

## **THE BARRIER OF HIDDEN DISABILITIES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This study was carried out to survey the general knowledge among teachers and students in the Faculty of Health and Caring Professions of TEI of Athens about a) the hidden disabilities and b) the opportunities provided by LLP to beneficiaries with disabilities. Simple self-administered questionnaires were given to the teaching staff and students and a total of 283 valid questionnaires were collected back. Generally knowledge of the term “hidden disability” was considered low among students and teachers, as they have connected the term “disability” with obvious mobility problems and hearing/visual impairments. The level of information about the accessibility of disabled persons to LLP was considered low too, as they believed that any kind of disability is a barrier to mobility.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The number of outgoing students within the framework of the LLP/ERASMUS program in Greece has increased to 2600 this last year, with only 1-2 students with heavy disabilities and 2-3 with minor disabilities going abroad to study per year. Among students with special needs, the bigger disability group is this of individuals with hidden disabilities. In U.K. i.e. is estimated that around 70% of people who have a disability in this country have a hidden disability.<sup>1</sup> Hidden disabilities are physical or mental impairments that are not readily apparent to others. They include such conditions and diseases as specific learning disabilities, diabetes, epilepsy, and allergy. A disability such as a limp, paralysis, total blindness or deafness is usually obvious to others. But hidden disabilities such as low vision, poor hearing, heart disease, or chronic illness may not be obvious. A

chronic illness involves a recurring and long-term disability such as diabetes, heart disease, kidney and liver disease, high blood pressure, or ulcers.<sup>2</sup>

European Union has included the term “hidden disabilities” in papers concerning the rights of persons with disabilities. In the European Parliament’s resolution on the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament Towards a United Nations legally binding instrument to promote and protect the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities it is mentioned amongst other things that:

The European Parliament, believes that a future Convention on the rights of disabled people should be based on and includes the following principles:<sup>3</sup>

- ▣ acknowledgement of the need to provide for both the general and impairment-specific needs of disabled people, including those with 'hidden' disabilities, thereby recognizing the diversity of disabled people, in particular persons with multiple and severe disabilities and their families
- ▣ the development of information campaigns targeting the relevant persons (teachers, doctors and parents) on the so-called "hidden" disabilities which in fact clearly manifest themselves in daily life and life at school
- ▣ full involvement of disabled people, organizations of disabled people and organizations representing disabled people in the establishment of national and international policies and bodies which affect them
- ▣ recognition of the reality that many disabled people are confronted with multiple discrimination on grounds of gender, race, age etc.

Nevertheless, reality numbers are not very encouraging. Survey findings show that Europeans believe that disability-based discrimination is one of the most widespread forms of discrimination in the EU.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, the National Union of Journalists (UK) has recently published research on the problems faced by people with hidden disabilities in the workplace. Not surprisingly, one of the main difficulties faced is that managers and colleagues tend not to believe that someone has a genuine impairment if they can’t see it. The NUJ intend to use their research to develop national policy and guidance for organizations on managing people with hidden impairments.<sup>5</sup>

Elaine M. Beretz has given a very clear description of hidden disabilities: “The word "disability" conjures up "visible" impairments involving hearing, vision, speech, or mobility. But disability is actually a much broader umbrella, encompassing various conditions. For sufferers of hidden disabilities, phases of acute illness alternate with periods of chronic impairment, during which the body repairs itself or adjusts to damage from the incident and its treatment. Within that general pattern, there is a range of etiologies. Some illnesses strike suddenly and require aggressive initial treatment. The acute stage of such illnesses precedes a longer period of chronic impairment until therapy or medication (completely or in part) controls the condition. Other illnesses are progressive and incurable. The early stages fit under the category of chronic illness to the extent that therapies delay the onset of the acute phase. All grave illnesses of whatever sort profoundly

disrupt a life and career for a lengthy period. Recovery lasts for another long period, if not permanently”.<sup>6</sup>

Many conditions can be characterized by the term "hidden" disabilities, like arthritis, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder(AD/HD), asthma and allergies, bipolar disorder, psychiatric disorders, depression, anxiety, cancer, cardiac or respiratory conditions, chronic fatigue syndrome, colour blindness, cystic fibrosis, diabetes, epilepsy, seizure disorders, fibromyalgia, HIV/AIDS, lupus, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, sickle cell anemia, traumatic brain injury, etc. In Greece there is no official, medical or legal, definition for “hidden disabilities” and many young people who are suffering from hidden disabilities face difficulties in their studies. Until now the educational system does not focus on that problem.

## METHOD AND MATERIAL

This study was carried out to survey the general knowledge among teachers and students in the Faculty of Health and Caring Professions of TEI of Athens about the hidden disabilities and the opportunities provided by LLP to beneficiaries with disabilities. The motivation for this study was the fact that during the last three years that we are LLP coordinators, not even one disabled student applied in the context of SM and among the beneficiaries not even one has disclosed him/herself as person with hidden disability.

Simple self-administered questionnaires were given to the teaching staff and students (non disabled individuals) and a total of 283 valid questionnaires were collected back. The population answering the questionnaires was comprised of 252 students (145 females and 107 males between the ages of 18 to 22) and 31 members of teaching staff (7 medical doctors, 8 nurses, 5 physiotherapists and 11 other – non health professions).

## RESULTS

The following tables (Tables 1-5) show the questions and the answers given in numbers and percentage per group.

**Table 1**

<b>Do you know the meaning of the term “hidden disability”?</b>		
	<b>students</b>	<b>teachers</b>
No	235(93,3%)	13 (41,9%)
Yes	17 (6,7%)	18 (58,1%)

**Table 2**

<b>Among the following health conditions/diseases which you recognize as disability?</b>		
	<b>students</b>	<b>teachers</b>
Attention deficit disorder	24 (9,5%)	12 (38,7%)
Depression	47 (18,7%)	5 (16,1%)
HIV and AIDS	15 (6%)	5 (16,1%)
Diabetes	45 (17,9%)	18 (58,1%)
Epilepsy	19 (7,5%)	7 (22,6%)
Asthma	18 (7,4%)	8 (25,8%)
Dyslexia	32 (12,7%)	14 (45,2%)
Paraplegia	252 (100%)	31 (100%)
Blindness	252 (100%)	31 (100%)
Sickle cell condition	11 (4,4%)	21 (67,7%)
Chronic fatigue syndrome	8 (3,2%)	6 (19,4%)
Hearing impairments	252 (100%)	31 (100%)
Cystic fibrosis	13 (41,9%)	19 (61,3%)
Cancer	7 (2,8%)	12 (38,7%)

**Table 3**

<b>If no, why a disability could be characterized as “hidden”?</b>		
	<b>Students</b>	<b>Teachers</b>
Is not accepted in a given society (has a social stigma)	24 (10,2%)	1 (7,7%)
Is not a real disability, is a disability “created” by a person in order to have some privileges/facilities	18 (7,7%)	1 (7,7%)
Is not obvious	179 (76,2%)	8 (61,5%)
Is not a stable disability, has a episodic character	14 (5,9%)	3 (23,1%)

**Table 4**

<b>Do you know that there are extra funds for the mobility of disabled students/teachers in the context of LLP?</b>		
	<b>students</b>	<b>teachers</b>
No	212 (84,1%)	16 (51,6%)
Yes	40 (15,9%)	15 (48,4%)

**Table 5**

<b>According to your opinion which is an obstacle concerning the mobility of disabled students and teachers in the context of LLP?</b>		
	<b>Students</b>	<b>Teachers</b>
Financial/mobility of disabled persons costs more	176 (69,8%)	19 (61,3%)
Any kind of disability is a barrier to mobility	217 (86,1%)	26 (83,9%)
It is not easy to be informed about Universities that can accept disabled students/teachers	138 (54,8%)	11 (35,5%)

### **CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS**

Generally knowledge of the term “hidden disability” was considered low among students and teachers, as they have connected the term “disability” with obvious mobility problems and hearing/visual impairments. The level of information about LLP and disabled persons was considered low too as they believed that any kind of disability is a barrier to mobility and they were not informed about the cover of needed extra costs.

The aim of LLP/Erasmus is to give all students, including those with disabilities, visible or hidden, equal opportunities to experience several different aspects of academic, social and cultural life. The Institutions are challenged to handle the situation in a two-way action, on the one hand, disabled students must be encouraged to apply and on the other hand, tutors and teachers must try to remove obstacles and to provide access to the programme. Students do not notify their disability to the institution because of fear of discrimination or prejudice and/or fear of being disbelieved.<sup>7</sup> Additionally to this, students with hidden disabilities are not accessing funding and resources that they are entitled to because they are not considered to be “disabled enough”, although their numbers are far greater than those of any one disability group. On the other hand, the lack of awareness and knowledge of no disabled persons are among the most serious invisible barriers to the full participation and integration of disabled students into European mobility programs. Tutors and teachers must be aware of the impact of hidden disabilities on everyday life and studies in order to remove the obstacles and facilitate participation of students in the mobility projects. According to the condition, the impact could be frequent absences from classes (because of symptoms such as pain and fever, or hospitalization), poor concentration (as a result of their disability or their medication), dexterity problems, and difficulties participating in group work and meeting deadlines, need for unpredictable medical emergency.

Before student with hidden disabilities starts his/her preparation for moving abroad, coordinator should ensure that the hosting Institution can support students with

disabilities and ask questions that will help the hosting Institution to meet the needs of the student and to provide appropriate accommodations. Additionally to that, coordinator should advise student on course selection and academic department approval procedure being aware of the social and interpersonal skills of him/her. Student must be well informed about differences between home and host universities (access to health services, legal and safety issues, cultural perceptions and stereotypes).

Student must also send to the hosting Institution a detailed medical report. The medical report should be confidential, signed by a medical doctor, and mentioning the ways in which that disability substantially limits the individual's academic pursuits and his/her everyday life activities.

Special arrangements must be done during the studies period abroad, such as sheltered accommodation if needed, flexible schedule (rest breaks between the teaching sessions, individual examination arrangements, extension on deadlines if needed, time beneficial to individual, e.g. around medication schedule, multiple sessions etc), and in some cases equipment such as audio recorder, note takers, etc. The presence of a support worker or academic advisor could be useful and if it is not possible, frequent communication via email with the sending Institution could give psychological support to the student.

In conclusion, we have to admit that it is necessary to increase knowledge of several types of hidden disabilities. Actions such as to create a network of Institutions that have services for students with hidden disabilities, to provide information through promotional materials as well as adequate guidance to teaching staff and students and to disseminate good practices could be the first steps, so that the number of disabled students travelling abroad in the frame of LLP/Erasmus will be increased and equal opportunities and open accessibility will not only be a slogan, but a way of life.

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