

(No) Limits on International Exchange? International mobility and students with a disability"

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Assumptions about disability

Life runs on assumptions. When we wake up in the morning we assume the clock is correctly telling the time, our assumptions get us through every day without having to re-examine our thinking all the time. Most of our assumptions are based on our experience, if we see a rottweiler dog in the park we just know not to pet it. However, many of our assumptions are not based on any real evidence. We often make assumptions about people based on very little, the way they look, dress or talk. These assumptions can have a huge impact on the lives of others we come into contact with in our professional lives.

Research conducted by the World Health Organisation (2012)¹ states that negative attitudes are a major barrier to the inclusion of students with disability into education and most of these attitudes arise from assumptions people make about disability. For example if the disability is physical they can assume the person needs help, or deserves sympathy, or is sick, or is a problem. These assumptions can kick in even when the person is not there, for example when we see an application or a CV of someone who wants to be a nurse, or an engineer. If we meet a student with a disability we may assume they cannot be a doctor, or an engineer or be able to study abroad, we may assume that their disability means they won't be able or won't be as good as another non-disabled person.

Of course these assumptions are simply wrong but they can have a very negative impact on the opportunities open to students with disabilities in higher education. Of course, no one sets out to exclude them, but commonly professionals working in higher education make the assumption that students with disability are not their job, it is someone else's job. On the other hand where a professional such as an international officer assumes that students with disability are part of their role, then this is a game changer and ensures that these students get the same opportunities to study abroad as other students.

Stories of students with disabilities

In this article we want to share with you the research conducted by SIHO into the stories of students with disabilities who have studied abroad. Their stories give great insights into what

¹ World Health Report on Disability, WHO, 2012, pg 216

international mobility means to them. We will also hear about what they, as experts in their own story, can teach us by sharing their international experience?

Nine students with a disability from all over the world tell about their experiences of going abroad, in the context of their studies (SIHO Research 2013). They came from The Netherlands, Lithuania, Belgium and Ireland and went to Sweden, France, Belgium, Spain, Suriname and Denmark. They give insight in the reasons why students want to join international mobility and the way they experience their disability differently depending on the 'place' where they are. Furthermore, they tell us about the supports they need when studying abroad. But what they really showed us was their huge enthusiasm to study abroad!

Reasons to go abroad

For some students an international experience is a way of overcoming barriers and proving (themselves and others) what they are capable of. A possible explanation for feeling this need to prove that they can participate might be because people with disabilities are still underrepresented within international mobility programs.

"I started to get the feeling that I could do anything as long as I was motivated. I think going to Denmark was the icing on the cake. I had the idea: If I do this and everything works out well, I can do anything!" And it did, I had a really great time, made great friends and experienced new stuff. I started exploring my boundaries and for the first time I went abroad without my parents without ending up in the hospital."



Besides that, students with disabilities have comparable wishes and goals as other students: improving employability, language and life skills, having fun, being more culturally aware, Indeed disability is only one dimension of a person. **Maybe we should pay more attention to the similarities instead of differences.**

Influence of contextual and environmental factors on disability experience

Experiences of students differ, depending on the disability and context. Other countries bring different attitudes towards disability, they have more accessible environments, more positive cultures, lifestyles, climates, all of which contribute to a different disability experience.

"I noticed that bus drivers are always so helpful. In Lithuania you can't see the positive spirit in drivers' faces as often... I noticed the same thing when walking on the street. People were not afraid to look me in the eyes and even smile! In Lithuania, people are often surprised (sometimes mixed with fear) when they see a person with disability in the street."



Sometimes these differences also influence the choice of place to go to. It is clear that a society with a certain desire for inclusion, accessibility and participation can make change happen.

The right to international exchange

Some of the students want to tell their stories to make change happen. They want to defend the rights of persons with a disability and create more and equal opportunities for everyone to participate in international mobility.

“People with disabilities often don’t know their rights. I know a lot of students with a disability and they don’t go on Erasmus.”

They use their personal experience to promote social change. They identify some things that need to change:

- ✓ **Better and accessible information in relation to inclusive international exchange programs;**
- ✓ **More help from international offices for receiving additional grants;**
- ✓ **More suitable assistance abroad.**



Support

Support needs differ between all students. But for most of them it is not easy to find support abroad. Students want to be **involved in the choice of who will be allocated to provide support**. All prefer assistance from people close to them and people they like.

“As an Erasmus Ambassador, I would like to give people with a disability the chance to choose their assistant when they go abroad, and give them a chance to meet them on beforehand. It is important to get assistance from someone you like.”



Besides support abroad, students highlight not to forget the significant role people at home can have.

Focus on positive experiences

The students didn’t put their disability central in their stories. They focused on the positive experiences rather than on barriers, such as making new friends, getting to know another culture, personal growth, maybe the positive experiences outweigh the negative experiences and the barriers?

“When we talked to Joshua, he especially mentioned the positive elements in Suriname: the good weather, the people he met over there, his internship, what he was doing there ...”



Conclusion

Students with a disability perceive an international experience as positive and enriching. There were differences but mainly similarities in the reasons given by all students going abroad, like improving employability, gaining language skills, improving life skills, having fun and making new friends, gaining awareness of other cultures. Students mention at some points they were faced with barriers and challenges as well. The biggest barrier is the lack of information on how international opportunities might be accessible. It isn't always easy to find the correct information. They also mention it isn't always easy to find assistance and they want to be involved in the decision process throughout and particularly about who will support them.

There is an opportunity and responsibility for higher education institutions to more actively encourage students with a disability to participate in international mobility and to support outgoing and incoming students to realize more inclusive international experiences.

The **ACCESS & Inclusion Expert Group of EAIE**, the LINK-network and SIHO are gathering tips and tricks that will support higher education institutions to support incoming and outgoing students with a disability. Contributions from members are welcome.

More information

- The stories of the students were represented also in [personalized portraits](#).
- Find more information on the emergent themes and the research is in the [the complete research report](#)
- Visit the [SIHO-website](#): 'Mobility portraits'.
- Visit the [LINK-website](#): 'Study abroad without limits'.
- Visit the [AHEAD website](#): www.ahead.ie
- Contact the EAIE [ACCESS & Inclusion Expert Group](#).