the Ethical Board of the University, included standard questionnaires measuring the knowledge, attitudes and direct interactions with persons with disabilities, as well as their self-expressed need for being informed on accessibilities and the legislative frame regarding disabilities. Even though the participation rate to the survey was relatively low among the academic personnel of the University (note: the Office for Students with Disabilities was founded only in 2013), the respondents indicated the necessity of educational input (training seminars) on the topic of accessibility in University (Costea-Bărluțiu, Muresan & Rusu, *in press*). Also, although the respondents reported a high level of direct contact with the students with disabilities that are currently enrolled in their classes, only few of them appear to be familiar with the University policies regarding the persons with disabilities, as well as with the National and European legislative frames.

All the respondents expressed a high level of availability toward seminars (i.e. training activities) on accessibility (physical, communicational and informational), communication with and about persons with disabilities and about principles of Universal Design in Learning. We recommend that the Offices should carry out such surveys at the beginning of each academic year for Students with Disabilities. In the case of OSD of Babes-Bolyai University, the survey can provide a valuable starting point for planning the types of activities addressed to the educational needs identified by the teaching staff (e.g. training sessions on communication with and about people with disabilities).

7. **Addressing the special needs of the students with disabilities (upon request) through counselling and/or written institutional recommendations:** Although the awareness-types activities listed above were preponderant during the academic year 2014-2015 at level of OSD of UBB, a number of five students with disabilities have individually contacted the Office (direct or by email) in regards to their special educational needs. Each request was carefully analysed by the team of OSD, in collaboration with the academic personnel (i.e. head of Department, **Deans of the Faculties the students were enrolled at, Rector's Office**) and/or with the family of the students. Based on the analysis of their special needs, the students were either assigned an OSD-volunteer (e.g. for note-taking, guidance through the Campus), were included in an individual psycho-pedagogical counselling plan, or a letter of written recommendations to facilitate the reasonable access to education of the students in the study program he/she is enrolled (the official letter was addressed to the academic personnel of the Faculty). Also, in some of the cases, the students were referred to other centres of the University, such as the Expert Centre for Professional Orientation, or specific NGOs offering programs for physical rehabilitation, social and professional inclusion etc. All the recommendations that can be found in the official letters from OSD are based on the National legislative base, including alternative methods of assessment. Examples of recommendations are: supplementary examination time, offering the study materials in advance and in an accessible form (e.g. enlarged text, Braille text – in such cases, the students are referred to the Centre for Assistive and Technology for Access of UBB), permission for the OSD-volunteers to accompany the students with disabilities during seminars and lectures for note-taking and/or gestural translation, permission for a special space in the classroom, peer-tutoring activities etc.

Discussions and Conclusions:

The analysis concludes that the difference between the prevailing activities of the two OSD can be explained particularly in regard to the specific legal and institutional context. However, the key issues and the challenges are similar. A significant deduction of the paper regards the key role of the OSD in enabling access to higher education for people with disabilities, which means that each Higher Education Institution should create and support such an Office (institutional capacity building).

At international level, the offices for students with disabilities promote, first of all, the **focus on interactional manner (individual-environment interaction) on the individual special needs** of the students already enrolled in the study programs of a Higher Education Institution, regardless on how large or small is their numbers, in terms of properly and reasonable addressing these needs. An University that indicates an optimal level of awareness and it proves that it has the possibility to address the special

needs of each student with disabilities in terms of ensuring physical, informational and communicational access (i.e. through clear institutional policies and structures oriented to the students with disabilities, such as OSDs), will eventually become more visible and more attractive to this category of persons. In other words, once the educational needs of the students with disabilities are reasonably addressed at institutional level, each student has the potential to become an ambassador of the institution's level of preparedness to accommodate and socially include the persons with disabilities, in the direction of reciprocal benefits.

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