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Reconceptualising the idea of participation of students with

disabilities in higher education system

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According to UNESCO (1994), participation of students with disabilities in mainstream schools, as well as in higher education, is an important goal. Students with disabilities in Croatia are guaranteed equal access to higher education. However, still remains a complex social, political and cultural challenge, since their physical presence in the classroom is often taken as an indicator of equal opportunity to participate in all aspects of student's life, and it is perceived as a sign of their psychological, physical and social well-being. Being present at lectures does not mean that a student is included; on the contrary, it can lead into further isolation. On the other hand, responding appropriately to the needs of students with disability (Beaumont and Cemlyn, 2005) promotes good practice for all students and the whole academic community.

Until recently, disability was seen as an individual and dominantly medical problem. Today, in the 21st century we claim that disability is not the cause of many disadvantages that people with disability experience in every day life, as well as in higher education. We blame society for failing to accommodate the needs of people with disability, relying on the concept of independent living as a theoretical answer and practical solution to the problem of disability (Oliver, 1998; Barnes, 2002; Barnes, Oliver and Barton, 2002; Shakespeare, 2006). The aim of this paper is to explore the tensions within the concept of guaranteed equal access" and

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develop a better understanding of opportunities and challenges arising from the inclusion of students with disabilities into the process of higher education, focusing on the results of research on experiences of students with disabilities from the University of Zagreb .

Introduction

There are numerous definitions determining the content, purpose and principles of the empowerment process. The common feature of the mentioned theoretical foundations of the empowerment process is the fact that it is a deliberate, planned process in the community with the purpose to enable individuals or groups a more efficient access to the community's resources, better control over their own lives and greater inclusion in the life of the community in general.

Some authors (Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman et al., 1992; in Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995) mention the importance of critical understanding of the environment by individuals and groups in the empowerment process. Others (Payne, 1997, 2005 and Gutiérrez, Parsons and Cox, 2003) focus more on the importance of transferring power from the environment to the individual, i.e. group. The transfer of power is understood as an action which, according to Saleebey (1997, in Čačinović Vogrinčić et al., 2007, p. 9) means the following: „Practicing from a strength orientation means this - everything you do as a social worker will be predicated, in some way, on helping to discover and embellish, explore and exploit clients' strength and resources in the service of assisting them to achieve their goals, realize their dreams and shed the irons of their own inhibitions and misgivings. The formula is simple: mobilize clients' strengths (talent, knowledge, capacities) in the service of achieving their goals and visions and the clients will have a better quality of life on their terms".

To have the right to participate means to have an equal position in negotiations, agreements and interventions as well as an equal possibility of analysis from one's own perspective. However, the level of users' inclusion can span from the so called (1) manipulative level, where the users are not informed and they do not have an understanding of the meaning of actions and processes they are invited to, and serve as "decoration", 2) tokenism level, where

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the user is asked to express his/her opinion but the user himself/herself does not know to which extent he/she can be personal and critical in describing certain experience and what the consequences of such actions are, (3) the level of informed consent of the user to participate; (4) the level of common initiative of the user and the professional, and finally (5) the level at which the users take initiative whereby the professionals are invited to participate but they are not in charge of implementing the ideas (Urbanc, 2008; Urbanc, Kletečki Radović and Delale 2009).

Croft and Beresford (1994, in Payne, 1997) argue that inclusion is a very important approach since people wish and have the right to participate in the decision-making process and in procedures concerning them. The inclusion of users reflects the key values of social work. A greater responsibility leads towards more efficient services and helps in attaining social work objectives.

At the theoretical level, Croft and Beresford (1994, in Payne, 1997) consider that the practice of inclusion of users consists of four elements: (1) empowerment – enables the users to make decisions on the issues concerning their lives and presents a challenge to repression; (2) control – includes defining personal needs and influences decision making and planning; (3) power - "equips" the users with personal resources for taking over the power, for example by gathering information, the development of trust, self-esteem, self-confidence, expectations, knowledge and skills; (4) resources – organization of services by activation of resources in the community in a way that they become open for the inclusion of users. The ultimate purpose of the participatory approach is to achieve a better feeling of personal security, greater social and political equality, greater inclusion in the community life and, generally, the promotion of social justice.

Theoretical context for understanding participation

From the historical point of view, social policy and social work have made a huge impact on people's lives, particularly on the lives of people deprived of fundamental rights due to poverty, disability or oppression based on diversity of all kinds and a lack of power over their

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own lives). However, the history of non-participative practice in social work and social policy is long, based on a paternalistic approach and top-down process of decision making and provision of services.

Twenty five years ago and more, the dominant paradigm in social work and other helping professions was based on the expert position of professionals, on state control and an uneven distribution of power. The state was reluctant to empower «other subjects» to engage in dialogue and participate in the process. It took a long time for some basic prerequisites to be developed in order to initiate some cultural and professional changes in direction of new concepts of providing and receiving services within the helping profession.

The former top-down socialist approach in social work and related sciences supported a strong dichotomy between experts and service users until the present times (Zaviršek 1995; Zaviršek 2001; Hessle and Zaviršek 2005): professionals have "expertise" and "knowledge" while service users only have "experiences". The latter have been seen as too personal and emotional, and much too subjective to be able to provide an "objective" truth. At the same time expertise and knowledge have been perceived as an objective truth that can be generalised. One of the main challenges in developing service users' involvement in cultural traditions of Eastern Europe was the demand for a paradigm shift within the professional culture. Seeing service users only as demanding and "with problems" is the major cultural obstacle which prevents the development of service users' participation in service conceptualization and planning (Zaviršek 1999; Džombić and Urbanc, 2009).

As for social policy and social work, it goes far beyond the academic level, and even academic training cannot be perceived in isolation from direct practice (Burgess and Taylor, 2005). A huge part of training for social policy and social work should be performed in practice settings (institutions, NGOs, agencies, Centers for social care, user-run organisations, etc.). Therefore, the involvement of participants (students, service users, teachers, decision makers, etc.) should not be neglected. According to Bray and Preston Shoot, (1995), social policy does not have a long tradition of citizen involvement on the level of direct practice, and they wonder just how enthusiastically social policy as an academic discipline has

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embraced the ideas of user involvement and participation. As for social work, user participation is still very limited, although, at least on a declarative level, identified as one of priorities (Beresford, 2005).

Legal framework, concept of disability and participation

Until recently, disability was seen as an individual and dominantly medical problem. Today, in the 21st century we claim that disability is not the cause of many disadvantages that people with disability experience in every day life, as well as in higher education (Barnes, Oliver and Barton, 2002). According to UNESCO (1994), participation of students with disabilities in mainstream schools, as well as in higher education is an important goal. Students with disabilities in Croatia are guaranteed equal access to higher education. However, still remains a complex social, political and cultural challenge, since their physical presence in the classroom is often taken as an indicator of equal opportunity to participate in all aspects of student's life, and it is perceived as a sign of their psychological, physical and social well-being. Beeing present at the lectures does not mean yet that a student is included; on the contrary, it can lead into further isolation. On the other hand, responding appropriately to the needs of students with disabilities (Beaumont and Cemlyn, 2005) promotes good practice for all students and the whole academic community.

In 1944 a "special protection" for disabled people in Britain was established by the Education Act and the Disabled Persons Act. Employers were required of a substantial number of employees to employ a quota of people with disability. As a result, only five agencies in Britain met the quota requirement (Fredman, 2002.).

In 1995 the Disability Discrimination Act seemed to bring more effective legal protection – it was against the law to discriminate disabled people in the field of employment, provision of goods, facilities and services, education and property. The Act was characterised as not comprehensive and strong enough concerning civil rights policy, based on the grounds for sex and race discrimination, but much weaker. However, a requirement for reasonable

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adjustments is specific for the disability issue, and should not be grouped with other grounds or forms of discrimination (Vanhala, 2006).

In 1999 the Disability Rights Commission was established, enabling the writing of Codes of Practice to enforce the rights of the disabled. Basic difference was the importance of a positive duty on employers to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate people with disabilities, instead of compromising able-bodied norms as a precondition for protection. In 2004 significant modifications were introduced to the DDA in order to bring it in line with the EU legal framework. A huge challenge in establishing the EU anti-discrimination policy was the fact that disability issues were within the areas in which the EU did not have enough power or influence – social policy, welfare, rehabilitation. After the European Disability Forum was established – an association of member state disability groups, based on the civil rights model of disability - the issue of disability has become the main resource for developing non-discrimination policies, such as in the context of race and gender (Vanhala, 2006).

A short overview of the British example was given here because it had an important role in opening a dialogue on non-discrimination issues in the early 1990s within the EU. However, the law itself does not lead to social change – it enables decision making and serves as a long-term goal to the issue of discrimination (Vanhala, 2006). On the other hand, deconstructing disability as the ground of discrimination and focusing on the rights based model of disability, as well as on economic benefit (it is "bad for schools, universities, firms" to refuse or be unwilling to stop discriminatory practices and to make reasonable adjustments for people with disabilities). So, the concept of rights-based rethinking of disability instead of charity and paternalistic approach, besides the normative dimension, was strongly influenced by disability rights movement and organisations of disabled people (Oliver, 1988). Therefore, deconstructing the concept of disability by providing the legal framework and empowering organisations of people with disability as rights-holders has created the tools to enforce the rights for disabled people in the area of education, what is presented in the next sub-section.

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The over-arching legal and policy background for the EU is shaped by the European Disability Action Plan 2003-2010 (which is focused on mainstreaming disability issues within all relevant EU policies), and the new EU Disability Strategy 2010-2020,, which emphasises equal access to quality education and lifelong learning as key factors in enabling full participation in society. This Plan echoes the key principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which highlights the importance of education. However, implementation of legal regulations and policies in practice is problematic. This is why the system of organization and support for students with disabilities varies considerably across the EU countries. The reason for this lies in the fact that in most EU countries, unlike primary and secondary education, providing support for persons with disabilities in higher education is optional, and is largely left to individual institutions and their interpretations of adequate support (Arcola Research LLP, 2012).

In the American society, awareness about the need for classroom adaptation for students with different kinds of disabilities has been developed to the extent that school libraries collect audio materials and materials in Braille for students with visual impairments, and offer amplifiers to make lectures more available to students with hearing impairments. Schools provide reading services for blind students and translation services for students with hearing impairments. Rehabilitation programs provide additional types of equipment for adjustment and personal services to students with all types of disabilities. A program of independent living, which is run by users themselves, provides assistance to students in the support system outside the university to facilitate regular class attendance and employment, in the future (Vash and Crewe, 2010)

In the European Union, mainly support for students with disabilities is focused on three main areas: financial support (support for higher education institutions and support for students); accessibility and mobility (architectural accessibility and transport services) and technical and pedagogical support (different services such as free photocopying of teaching and lecture materials, transcribing recorded lectures, documents in Braille, taking an e-exam, note-taker) (Arcola Research LLP, 2012).

The experience of other countries (Slovenia, Poland and Montenegro) indicates that the support for students with disabilities is provided on several levels: university level, individual

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faculties and the civil sector. The University of Ljubljana provides help and support to students with disabilities through the system of tutelage, while associations of persons with disabilities organize transportation services (transportation services for students with disabilities are mostly organized by the Association of students with disabilities Slovenia) (Univerza v Ljubljani, 2011).

As part of the project "University for All", University in Warsaw, established the Office for People with Disabilities in 2000 as a response to an increasing number of people with disabilities and those who suffer from chronic diseases included in the higher education system (Office for Persons with Disabilities, 2009.). Montenegro in its legal system integrated a number of ethical and legal structures with the aim to promote an '"inclusive education system" (through the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its Protocol and instruments such as the Strategy of integration of persons with disabilities in the 2008-2016 period and the Act on prohibition of discrimination of persons with disabilities adopted in 2011 (Arcola Research LLP, 2012).

The Republic of Croatia, as a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, took over the role of improving the situation of persons with disabilities in society. Therefore, it has the responsibility to grant the right of persons with disabilities to education and ensure an inclusive education system and lifelong learning. In accordance with the above mentioned, Croatia is committed to ensuring people with disabilities to be included in the general education system on the basis of their disability, to provide access to general tertiary education, vocational training and lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis with others, as well as to provide reasonable accommodation for students with disabilities. However, the practice on Croatian universities shows a lack of teachers' knowledge of approaching students with disabilities as well as their opinion that the student may be excused of some assignments, rather than finding an alternative approach to the assessment of his or her (Ombudsman for Persons with Disabilities, 2011).

Out of more than 65,000 students currently enrolled at the University of Zagreb, only 330 are registered as students with disabilities, which makes up about 5 per thousand (2012). In order to enable all potential students with disability to study, in 2007 the University established the Office for students with disability as a referral centre for providing information and direct

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help. Its responsibilities include: informing students and teachers; facilitating international cooperation, creating a data base of students with disabilities; activities for increasing accessibility, meeting specific needs of SD for attending lectures and learning (transport, adjustment of literature, providing sign language interpretation services, personal assistance...) (University of Zagreb, Office for Students with Disabilities, 2012). Furthermore, the Office coordinates the Tempus project EDUQUALITY (2010-2013). The main aim of the project is to equalize opportunities in higher education for students with disabilities in the Republic of Croatia. In order to achieve this goal, three objectives have been set: enhancement of support for students with disabilities in Croatian universities; initiation of creation of national standards and guidelines for development of accessibility of higher education for students with disabilities; and ensuring of accessibility, sustainability and quality of a system of support equalization (Eduquality, 2011). Finally, it has to be noted that a constant support of NGOs also provides a vital resource for students with disability.

The research

The aim of the research was to explore, describe and analyse the experiences of students with disability in the course of their study at the University of Zagreb. We were interested in defining the resources (personal characteristics, motives, knowledge, family, peers, community and university support) that were helpful to them to enrol in the university and pursue their studies.
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Research questions were focused on the following: students' motivation to enrol in the university; students' experience at the beginning of classes; of class attendance and assignments; everyday life in the campus; accessibility of information, buildings, teachers and administration; formal sources of help available to them; suggestions for possible improvements in the quality of education from the perspective of students with disabilities.

Ten students with disabilities in their final semester before graduation participated in the research. They were recruited through a written invitation, and after responding to the letter, they were asked to join the focus group. The focus group method was chosen in order to

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explore different aspects of experiences of students with disabilities and to expand our understanding of the challenges of studying with the experience of disability. Two focus groups were carried out: one consisting of blind students and students with visual impairment (1 male; 4 female students) and the other group consisting of students with the experience of physical disability (4 males; 1 female student).

A qualitative data analysis of participants' statements was conducted at several stages by using the procedure of open coding[1] (Mesec, 1998; Maxwell, 1996;): (1) in order to systematise empirical data, we have used recorded materials from focus groups, made transcripts, paraphrased participants' quotes and underlined these quotes, clustering them around research questions; (2) open coding procedure consisted of the following: identifying particular terms in data and labelling and grouping them around the same research questions; (3) further steps included categorisation of terms, naming the categories at the more abstract level than the one they denote and analysis of their meaning.

Detailed results with an example of the procedure used in data analysis can be provided by authors upon request.

Findings

Students with disabilities and their motivation to study

Basic motivation for students to enrol in the university was their interest in a particular field (political science, arts, journalism, etc.) but also their personal aspirations (desire for progress, learning and knowledge), and personal resources (communicational skills, emotions attached to a specific profession and field, persistence and desire for achievement). Students with visual impairments have discussed restraints in choosing their future profession and reported a lack of knowledge and skills required for admission to a particular faculty, based on the fact that they were not provided with sufficient preparation for entrance exams. Students with visual impairments also reported a lack of support and encouragement from their families and high school teachers when deciding on their further education.

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[1] Open coding is a process of examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data (Mesec, 1998; Maxwell, 1996).

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The perspective of a «better future» served as a motivation for both groups of students, but there were differences in their interpretation of the future. Students with physical impairments referred to better employment opportunities and easier life *(«...if you want a better life for yourself, you are forced to go further, to study..»,* whereas students with visual impairments pointed to poor employment opportunities for those holding just a high school degree. Most of the participants with visual impairments were educated for non-competitive professions (for instance, a telephonist), usually in specialized, segregated institutions for education and rehabilitation for visually impaired children and youth. Students with physical disabilities reported that they chose to study because they were not ready to start working just after high school; or that studying was an effective way to deal with boredom; or that it was logical to continue with higher education after graduation from high school. Students with disabilities have different expectations of higher education: some think of it to be a natural sequence in their personal development, while others perceive it as a kind of psychological rehabilitation (Goode, 2007). Students with visual impairments stress the importance of environmental support *(«A high school teacher encouraged me to study philosophy, saying I was talented ...so I have enrolled the Faculty of philosophy;»);* or a lack of it *(«My high school teacher wondered if I could manage it... studying art was very difficult, she said...»).*

Individual experiences at the beginning of university education
Transition into higher education is a big step for every young person in developing his/her personal and professional identity. For students with disabilities this means they need to have a stronger social network than their colleagues without disabilities (Goode, 2007).. Students with physical impairments emphasized only negative emotions: chaos and fear due to their lack of information and sufficient knowledge about the higher education system. At the same time, students with visual impairments highlighted both positive (euphoria, positive state of shock, new things, challenges) and negative emotions (financial worries and lack of information, traumatic experiences) *(«I was really stressed out, I even got a diabetes due to a stress, but I recovered later...but it took some time.»)* .

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The participants perceived the university and NGOs such as «Step» (Korak) and «Bat» (Šišmiš)[2] as the main sources of information for orientation before the beginning of university education. On the other hand, they saw «Imagine» (Zamisli) as an organization providing help and information to first-year students with disabilities (orientation week, mobility and transport, literature adjustment[3]).

Students with physical impairments identified good orientation and communication skills as the resources that helped them during their first year, while students with visual impairments emphasized the ability to recuperate and personal persistence. Other studies show that social support and personal characteristics (such as firmness, determination, and devotion) are perceived as protective factors in the life of a person with disabilities (Leutar, Štambuk, Rusac 2007.).

Students with disability have experienced different reactions of teachers concerning their presence in the class: different levels of teachers' readiness and competence to work with a student with disability, discouragement, indifference, kindness, helpful initiative and equal criteria for all students. They also pointed to the need to educate teachers to work with students with disabilities, as well as the importance of getting teachers to know students with disabilities at the beginning of the course, and agreement between teachers and students with disabilities about teaching and assessment adjustments. Students thought that many teachers have difficulties in approaching students with disabilities and talking to them because of insufficient knowledge of disability, fear and prejudice. Also, some have experienced that teachers are ready to reduce the workload and lower criteria for students with disabilities, instead of finding alternative ways of participation (Ombudsman for persons with disability RH 2011.).

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[2] The association of visually impaired students „Bat" was founded in 2001. The association of students with physical disabilities „Step" was established in 2002 but it is no no longer active.
[3] Imagine is an association carrying out the program *Center for the support of students with disabilities*. It provides support in class attendance and performing college tasks by organizing transportation, adjusting literature, giving personal assistance to students with disabilities and typewriting for students with hearing impairments as well as providing information, advice and help through the program *Cuonselling for the youth with disabilities*

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Students with physical impairments have stressed the importance of transportation organisation, seeing «Imagine» as an example of good practice. Besides two vehicles owned by «Imagine»[4], students with disability in Zagreb can use public transportation (there are ten vehicles available for adults with disabilities [5], while in some European countries transport is provided by the university[6] (Office for Persons with Disabilities, 2009).

Students with physical impairments have reported various difficulties at the beginning of their university education, due to a lack of motivation for learning, being unaccustomed to life in a big city, and living on their own *(«My first year was full of hangover, it was funny, haven't done a single exam, though...honestly, I did not care much about it»)*. Students with visual impairments did not mention these problems.

Both groups have stressed the importance of support from teachers, family members and room-mates at the beginning of university education, but also from the faculty in general (for example, mobility within the campus and the faculty, literature provision and adjustment). Students with physical impairments have mentioned the importance of establishing relations with their colleagues and pointed to the reactions of their colleagues: from being surprised to getting close to each other and making friends *(«We were pretty much on our own...it was always easier for me to ask somebody I knew from before to walk me to the library or elsewhere...than to ask some of the new colleagues...»)*.

Experiences of class attendance and assignments
Students with visual impairments have reported a lack of teachers' knowledge and experience in contacting students with disabilities as well as their lack of sensibility and compassion for students' needs *(«I had to go by myself and explain my needs to every single professor. It was irritating»)*. Goode (2007) writes about disabled students' traumatic experiences at the beginnings of their university education, indicating that once they overcome these

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[4] In 2012./2013. There were 31 users of transportation services organized by association «Imagine».
[5] According to Regulations on the organization of transport for people with disabilities (2004.), persons who are entitled to transport are persons which arethose using wheel-chairs and having severe motoric disabilities 'teškim motoričkim smetnjama'. Also, escort is entiteled to that transport, under administrative borders of Zagreb to airport Zagreb.

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experiences, they carry on to the next semester. There is a question of how many students give up during their first year because of insufficient support and lack of compassion. On the other hand, the importance of teachers' previous experience with students with disabilities (in their first contact and also later, during lectures) was recognised as very important. More experience resulted in higher level of teachers' competence, understanding and cooperation, and made it easier for the student with disability.

This research has shown that the students were mostly left on their own in the matter of class attendance and participation. According to the participants, the only support they received was the service of personal assistance for students with disabilities provided by "Imagine" (This NGO has been providing this service in the area of Zagreb since 2008). Personal assistant is a trained student, continuously supervised by an outside supervisor and supported by a project team, who helps students with disabilities in attending classes and performing tasks that they could not perform independently. Basic support is needed in: mobility, class attendance, introducing faculty staff with a student and his/her needs during study, providing help in learning process, support during exams, information and technical support for realization of students' rights. (Pravilnik za asistenciju studentima s invaliditetom (2009.)

Students with visual impairments have mentioned the use of alternative methods and assistive technology, such as tape recording, taking notes with the Braille Notetaker (due to the constant battery charging, sometimes it was impossible to use it), and the Parkins typing machine because it was impossible to use it during the class). Students with visual impairments had experience of independent note taking and also, with a help from their colleagues, they were able to read the blackboard. Both groups of students said they used to borrow, copy or rewrite notes from classmates.

Students with physical disabilities reported they have tried to memorise lectures, and copied their classmates' or teachers' notes. They emphasised the importance of regular attendance and elevators as essential prerequisites for studying. Both groups of students either studied independently for exams or needed assistance or technology backup. Also, students with

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visual impairments have mentioned teachers' involvement in the pre-exam period (individual approach during consultations and additional effort from teachers).

Students with visual impairments took written exams, by using their own personal computers, or they took oral exams only, or they had a help of teachers assistants (the assistant would read questions and write down their answers). They pointed to the need to be given more time to submit their written assignments. Due to their disabilities, some students with physical impairments were exempt from taking written exams or writing essays, while some were granted additional time to submit their papers or were allowed to take exams with the aid of their personal computers. Students were quite ambivalent about these experiences: on the one hand, it was good to be exempt from writing essays; on the other hand, they felt disadvantaged in this way.

Some SPI students reported they have experienced discrimination due to being seated in the first row, quite in front of the teachers, so they were not able to cheat during exams, like, maybe, other students. On the other hand, they have expressed their doubts about the equality of professional competencies of students with disability *("It often happens that in some faculties disabled students are exempt from important assignment, due to their disability, so they are not fully competent, according to the degree they are supposed to get. This should be reconsidered")*

Experiences of everyday life in the campus
One of the criteria for the selection of participants in this research, was their experience of housing in the dormitory "Cvjetno naselje". Some 40 students with disabilities lived there during the academic year 2009/2010, according to the information gathered from the dormitory's administration. [7]One additional students' dormitory in Zagreb had rooms adapted for students in wheelchairs, at the time of the research, which was "Dr. Ante Starčević" students' campus.[8]

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[7] Student dormitory „Cvjetno naselje" has 8 pavilions; rooms adapted for students in wheelchairs are located in the groundfloor of the first pavilion. In total there are 19 adapted rooms. During this research on the first floor of the same pavilion were 22 double rooms, where blind and visually impaired students were placed .
[8] Student dorm „ Dr.Ante Starcevic" has 3 paviliona. In 2010 there was a renovation of the largest stud ent dormitory "Stjepan Radic," and 12 apartments for students in wheelchairs werre opened.

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Participants expressed satisfaction with accommodations in students' dormitories "Ante Starčević" and "Cvjetno naselje". Some participants had experiences with accommodations in "Ante Starčević" dorm, and were satisfied with the rooms' furnishings, adapted markings (in Braille) at the visually-impaired washing room, they emphasized the advantages but also the feeling of loneliness from being housed in single rooms, while students with physical impairment were all housed at "Cvjetno naselje", and they expressed satisfaction with the accommodations in rooms intended for students in wheelchair, while they also emphasized the importance of being housed in rooms with accompanying bathrooms, the importance of handlebars in bathrooms and rooms, and of adapted beds.

Participants emphasized the process of adapting to independent living, feeling of freedom, sense of responsibility and independence, but also fear of the unknown. The most usual problems of living in a dormitories were parking problems, distrust from the dorm's administration, limited right to personal assistants, and withholding of information on the daily menu by the staff of the students' mess.

There are different kinds of assistance available to disabled students at the dorm of "Cvjetno naselje", including help of personal assistants in the area of the dormitory (provided by individual faculties). Rector's Office of the Zagreb University is organizing and financing help for disabled students housed in students' dorms since January 2009. In academic year 2012/2013, a total of 17 students are using this service, all of them housed at "Cvjetno naselje" students' dorm. Service is provided for 24 hours each day (including weekends and holidays), by six students working in shifts helping students with disabilities with their everyday needs, in accordance with their capabilities.

Information for students with disabilities and accessibility
Students with visual impairment both, presented positive and negative experiences regarding spreading information, which is very important for them in order to be capable of independently tracking notices and keep in touch with current information regarding study and classes. Accessibility to information is also important to students with physical

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disabilities, which are physically unable to reach notice boards, and are in dire need of faculty's informational organization *("I cannot read information sheets from the board on the wall, and often I miss some key issues")*. Both groups of students emphasized students' office as a source of information, with which they have both positive experiences - contact and friendliness of staff - neutral experiences, and negative experiences, such as lack of task performance and unfriendly staff (from: *"Whatever I need I feel free to drop by and ask", "They are more than nice to me..."* to: *"Oh, not you, not again...what do you need this time?"*)
.

Students with visual impairment pointed out positive experiences of IT organization of Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (regular updating web sites, email addresses), negative experiences of IT organization of the Centre for Croatian Studies and the crucial role of peers like a source of information. And as additional resource of information (which compensate a lack of IT organization of the faculties), students with physical impairment pointed out teaching and non-teaching staff .

Some faculty leadership is sensitive for difficulties of students with physical impairment. This staff sensitivity students attribute to having personal experiences with people with disabilities, for instance, having a member of a family who is *disabled ("Faculty of philosophy has an advantage :the Vice-dean has a son with disability...and before him there was a dean whose child has cerebral palsy...so they know...")*

While discussing accessibility, students with visual impairments focused on methods of how to arrive at college and pointed out their independence in arriving at college. They also emphasized the need for learning routes to the college (spatial orientation), as a precondition for independent mobility, friends and colleagues as a source of help when learning routes to colleges, and use of public transportation in arriving at college. Students with physical impairment stressed spatial adoption of buildings of Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Faculty of Economics and Business and Faculty of Political Science. They also stressed the importance of having proper/ trim lifts, adapted toilets and halls in faculties, advantages of having classrooms for students with disabilities at the Faculty of Humanities

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and Social Sciences and the importance of the existence of parking places for people with disabilities.

Formal resources of help

In aspect of formal types of assistance, financial assistance is indispensable for students with disabilities, which they are carrying out in two bases: on the basis of student status, and disability status. Financial aid on the base of disability status, students are receiving from the social welfare system (personal disability allowance) and the City of Zagreb is providing financial support for personal disability allowance users. Based on student status, students are having right to scholarships of state, local and regional communities, as well as those private entities (such as the Croatian Foundation for the education of blind people, Marko Brkić), then the financial aid for transportation for students with disability of Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, and the ability of working and make some profit through Student Services and earning without working, but getting some fee. Earnings through cession their own contracts to colleagues is highlighted, because students with disabilities aren't able to perform duties because of nature of their disability and building of Student Service isn't available. Because students with visual impairment have colourful aspects of needs (some of them are additional instructions and specific literature) and increased costs of living compared to their colleagues, they have suggested a different name for financial aid for transportation of Ministry.

According to services that are available for students with disabilities at the University of Zagreb, students are mostly referred on the Office for students with disabilities. They expressed a lack of contact with Office, and Office is perceived as pro forma and very abstract and formal source of help for students, like and advisory body for relaying information to students with disabilities, focused on institutions and not on students.

Students with physical impairment more often use transport of NGO Imagine to get to the college, than public transport or transport by adapted vans of Zagreb Electric Tram Company. These students are also dealing with some difficulties related to mobility, such as maladjustment tram stations for people who are moving with the wheelchair (the gap between

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the edge of the street and tram entrance is too big or to high), transport with the ZET vans only for people in wheelchairs, insufficient availability of ZET vans, and difficulties of independent enter the tram.

Recommendations of students with disabilities for improving the quality of education

Recommendations of students with disabilities for improving the quality of education are referring to services provided by NGOs (dependence on the city budget and donations, need for continuous financial support of associations that are providing transportation for students with disabilities), recommendations on the level of college (the need for removing architectural barriers, need for harmonization of exam criteria, need for support of assistant for students with disabilities), as well as recommendations on the national level (through more elaborated education policy for students with disabilities, free education for all students, the timely payment of scholarships, increasing the amount of state scholarships, reducing the extent of bureaucratic procedures *(«Most of us have diagnoses that would not be changed, still every month one has to "prove" this fact by carrying around a bunch of papers, health insurance office is on the 1st floor, of course, no lift available...")*
.

Also, as one of the recommendations, students have pointed out the possibility of temporary employment through Student Services, appropriate level of medical care and the need for regular services of physical therapist.

Students with visual impairment were referring on service providers and they emphasized the need for cooperation between NGOs and institutions (*«"There's more than enough work for all of them, I don' t know why they can't stand each other..."; "They are here for us, not vice versa, and they should agree upon some things...otherwise, it happens that one notebook was scanned twice, it costs are doubled..."; "The aim is to improve life and education quality for SWD, not personal promotion..."*, need for institutionalization of services for students with disabilities (*"It means, not depending on projects and whether it is going to be approved or not..."; "Our transport service (NGO) works till 4 p.m. And we have lectures till 6 or even 8, because the lack of money it is not covered for the whole day."*) , continuous funding of projects aimed at students with disabilities (*«...to have more stable and predictable financial*

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support for NGOs which deal with transportation for SWD ...instead of making a big deal out of it during election campaign»), and the need for training for library staff for approach and working with students with disabilities

The library staff is uneducated and is acting in a discriminatory way towards the visually impaired students, in relation to the blind, and shows a different approach of staff toward the visually impaired students - who is walking with the help of another person, but without a white cane and wear glasses - and blind students who are walking with the aid of a white cane, which indicates that the access important visibility of disability *(«Library on Faculty of Philosophy has very sensitive staff, and also part time help of fellow students...at the moment they see you are a SWD they will be ready to give you a hand"* but it is far more difficult for persons without visible disability *("I used to explain to the librarian in NUL that I can barely see, and she keeps wondering is that so. She does not understand., "It is different if you are a blind person, people will say to you: "Can I help you?". But if you have glasses, they think, it's O.K., she can see.")*

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Concluding remarks

This research analyses the experiences of students with disabilities at the University of Zagreb. It investigates their motivation to enrol in the university, experiences at the beginning of university education, class attendance and assignments, everyday life in the campus, accessibility of information, facilities, teachers and administration, as well as formal resources of available help. It also provides suggestions for improvement from the perspective of students with disabilities. Taking all into consideration, we can conclude that there is a need for:

(1) a systematic approach in improving accessibility (of classrooms, toilets, libraries, teaching materials, traffic, information, staff) and developing educational policy for students with disabilities . As one of the participants said: *"I have listened to the Belgian lecturer at the conference last December...there are some 14 or 17 basic requirements to be met in order to make HE accessible for SWD, and we have hardly covered 2...The Ministry and University need to define a clear education policy".*

(2) developing responsibility for institutional and individual empowerment of "non-traditional" students and developing a new tradition and personal commitment of teachers ("Personal is political");

(3) the "hearts and minds approach" since only an intellectual view of understanding is not enough to maintain the process of changing in a positive direction –it also takes emotional, personal, irrational, and creative levels of understanding (both sides of our brains) to make an important issue out of it.

We also hope that this research provided a space for better awareness about differences, weaknesses and challenges for further development of participatory approach and the participation of students with disability in higher education.

The increased accessibility of higher education has changed the profile of students, which has become more diverse in the last few decades (students from ethnic minority groups, financially disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, more mature students, students with their own families). This means that teachers, schools and the academic community in general have to learn how to respond to the diverse educational needs of, «non-traditional

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learners» (Beaumont and Cemlyn, 2005). Promoting users' involvement and the participatory approach is particularly significant because of links between subject content and personal experiences of students, where many of them have direct experience as service users, especially when it deals with social work and social policy, but also when it deals with law, health, education and many other areas.

To facilitate these experiences and processes we need to open more space for dialogue between all participants in HE: students with disabilities and students' population in general, academic community, associations of students with disabilities, but also policy-makers. Enhancing equal opportunities for people with disabilities and create a possibility for them to be active and informed participants of educational process necessitates political and cultural changes, changes of expectations in education and the school system as a whole. The goal of having the guaranteed equal access to HE for people with disabilities should not only be in preventing and reducing the problems that disability may bring into someone's everyday life, but to enable them to participate in all aspects of students' life and to "produce" competent professionals of different profiles who would be able to participate in all aspects of life in society (social, political, cultural, etc)

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