

## Information Access for Disabled Students

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### **Abstract**

Disabled students who makes relatively small part of the academic society are in risk to disappear among all other students, due to their communication and mobility difficulties have less possibilities to satisfy their needs, ensuring their rights to qualitative studies, equal opportunities in the labor market and social integration.

A topic about information accessibility for disabled students is extremely important because of their information exclusion in their study process at the universities.

The purpose of this presentation is to reveal the information access possibilities and perspectives for disabled university students in Lithuania. The main task of this work is on the basis of legal documents which regulate equal rights of disabled people to information access, and running programs of European Union and European Blind Union for disabled people to find out how services are provided to disabled students at the Vilnius University. For this reason a study was undertaken at the Vilnius University Library information centre for disabled people "Odisėjas" to find out needs, possibilities and perspectives of the disabled students to information access.

Questionnaire type study analyzing the needs of disabled people in higher education was undertaken. It was concluded that a propitious law basis for disabled people is developed in Lithuania. The laws seek to guarantee equal right to information, rights to protection from discrimination, and to decrease social isolation.

The Vilnius University Library is the first academic library in Lithuania which provides the modern technologies and software for disabled students at the centre "Odisėjas" in Lithuania.

### **Introduction**

Disabled people are equal participants of all social and economical life segments. Information accessibility is considered as crucial part of this life. The right to information accessibility is accepted internationally and should be realised at national level in each country of the world. Disabled, as equal society members, have right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, art. 19).

Even more attention require information needs of disabled students and possibilities for fulfilling those needs. In most cases their information needs are fulfilled only partly, eliminating possibility for disabled students of equally competition in the labor market and social integration. In order to know how necessary conditions for information accessibility for disabled students in Lithuania are created the case of Vilnius University Library „Odisejas“ information centre for disabled is analysed.

### **Legal and organizational background**

European Union is striving to make information services accessible to disabled people. Important organization for visually impaired people is European Association of Blind (EAB). It is nongovernmental and nonprofit institution. The EAB main aims are:

- to act for the good of blind and visually impaired people;
- change information and experience with European forum for disabled;
- encourage blindness prevention in Europe.

There are 44 members in the EAB nowadays. Important trend of activity of EAB is recommendations of information accessibility for visually impaired people.

European convention of human rights (art. 10) (<http://www.un.it>), Universal Declaration of Human Rights, (art. 19) (<http://www.leidykla.eu>) declare, that everybody has right for expression of personal thoughts and conviction, have freedom to receive and disseminate information and their ideas (<http://www.hrmi.it>).

There is huge amount of initiatives, programmes, projects running on the international level. The period for information accessibility assurance cover almost ten years. Some of the initiatives are presented below:

- TIDE initiative (Technology Initiative for Disabled and Elderly, 1991-1997);
- 4 Framework Program (Technology Application Program TAP); 5 Framework Program Applications for Persons with Special Needs including the Disabled and Elderly; 6, 7 Framework Programs;
- Leonardo da Vinci Program (ACCELERATE – Access to the Modern Library Services for the Blind and Partial Sighted People);
- Lifelong learning programmes (Comenius, Erasmus, Gruntvig, Leonardo da Vinci).

Republic of Lithuania laws regulate legal situation for disabled people. Laws and international legal acts make legal basis for their activities in Lithuania. They talk about equal rights and possibilities for disabled people, indicate principles of social integration of disabled people and stress importance of creation of appropriate information environment (Law of social integration of disabled people in Lithuania). Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania, art. 25, says: „, person has a right to have your conviction and present them freely; nobody can prevent to seek, receive and promote information and ideas“.

Visual disability is the most often met disability in Lithuania. Nowadays there are near ten organizations and foundations, which take care of blind and visually impaired persons. Main organizations, taking care of blinds and their information needs in Lithuania, are:

- Lithuanian Association of the Blind and Visually Impaired,
- Lithuanian Library for the Blind,
- Lithuanian Association of The Blind Innovation,
- LASUC (Lithuanian Centre for Education of Blind and Visually Impaired People).

Lithuanian Association for disabled people is the biggest and most active organization for people with movement disability.

Lithuanian Republic institutions of different levels are responsible for integration of disabled people into the society: government itself and ministries (Ministry of Social security and labor, Ministry of education and science, Ministry of health), municipalities etc.

### **Information Access for disabled students**

Most of the countries (Belgia, Canada, Great Britain) recognized the need for creation of information and learning environment for the disabled people in the end of twenty century. Therefore, universities and other higher schools are prepared for students with disability studying today. Orientation of the whole study environment, as well as study programmes, to disabled students particularity and their needs are the focal point for many countries.

There are some criteria, which guide disabled students when chose universities or schools for their studies: services correspondation to specific disabled requirements; the size of the community of students with disabilities at a certain school, their attitudes etc.; study possibilities for desirable profesion and quality of studies. One of the main criterion – level of adaptation of studying process to the specific needs of disabled students. Disabled students usually do not choose university which do not inform about opportunities to study for disabled.

Vilnius University Library (VUL, <http://www.mb.vu.lt>), having one of the biggest collection among Lithuanian libraries (about 5,3 mln.), and being one of the oldest libraries not only in Lithuania, but in East Europe as well, had recognize the significance of the matter. VUL is integrated part of the study process at VU. There were no any special possibilities for disabled students at Vilnius University before, and they had very limited possibilities to information access. Accordingly, several years ago project „Equal possibilities to information access for disabled people. ODISEJAS“ was prepared and realized at Vilnius University. It was UNESCO and it's program „Information and communication“ which helped to implement the idea of the centre into reality. Several Lithuanian associations and Vilnius University and the Library itself have made financial input too.

### **Information centre for disabled people „Odisėjas“**

There are 60 disabled students at Vilnius University presently. Anyway it is not much, but it is probability to grow, because of growing number of student annually. Unique centre in Lithuania was established at Vilnius University Library.

### **Library technique for disabled**

Centre „Odisėjas“ is offering a range of special equipment for disabled students. It has all necessary modern technology, which is necessary for disabled students: 3 computer-integrated workplaces for people, who have various disabilities: for blinds, weak-eyed, people with disturbed movement, also, one computer-integrated workplace with electronic loupe. They can access internet, some data bases (EBSCO, JSTOR, Emerald Fulltext, Zentralblatt MATH, IEEE/IEL, Cambridge Journal Online, ProQuest, Science Direct, Springer Link, ISI WEB of Knowledge) and electronic library catalogue using computer technologies. One computer is fitted to the persons with small motor disorder. There is worklace for blind people. Special computer programe Jaws allows not only to listen computer reading text, but also to hear all meniu comands, fail names, etc. Jaws programe can read text in english, russian and also other languages. „Odisėjas“ has sound books reader.

Another computerized workplace is for weak-eyed. It is software „Magic“, which allows enlarge and more easy read text. All blinds visitors of the Centre have opportunity to print useful information from computer using Braille printer. Special programs can give information in desirable documents formats: in Braille; increased type; literature can be scanned; texts can be read by using adaptational programmes; all users can get consultation and help from employees of the Centre.

So, nowadays information centre for disabled people „Odisėjas“ provides these services:

- internet access,
- access to electronic Vilnius University Library resources,
- opportunity to order documents in traditional format from Vilnius University Library stacks,
- scanning service,
- printing with Braille printer.

All services in information centre is free of charge.

The information centre for disabled people „Odisėjas“ has an internet page (see Vilnius University website (<http://www.vu.lt>)).

### **Research „ The need for use Vilnius University Library information centre for disabled people „Odisėjas“**

In 2007 during the period of February – March, questionnaire research was performed. The main purpose of the research was to find out the needs of the disabled people for services and possibilities offered at the Vilnius University Library information centre for disabled people „Odisėjas“.

#### *Method of research*

The questionnaire method was used for this research. Questions were ranged into three groups:

- information about disabled students needs to use the library;
- information about the disabled needs to use Vilnius University Library information centre for disabled people „Odisėjas“;
- information about respondent.

The questionnaire consists from 20 questions. All questions are closed; some of them offer an opportunity to present your opinion.

#### *Respondents*

19 Vilnius University disabled students were interviewed. They have movement and visual disabilities. Finally, questionnaires from 12 (9 boys and 3 girls) (64 % from total) disabled students from Vilnius University were received.

#### *Results*

All disabled students were bachelor level students, except one postgraduate. The main questions of this research were following:

- *How often do you visit the library?* 7 (58 %) students visit the library one time per month, several times per year – 5 (42 %) students. Nobody did note, not to use the library at all (see Figure 1)

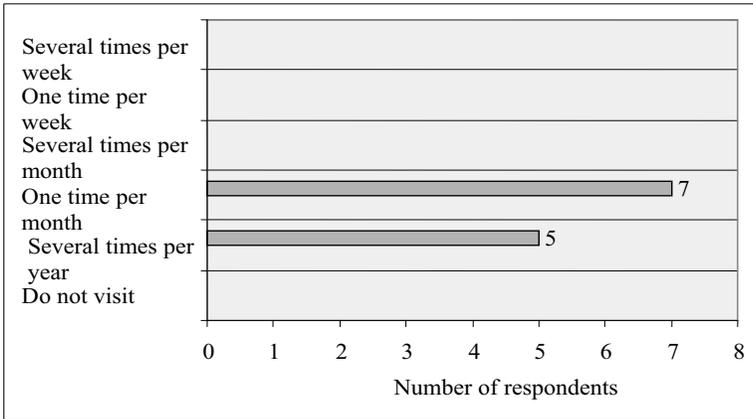


Figure 1: Disabled students library visiting.

- *Why do you usually visit library?* Study purposes are the main aim in visiting Vilnius University library for all respondents. Nobody do not go to library for leisure time.
- *If you need information, where do you look for it first of all?* 4 (33 %) students said, that first of all they use library services. 8 (67 %) students search information in the internet at home. Some students use electronic books and <http://www.emeraldinsight.com> website.
- *Which library services do you use?* Respondents were asked about using of these services: special information technologies, loan, internet, reading-room, librarian consultation, printing, copying. All respondents use loan. Two students use internet, 9 – reading-room, printing and copying services and librarian consultation use 4 students. Nobody uses special technologies (see Figure 2).

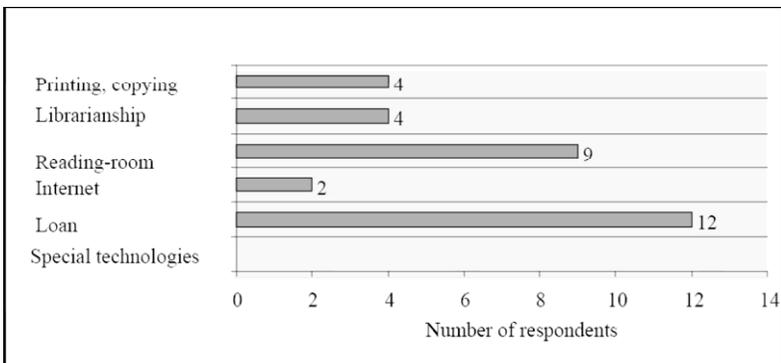


Figure 2: Services of library, which use students.

- *Do you visit information centre for disabled people „Odisėjas“ at Vilnius University Library?* No one student visit information centre „Odisėjas“. Some of respondents have heard about „Odisėjas“ first time.
- *Do you feel the lack of information about information centre for disabled people at Vilnius University Library „Odisėjas“ and it's services?* 7 (58 %) students have no information about „Odisėjas“. 5 (42 %) respondents have information about information centre for disabled people „Odisėjas“ (see Figure 3).

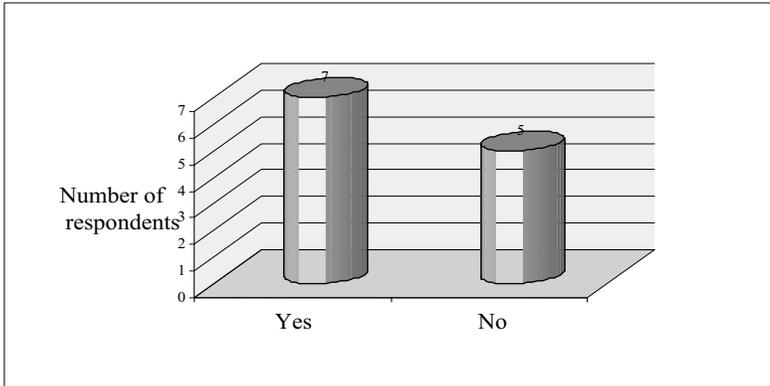


Figure 3: Respondents information about “Odisėjas“.

- *What is main problem of information centre „Odisėjas“ according to your opinion?* 3 (25 %) students indicated low environment adaptation. 2 (17 %) respondents indicated social exclusion and the lack of information.

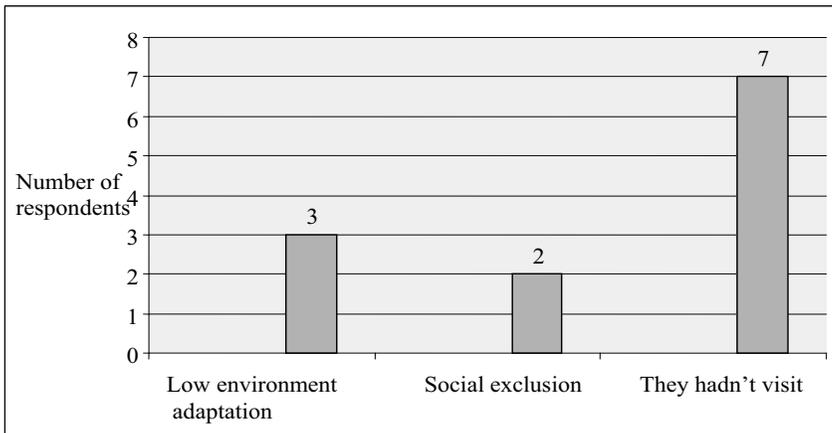


Figure 4: Main problems of the centre “Odisėjas“.

- *Do you visit similar information centres like „Odisėjas“?* No one student use similar information centre for disabled people.

Disabled students indicated in general, that they need more information about the centre „Odisėjas“, and more intensive advertisement and promotion of its services and possibilities. Some of respondents have mentioned inconvenience of the place of „Odisėjas“.

### Conclusions

At present there are variety of institutions that offer information services for disabled people. The European Blind Union is actively working on questions of reducing the social exclusion. The European Union is aiming to make all services more accessible for disabled people. The problems of information access are included in all the educational programmes recently developed in different countries of the European Union. The Lithuanian Student Union is taking an active part in developing of integration processes into studies for people with various disabilities. Vilnius University Library is the first academic library in Lithuania in providing the modern technologies and software for disabled students.

The most important outcome of the research aiming to investigate the evolution processes of adaptation of information environment and ensuring information accessibility for disabled students at VUL could be named as following:

- need for the centre for disabled students is obvious (legal basis; international dimensions – attitudes, experience and good examples),
- realization of the idea – establishing of the Centre has taken place at VUL,
- analysis of potential users (disabled students) and their needs for information services,
- it could serve as a basis for next steps of development of the Centre in fulfilling special needs of disabled,
- recommendations for more intensive information campaign about information services and activities of the Centre in a whole should be prepared.

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