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

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) 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 nondisabled 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. 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 disabilities 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 insight into what 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 experiences.

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 into 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 (to 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.

Students with disabilities have comparable wishes and goals to other students: improving employability, language and life skills, having fun, being more culturally aware. Indeed an impairment 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 disabled students experiences

Students' experiences differ, depending on the nature of their impairment and context. Other countries bring different attitudes towards disability, they may have more or less accessible environments, 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 eye and even smile! In Lithuania, people are often surprised (sometimes mixed with fear) when they see a disabled person in the street.

Sometimes these differences also influence the choice of destination. 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 wanted to tell their stories to make change happen. They wanted 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 identified some things that needed to change:

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- 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 arrange support abroad. Students wanted to be involved in the choice of who would be allocated to provide support. All preferred 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 get on with. Besides support abroad, students highlighted 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.

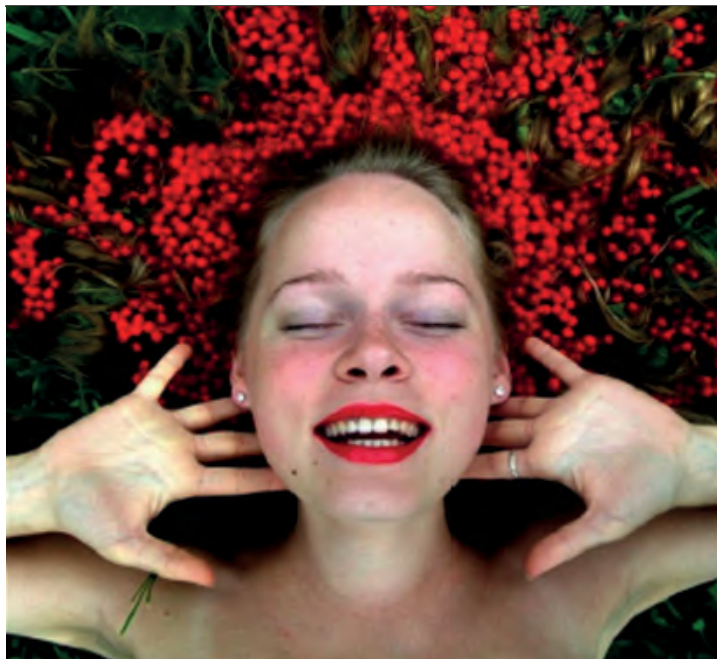
Conclusion

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 mentioned at some points they were faced with barriers and challenges. The biggest barrier was the lack of information on how international opportunities might be made accessible. It isn't always easy to find the correct information. They also mentioned it wasn't always easy to find assistance and they wanted to be involved in the decision-making process throughout, particularly in relation to who would 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 realise more inclusive international experiences.

Glimpse on the portrait of Laima

Besides the analysis of emerging themes, the students' stories were represented in personalised portraits based on the research method of 'portraiture' as outlined by Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997).



Laima

Erasmus: Am I able to go?

I started to dream about Erasmus in early spring.

I kept my dream to myself and no one knew about this.

I didn't want to talk about it out loud,

because of the idea that if everyone knows a dream,
it will not come true.

'Am I able to go?'

was the first question on my mind when I began to think about
going abroad.

For me, all the things in my life happen so easily.

I just need to dream a little about what I want to happen and it
becomes true.

I wasn't afraid to dream,

but when I was reading offers from my home university to go
abroad I always noticed the sentences with extra information for
people with disabilities.

Well just one sentence, and one main question that kept coming
back:

'Am I able to go?'

Still I stayed positive.

Thinking positive comes rather naturally to me.

And I know that I could not reach half of the things I have now
without this way of thinking.

Acknowledgements

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The ACCESS & Inclusion Expert Group of EAIE, the LINKnetwork and SIHO are gathering tips to 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 [personalised portraits](#).
- Find more information on the emergent themes and the research in 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 Community](#)

References

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

Lawrence-Lightfoot, S., & Hoffmann Davis, J. (1997). The Art and Science of Portraiture. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc.



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Ann Heelan is a consultant on Inclusive Education Practice and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) for all students. Originally a teacher and then CEO of AHEAD for 20 Years, she has a track record of working in collaboration with national and international organisations to improve the opportunities and rights of students with disabilities in education. She has written on topics such as "Building Inclusive Learning Spaces," "Getting Started with UDL," "Inclusive Study Abroad," "Accessible Assessment," "Developing your UDL Practice," and "Building Communities of UDL Practice."

In her role in AHEAD, Ann established learning networks with staff in further and higher education, to support them to work together to make their practice more inclusive of students with disabilities. She was the winner of the Miriam Van Acker Award for Innovation in Inclusive Education in 2017, which recognises leadership in promoting inclusive practice for students with disabilities in tertiary education and employment.

Since 2020 she has been working with SOLAS on behalf of AHEAD to research and write the SOLAS publication on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) for FET which SOLAS are due to be published in early in 2021.

She now runs a [Consultancy Service supporting staff in tertiary education](#) to get started and reduce the barriers for individual students and to develop UDL practice across the institution.



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This article appeared in the AHEAD Journal. Visit www.ahead.ie/journal for more information
