

White Paper on the situation of international mobilities for students with disabilities

At the Universities of Agder (Norway), A Coruña (Spain), Szeged (Hungary) and Timisoara (Romania)

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Executive summary

This paper aims to be an authoritative report that informs readers concisely about the current situation of international mobilities of students with disabilities in four European countries (Romania, Hungary Spain and Norway). It is produced in the framework of an EEA Grants project entitled “Institutional change for International Exchange of Students with Disabilities”, with the participation of the University of Agder (Norway), Universidade da Coruña (Spain), and the University of Szeged (Hungary), under the coordination of Universitatea de Vest din Timisoara (Romania). This white paper aims to shed light on the inclusiveness of international mobility programmes for students with disability based on the experience of these four universities. The results of the statistical tests suggest that there is not sufficient empirical evidence to conclude that students with disability are underrepresented in the last academic year for which data were available. However, after closer scrutiny involving the use of empirical evidence for a longer period of four years at Universidade da Coruña, we found out that students with disability are significantly underrepresented in outgoing international mobilities. The main conclusion is that it is necessary to increase the availability of empirical data in order to be able to develop more powerful tests about the participation of students with disability in international mobilities.

1. Introduction

This paper aims to be an authoritative report that informs readers concisely about the complex issue of international mobilities of students with disabilities in four European countries (Romania, Hungary Spain and Norway). It is produced in the framework of an EEA Grants project entitled “Institutional change for International Exchange of Students with Disabilities”, with the participation of the University of Agder (Norway), Universidade da Coruña (Spain), and the University of Szeged (Hungary), under the coordination of Universitatea de Vest din Timisoara (Romania).

The white paper presents the philosophy of a consortium of the four participating universities on the matter. It is meant to help readers understand the complex issue of international mobilities of students with disabilities, identify the existing problems, and make decisions to solve them.

This white paper is not intended as an unalterable policy commitment but as a tool of participatory democracy. It tries to perform the dual role of presenting firm university policies while at the same time inviting opinions upon them.

The problem

Universities are key actors in the formation of human capital and, therefore, have a potential impact in the increase in productivity of future generations, which can lead, in turn, to higher standards of living.

In the last decades, universities have managed to increase their contribution to societal progress by broadening their student base. They have progressively turned from elitist institutions into more inclusive ones.

This general trend has not only meant an increase in the diversity of socio-economic backgrounds of students, but also in the diversity of their personal conditions. In particular, it has meant a considerable increase in the number of students with some degree of disability.

This result has not only meant increasing costs but also opportunities. Often, students with some degree of disability are the ones that can benefit the most from university

education and with the social dividend of investments in their human capital being among the highest.

Another interesting trend of the last three decades in Europe has been the internationalisation of higher education and the Erasmus programme of the European Union has played a major role in this respect. In particular, there has been a constant increase in the number of international student mobilities.

These international student mobilities have proven to be very productive in terms of increasing the employability and careers of students taking part in these mobilities. A former Erasmus student has greater chances to find a job, and also greater chances to work for a multinational company.

The Erasmus programme has also popularised international student mobilities in the past decade, which means that it is no longer seen as an option for just a few. The programme has become normalised.

What is not clear at first sight is whether this normalisation of international student mobilities has also extended to students with some degree of disability, who have increased their share of student populations. In other words, we should investigate whether the greater inclusiveness of our universities regarding students with disability has gone beyond the registration of these students and extended to their participation in international mobilities.

This white paper aims to shed light on this issue from the experience of three universities in three European countries, namely Spain, Hungary and Romania. The answer to this question will have political implications not only for these universities, but may also be transposed to other universities in Europe facing similar challenges.

The rest of this paper is divided in two parts. In section two we will present some original research on the inclusiveness of international mobilities at universities participating in this project. In section three, we will identify some problems and provide a firm policy commitment of the consortium of the four participating universities to solve them by means of a set of concrete policy proposals, while at the same time inviting opinions upon them.

2. A study of the inclusiveness of international mobilities for students with disability

In order to find out the answer to the question whether students with disability are properly included in current international student mobility programmes, we have undertaken research involving partner universities in four European countries, namely the University of Agder (Norway), Universidade da Coruña (Spain), and the University of Szeged (Hungary), and Universitatea de Vest din Timisoara (Romania). The study is based on the analysis of statistical data at those universities.

Data and collection

For each participating university, we have collected data on four variables:

1. Number of students registered at the university.
2. Number of students with disability registered at the university.
3. Number of outgoing international student mobilities.
4. Number of outgoing international mobilities of students with disability.

Of the four participating universities, we managed to obtain these data from three of them, namely Universidade da Coruña (Spain), University of Szeged (Hungary) and Universitatea de Vest din Timisoara (Romania). We were not able to gather the data from the University of Agder (Norway).

The collection of data about the international mobility of students with disabilities at Universidade da Coruña was not straightforward. On the one hand, this university uses the Moveon software to record its international mobilities. This software allows to record student outgoing and incoming mobilities in all their phases, from the first application and selection to the actual performance of the mobility. The system records personal information about students and about their mobilities. In particular, the system is prepared to record student degrees of disability, grouped into categories, as well as the allocation of an extra mobility grant because of disability (this information is available in the case of outgoing students only).

On the other hand, despite the potential of this software to record systematically information not only about students actually undertaking international mobilities, but also about those who apply for these mobilities but are not finally selected or do not finally accept the grant, the information about disability is only recorded for students that are actually awarded an extra mobility grant on the grounds of disability. This reduces the potential of the system to understand why few disabled students participate or not in international mobilities.

From a statistical point of view, the participation of students with recognised disabilities is almost inexistent. The system only records one such Erasmus student in 2014-15, a year in which 373 students performed outgoing mobilities. The proportion of 0.27%, in the single year with one such mobility, is significantly lower than the proportion of disabled students registered at the university.

A special unit for assistance to diversity (ADI – Atención a la Diversidad) records the total population of students with disabilities at Universidade da Coruña. These students benefit from a tuition-fee waiver, so statistical information is readily available from the software application that manages students' academic records, including data on registrations from an academic and financial point of view.

The data from the universities of Szeged and Timisoara were provided by e-mail. There was no response from our Norwegian partner.

Preliminary evidence

Preliminary evidence about international mobility of students with disability is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Outgoing mobilities of students with disability

	Students	Disabled	%	Outgoing Erasmus	Outgoing disabled
UDC 2014-15	18000*	113	0,63%	373	1
UVT 2015-16	16200	72	0,44%	250	3
Szeged 2015-16	22501	184	0,82%	274	0

* Provisional data.

The table shows data on international student mobilities in the period 2011-2015 at Universidade da Coruña, and in the academic year 2015-16 at Universitatea de Vest din Timisoara and the University of Szeged.

The data shows that the international student mobility affects less than 1% of students registered at a university in a given year, and that the international mobility of students with disability is also a rare phenomenon, with some variation across universities (1, 3 and 0 cases for the universities of A Coruña, Timisoara and Szeged in the last year with available data).

Data analysis

Given the fact that participating in an outgoing international mobility is a rare phenomenon, the participation of students with disability in such mobilities should conform to a Poisson distribution.

Table 2. Analysis of the inclusiveness of disabled students in international mobilities

	Students	Disabled	%	Outgoing Erasmus	Expected outgoing disabled	Outgoing disabled	Prob.
UDC 2014-15	18000*	113	0,63%	373	2,34	1	0,3214
UVT 2015-16	16200	72	0,44%	250	1,11	3	0,9734
Szeged 2015-16	22501	184	0,82%	274	2,24	0	0,1064

* Provisional data.

Table 2 analyses the inclusiveness of international mobility programmes for disabled students. The table calculates the proportion of disabled students in each university. There are 113 out of 18000 students at Universidade da Coruña in 2014-15, i.e. 0.63%. If we apply this proportion to the 373 outgoing mobilities of this year, we should expect 2.34 mobilities of disabled students, compared to one disabled student mobility only. The difference is not significant, however, with a probability of 32.14% that this is a random phenomenon.

In the case of Universitatea de Vest din Timisoara (UVT), there were only 72 disabled students out of a total of 16200 in 2015-16. This is a proportion of 0.44%, significantly lower than in the other partner universities. Conversely, the participation of disabled students in international mobilities is higher, with three actual mobilities compared to the expected 1.11. In this case, there is no indication of discrimination of disabled students in international mobility programmes.

Finally, in the case of the University of Szeged in Hungary, there were 184 disabled students out of a total student population of 22501, which represents a proportion of 0.82%, nearly twice as high as that of UVT. With this proportion and 274 outgoing student mobilities, we should expect 2.24 mobilities carried out by disabled students. This contrasts with the actual mobility of none of such students. However, the difference is not significant at conventional levels, with a probability of 10.64% that it is due to chance.

In conclusion, based on these figures alone, we could not affirm that in any of these universities students with disability are significantly underrepresented in international mobility programmes. However, there are still some indications that this might actually be the case, and the fact that these universities are acquitted may be due to the low power of the test we are using.

The power of the test can be increased by increasing the empirical evidence on which it is based, and this is what I show in Table 3. In this table I focus on the international mobility of students with disability at Universidade da Coruña, where I increase the power of the test by analysing mobilities in four academic years (2011-15) rather than just one.

Table 3. International mobility of students with disability at Universidade da Coruña, 2011-15

	Students	Disabled	%	Outgoing Erasmus	Expected outgoing disabled	Outgoing disabled	Prob.
UDC 2011-12	20183	146	0,72%	457	3,31	0	0,0367
UDC 2012-13	19396	112	0,58%	476	2,75	0	0,0640
UDC 2013-14	18169	152	0,84%	425	3,56	0	0,0286

UDC 2014-15	18000*	113	0,63%	373	2,34	1	0,3214
UDC 2011-15	75748	523	0,69%	1731	11,95	1	0,0001

* Provisional data.

The table show that in this four-year period the total number of students registered varied from 20 to 18 thousand, and that the number of registered students with a recognised disability varied between 112 and 152 (between 0.58% and 0.84%). The average proportion of disabled students from the general student population was 0.69% in this period.

Given this proportion, when we apply it to the 1731 outgoing international student mobilities that took place in 2011-15, we should expect a total of 11.95 mobilities carried out by students with disability. This contrasts with only one such mobility in the period of reference. In this case, the difference is extremely significant, with a probability of 0.01% that it is due to chance.

When we increase the power of the test by analysing evidence from several academic years, conclusions change, and we find that students with disability are significantly underrepresented in outgoing international mobilities at Universidade da Coruña.

3. Conclusions

The results of the former analysis highlight the critical importance of empirical evidence if we are to identify any kind of underrepresentation of students with disability in international student mobility programmes such as Erasmus.

We have analysed outgoing international student mobilities at four European universities from different countries (Norway, Spain, Hungary and Romania) and found out that there was not sufficient empirical evidence to conclude that students with disability were underrepresented in the last academic year for which data were available.

However, after closer scrutiny involving the use of empirical evidence for a longer period of four years at Universidade da Coruña, we found out that students with disability are clearly underrepresented in outgoing international mobilities.

The main conclusion is that it is necessary to increase the availability of empirical data in order to be able to develop more powerful tests about the participation of students with disability in international mobilities.

Clearly identifying the problem is of the utmost importance if we are to increase public awareness and gather support for policy reforms that will lead to a solution.

Policy commitments

As a consequence of these results, we propose that the partner universities taking part in this project, namely the University of Agder (Norway), Universidade da Coruña (Spain), and the University of Szeged (Hungary), and Universitatea de Vest din Timisoara (Romania), should increase their efforts to gather statistical information about the international mobility of students with disability.

These efforts can take the form of increasing the periods for which data are available, and also increasing the types of mobilities analysed (outgoing and incoming, Erasmus and non-Erasmus, mobility for studies and mobility for placements). The initiative should be coordinated so that there is a sufficient degree of harmonisation of the data collected across partner universities.

Any results from such initiatives should be given visibility by presenting to public opinion, policy makers and the wider academic community beyond the direct participants in the project.

It is only with sound empirical evidence and rigorous academic research that we will be able to convince university authorities, policy makers and public opinion to devote more resources to the integration of students with disability in international programmes.