



The Committee for Social Policy and Health, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki: Learning from best practices in Poland.

by Katie Quartano

On the occasion of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities on 3rd December and at the invitation of the Committee for Social Policy and Health of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, I and a colleague from the Disabled Access Friendly campaign attended a meeting at which representatives from the Disability Support Office (<http://www.bon.uj.edu.pl/>) from the Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland spoke about their work.

Since my colleague is in a wheelchair and the meeting room was crowded and difficult to negotiate, I was disappointed by the fact that on entering the room the manager of this Support Office, Mr. Ireneusz Bialek, did not offer us any assistance to find seating, given that surely he of all people would be sensitive to the difficulties faced by the disabled. How easy it is, I thought, to fail to put oneself in the position of others. In fact I was guilty of this myself, for Mr. Bialek had neither seen the wheelchair at all, nor the difficulties to be negotiated. How could he? He was blind.

The meeting was held in English, and Mr. Bialek stressed that knowledge of English is a valuable and empowering tool for disabled students, whose future jobs are likely to be of an intellectual rather than physical nature. Let us not forget that not all students fit into the "mainstream style". Foreign Language Centres looking for new students might like to think about this largely untapped market.

The mission of the Disability Support Office is to enable disabled students of the Jagiellonian University equal access to its educational offer, regardless of the kind and degree of disability. They strive to ensure that no student is disqualified at the beginning or during their studies because of disabilities or learning difficulties, and oppose all kinds of open or hidden discrimination. They support the constitutional right of disabled people to education, work and full participation in social life and believe this to be justified on both human and economic grounds. Their activities are guided by the provisions of the 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which was signed by Poland in March 2007, and which has also been signed by Greece.

So what kind of concessions and privileges can disabled students at the Jagiellonian University expect? Mr. Bialek was quite adamant on this point and said "None". People with disabilities are treated just like all other students and do not enjoy any special concessions or privileges. There is, however, the necessary support in place allowing them to use the

standard offer of the university available to all. Such support is neither a concession nor a privilege because it is an indispensable compensation for the limitations stemming from disability, and so a way to provide equal opportunities for disabled and non-disabled students.

In practical terms this means that the 485 disabled students (out of a total of 43,762) can count on courses and examinations organised in a format adapted to their individual needs, access to assistive technologies, training and counselling in modern technological solutions supporting the teaching process, adaptation of teaching materials into electronic or Braille formats for blind students, and English language classes for students who are blind, partially sighted, deaf or hard of hearing, amongst others. Teachers and university staff are invited to attend training programmes, which provide participants with solid knowledge on disability: its types, barriers that stem from it and ways to eliminate them.

Policies at the Jagiellonian University reflect the social model of disability which identifies systemic barriers, negative attitudes and exclusion by society (purposely or inadvertently) that means society is the main contributory factor in disabling people. While physical, sensory, intellectual, or psychological variations may cause individual functional limitation or impairments, these do not have to lead to disability unless society fails to take account of and include people regardless of their individual differences

Can we in the ELT world make changes to the way in which these differences are perceived and faced? I say yes. We can not only empower the disabled by facilitating improved access to the classroom (and only a tiny change can make a huge difference), but help open the eyes of the next generation by showing children that persons with disabilities do not have to be an invisible minority, by providing our students with the information necessary to allow them to put themselves in other people's shoes, to understand others and to feel what others feel. If you agree with these sentiments, then you already support the Disabled Access Friendly campaign.