

## Disabled Students in Secondary and Higher Education in Ukraine

Influenced, no doubt, by the development of civil society in Ukraine, a growing orientation to European values, and increasing opportunities for international contact, in December 2009 the government of Ukraine ratified the *Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities*. This was a clear confirmation that the government was committed to protecting the rights of persons with disabilities including rights to education that are outlined in Article 24 of that convention.

Access to higher education for students with disabilities is now a recognized priority in Ukraine; however, if we look at the enrolment of certain categories of citizens in higher education institutions we see that it remains unrepresentative of the general population (Bodnar, 2014; Kolchenko, 2013; Talanchuk, 2015). In the 2013/2014 education year the total number of students at all 4 levels of higher education in Ukraine was 2 053 000. Yet there were fewer than 13,000 students with disabilities among them (Derzhstat, n.d.).

### Concept of Disability in Ukraine

The terminology used in Ukraine in relation to people with disabilities and education has reflected some of the social movement in this area and deserves examination.

Up to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the following Ukrainian words were used to refer to people with disabilities: *kalika* (cripple), *chrometz* (lame person), *slipetz* (blind person), *nem* (deaf person). Then the word *invalid* (invalid) was borrowed from the French (Ivanova, 2000). *Invalid* was first used to identify war veterans only and was then extended to mean any person with physical or mental disability.

One of the reasons that *invalid* is still used in Ukraine in relation to persons with disabilities, special needs, or restricted mobility, lies in the problem of inadequate translation into Russian of the terminology used internationally and borrowed by Ukrainians from the Russian language dominant in the Soviet Union (Kobel, 2014). In Ukraine the differentiation in terminology relating to disabilities is still based on the ability to work or the severity of the illness or disability, which reflects the following logic: disability (leads to) inability to work (leads to) social deficiency (Diachenko, 2003).

Describing the scenario in Ukraine during Soviet times, Malofeev (1998) states that “for decades, the inherent problems faced by children with disabilities were recognized only by their families and those professionals charged with determining the course of their lives” (p.181).

### Legislation and Terminology

Although Ukraine developed its legislation in alignment with the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* where the term ‘disabled child’ was used, the term ‘child-invalid’ was common for most legislation throughout the 21st century. The changes in terms used reflect the evolution in legislation and changes in the society’s awareness of the problem. The terms that were used in laws, decrees, orders, and regulations, by year, include:

- 1991 child-invalid
- 1996 children who need correction of mental or physical development

- 2001-02 children with limited abilities
- 2013 children with invalidity (disability), children with special needs
- 2014 persons with special educational needs is first defined in the Law on Education (Holos Ukrayiny, 2014)

The variety of terms attests to the confusion among politicians and misunderstanding of the term and issue of 'inclusion' by the government. It also demonstrates the dynamics of Ukraine's striving to conform to European norms and values (Benardo & Silber, 2005). For want of appropriate definitions the rhetoric remains muddled.

In 1999 the Ministry of Education of Ukraine and the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences issued the paper *Concept on Special Education State Standards for Children with Special Needs* (herein called the Concept paper) intended to outline the reform of special education (NAPS, 1999). The Concept paper admitted that special schools were insufficient in providing services to the children with special needs and that children with special needs should receive additional instructional support in the regular curriculum context.

In terms of legislation, advancements to develop inclusive education during the period between 2011 and 2014 were very intensive. About 20 different regulations concerned inclusive schooling in the general school setting, including organizational issues, curricula, assessment, loads, and provision of psychological support, pedagogy, and new staff to assist the general school teacher with inclusive schooling (Bodnar, 2014).

## **Social Dimension**

The worlds of elementary and secondary education on the one hand and higher education on the other are fundamentally different with respect to educating students with special needs and/or disabilities. While secondary education is compulsory and no student with a disability may be excluded, access to higher education is selective and many aspirants do not get admitted. Higher education may also release students with disabilities for poor academic performance while secondary education may not.

For decades students with special needs have been disadvantaged in terms of accessing quality higher education. In most higher education institutions in Ukraine, the infrastructure and training of teaching staff does not allow for the participation of students with disabilities. Moreover, the Russian annexation of the Crimea and Russian aggression in Eastern Ukraine have posed additional challenges to ensuring access to post-secondary education in the temporarily occupied territories and for internally displaced people including many people with special needs.

## **Educating Children with Special Needs: Generally held View**

For many years, children with developmental problems, sensory disorders, brain dysfunction and complex disorders were marginalized in the Ukrainian secondary education system. These children were educated in a separate, special school system consisting of institutions, many of which operated as boarding schools for children who lived too far from school to commute every day (Csanyi, 2004). Children with the severe mental or physical disorders were totally excluded from the special school system and were fostered by institutions belonging to the Ministry of Social Policy (Care).

According to the Law on Education (Holos Ukrayiny, 2014), the system of Special Education includes:

- general boarding schools for children that need social care (orphans, children from at risk families);

- special schools (boarding schools) for children who need rehabilitation of mental and/or physical development;
- general education sanatorium schools (boarding schools) for children with poor health who need long term medical treatment.

However, none of the titles of the currently existing “special” schools identifies any specific special need or disability.

In Ukraine 3 different ministries are charged with the responsibility for children with disabilities; each ministry having its own schools, rehabilitation and medical centers and facilities (Derzhstat, n.d., *Open Society*, 2006).

The Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine supervises both general schools and special schools; of which there are:

- 396 special schools with almost 60,000 children,
- 40 educational rehabilitation centers for children with mental or physical disorders,
- 142 special preschool institutions and
- 1200 special education groups in mainstream preschools with 45,000 preschoolers.

Special education remains largely segregated from general education.

The Ministry of Social Policy supervises;

- 298 rehabilitation centers of which
- 208 institutions are early rehabilitation centers for children with developmental disorders and
- 90 centers provide medical, social and professional rehabilitation.

There is a group of special centers that falls within the mandate of the Ministry of Health of Ukraine such as sanatoria. Each ministry pursues its own goals. The Ministry of Education and Science offers educational and correction services. The Ministry of Social Policy pursues social care and renders support and social assistance. The Ministry of Health focuses on health care issues.

The population of children with disabilities has been constantly growing, but the conditions in special schools have been worsening with every year caused by insufficient government funding. However, financing was improved significantly when responsibility for special education schools was transferred from local to oblast authorities.

For decades children were put in special institutions often without special assessment and even without their parents’ consent (Bodnar, 2014; Kobel, 2014). In many cases parents had to withstand significant pressure from state officials if they rejected the special institution services. Because of international agreements and conventions on human rights, the situation is slowly changing. Special education, social protection of children with disabilities, integration and inclusion of the disabled children in general and special education are slowly gaining more national attention (Bodnar).

## **Higher education**

The Ukrainian model of inclusive higher education was first developed at the Open International University of Human Development UKRAINE (Kolchenko & Nikulina, 2013). Its mission, objectives and directions were explained in *The Concept of Inclusive Education for Disabled Students* and published on the university site along with some scholarly publications. However, Ukraine still lacks a national concept for inclusive higher education that would ensure continuous educational services to disabled people. Almost 50% of all disabled students study in the University Ukraine and its 20 countrywide local branches (Kolchenko & Nikulina). Students with disabilities studying in many other

institutions of higher education institutions may receive broadly variable services or, in some cases, none at all.

According to Kolchenko and Nikulina (2013), the greatest concern that university faculty express about their disabled graduates' future is that society is not prepared to accept qualified disabled people as equals, and will ignore their needs and marginalize them again. According to the President's Decree of June 2005 among the priority measures to be taken to provide conditions for disabled persons was the building of ramps in all educational institutions (President Decree, 2005). Among other priorities the decree prescribed the provision of academic support, availability of professional care staff, accommodation adapted to the needs of students with disabilities, and support with day-to-day living intended to meet challenges which faculty and disabled students experience in the classroom. Raver stated that "the notion of systematically providing accommodation for university students with disabilities is foreign to most instructors in Ukrainian colleges and universities. Instructors tend to be at a loss as to how to facilitate learning and evaluate students with disabilities. Some immediately assume that students with visible disabilities such as cerebral palsy or blindness will not be able to manage the academic demands of higher education" (Raver, 2007).

Official statistics says that more than 10% of Ukrainian children have special educational needs; however, they constitute only 1% of the total number of students at vocational schools and less than half percent of university students. Most disabled people who are physically able and mentally capable of attending higher educational institutions can't do so because of the lack of such basic facilities as ramps. Only a few instructors have been trained to work with students with special needs. Inability to get higher education makes prestigious work unreachable for disabled people, too (Karpachova, 2010).

Several attempts by the Ministry of Education have been made to improve the situation in higher education. In 2006 the ministry issued a Ministry Order #504 "On Enrollment and Education of Students with Restricted Physical Abilities" which authorized several higher education institutions to start enrolling deaf and hard of hearing students but only in 7 professions (Ministry of Education, n.d.). As the result of that step the number of deaf students increased, however, it again started declining because of the new procedure of admitting students based on the ZNO-(External Independent Assessment) which replaced the system of entrance examinations. One can infer that the vast majority of secondary school deaf and hard of hearing graduates won't be able to successfully pass the ZNO tests.

Another attempt to improve access to the higher education for individuals with special needs was made in the form of the so-called "Experiment regarding the organization of integrated education for persons with special educational needs in the higher education institutions with I-IV levels of accreditation" by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (order #512 Of 24.04.2012) (MAUP, n.d.). This experiment authorized 13 universities and colleges to start enrolling students with different disabilities and special needs and provided additional funding. No information has been officially published yet on the results of the planned 3 year experiment.

The last point of my presentation is about the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv. On November 1, 2016 a new administrative division named Service for Students with Disabilities was launched. Its development is based on the experience of Western universities. This project is meant to adapt the university educational environment and social infrastructure to the needs of special students and not vice versa.

## Conclusion

In summary, Ukraine continues in its efforts to conform to European disability law; however, the mechanisms to implement and enforce this law are largely ineffective. To reform the special education system and make inclusion a reality, the law has to be economically sustained and have community support. Further, it is necessary to coordinate the work of all relevant Ministries to pursue the national policy and involve other interested groups that can render assistance in removing the barriers to inclusion in the system of higher education. In addition, success in implementing inclusive policies at the secondary education level is almost a pre-condition for the achievement of positive change in the system of post-secondary education of individuals with disabilities and/or special needs.

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