

SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

DOI: 10.24234/se.2021.4.2.270

AUTHOR'S DATA

Zdenka Šándorová, PhD, Senior Lecturer

The University of Pardubice, Faculty of Arts and Philosophy, Department of Education, Czech Republic

Contacts: zdenka.sandorova@upce.cz

ABSTRACT

The education of school children and university students with special educational needs is enabled mainly due to the creation of an inclusive educational environment. In the Czech Republic, inclusive educational environment support is being carried out from an early age within the framework of social services. Within this scope, this analytical paper describes the inclusive environment of the university and the disability support services provided. At the same time, the article focuses mainly on the issues of the inclusive environment within university education and describes the situation at the University of Pardubice in the Czech Republic.

Results of the situation analyses are showing that providing the students with special educational needs with access to university studies leads to an equality of their educational opportunities

Keywords: special education, support, special education in university, students with special educational needs, labour market.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of young people's employability in the labour market has been gradually attracting major attention among the general professional public in all European countries. The well-known fact about education as a crucial employability factor has been repeatedly confirmed also within the group of the young generation entering the labour market. Obtaining at least the upper-secondary school education certificate, or recently even a university degree, has become a standard for young people today. Until recently, the university education within the population of the Czech Republic was

restricted only to narrow elites. However, since the Velvet Revolution in 1989, university education in the Czech Republic has been dynamically evolving. In connection with the development of the European area and the pressures posed by the Bologna Declaration, the possibilities of studying at the university level are opening up for broader parts of the population, which concerns also individuals with special educational needs (SEN).

The education of children, school pupils and the students with SEN is enabled mainly due to the creation of an inclusive educational environment, which is declared in the key document called White Paper, i.e. National Programme for the Development of Education in the Czech Republic (MŠMT ČR, 2001). The inclusive educational environment support is being carried out from an early age within the framework of social services, such as early care as a social prevention service (Šándorová & Fricová, 2019). Within the concept of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, the inclusive educational environment support was implemented via the Education Act No. 561/2004 Coll., as amended in 2015, in § 16, entitled “Education of Children, Pupils and Students with Special Educational Needs” in pre-school, basic and secondary education. This article focuses mainly on the issues of an inclusive environment within university education.

Historical context and current study possibilities for the students with special educational needs at the universities in the Czech Republic

The right to education is embedded in the transnational document, entitled Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, which concerns also the Czech Republic as an EU member. The Czech Republic is obliged to comply with it and respect it. At the national level, access to education is guaranteed by the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms of the Czech Republic.

The Czech Republic has also agreed to fulfill the commitments arising from the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which recognizes these persons’ right to education and declares that it will “ensure an inclusive education system at all levels without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity” (Article 24) (UN, 2006).

Until the year 1989, the approach towards the education of disabled people was very different from today. The educational system at the primary

and secondary level was fully concentrated in the individual special schools, which were oriented on the particular type of impairment. In the area of tertiary education, there was a lack of supportive instruments and therefore, it was very difficult for disabled persons to complete university studies.

The beginning of the 1990s brought a change in terms of the support provided for integrative/inclusive education. The disabled pupils and students who had been previously educated only at special schools were gradually given the opportunity to participate in the educational mainstream. Following the whole-national inclusive efforts to educate the children, pupils and students in both common educational streams, there also occurred a logical increase in the number of students interested in involvement in tertiary education.

The Higher Education Act in § 21 stipulates that all higher education institutions are obliged “d) to provide applicants, students and other persons with information and advisory services relating to studies as well as to professional opportunities for graduates of degree programs; e) to make all possible provisions for ensuring equal opportunities for study at the higher education institution.” (Act No. 111/1998 Coll.).

This idea was significantly reinforced through the National Plan for the Promotion of Equal Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities 2010-2014, which aimed at supporting the principle of inclusive education to the greatest possible extent. Based on this document, the universities were recommended to increase the quality of services and supportive provisions in legislative, human resource, pedagogical, economic and technical areas, as the complexity of this type of support represents an essential pre-condition for inclusive education (National Plan for the Promotion of Equal Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, 2010).

The inclusive environment at the University of Pardubice

The University of Pardubice is a public university that has decided to provide the students with special educational needs with access to university studies, and thus to open new self-fulfillment possibilities for them. This decision has been taken in accordance with the intended fulfillment of the students’ rights to access inclusive education at the university level, as declared by the National Plan for the Promotion of Equal Opportunities for

Persons with Disabilities 2010-2014. The total number of all students at the University of Pardubice in the reference period was oscillating between 9 and 10 thousand.

In the period 2012 – 2015, the care for the aforementioned target group of students was supported by the project entitled the University of Pardubice and the Campus without Barriers (Šándorová, 2014). The university entered the project with the aim of creating a friendly, inspirational and stimulating environment for the students with SEN. Besides, it also addressed the university academic and administrative staff in relation to the students with special educational needs, which reflects the main idea of inclusion as it is dealt with at the University of Pardubice (Šándorová, 2015).

An inclusive environment is such a type of environment where all the pupils, students and teachers naturally co-exist so that they might use this space to perform safely and collaborate on a mutual basis, regardless of their disability or social disadvantage.

This idea led to the establishment of the Academic Advisory Centre of the University of Pardubice (APUPA) on March 1st, 2012. APUPA started to offer assistance and support for the students with SEN in terms of social, psychological, special-pedagogical, and career counselling services. Besides, the Centre focused also on renting the adaptive and rehabilitation equipment, representing an essential type of aiding for numerous students with SEN, who would otherwise not be able to study at the university. Each year, the number of students with SEN was growing. The particular data about the accelerated growth in the numbers of these students are stated in Table no. 1. Some of the students demonstrate the combination of even three types of disabilities. Since the year 2015, the range of categories has been extended to include also the [F] type of student with other psychological disorders (including non-autistic, neurodevelopmental impairments) or chronic somatic illnesses. In 2017, the category of other types of difficulties was added.

Table 1.

The number of students with special needs at the University of Pardubice, since 2012 (according to the Rules for public higher education funding, MŠMT).

Type of student's impairment	2012/ 2013	2013/ 2014	2014/ 2015	2015/ 2016	2016/ 2017	2017/ 2018	2018/ 2019	2019/ 2020
[A1] user of sight	1	2	2	4	5	3	3	5
[A2] user of sense of touch/voice	1	1	1	1	-	0	0	0
[B1] user of verbal language/since 3 2016 spoken language	1	1	2	6	8	7	7	6
[B2] user of sign language	0	0	1	-	-	0	0	0
[C1] lower limb disabilities	2	2	1	7	8	10	13	12
[C2] upper limb disabilities	2	2	2	8	10	11	14	14
[D] special learning difficulties	1	7	14	21	27	31	34	54
[E] autistic spectrum disorder	2	8	8	3	5	3	5	5
[F] other psychological disorders (including non-autistic, neurodevelopmental disorders) or chronic somatic illnesses; since 2017 other types of difficulties (part 2, article 3, paragraph 9).	-	-	-	6	9	7	13	13
The total number of students with SEN, per year:	9	22	27	41	55	54	68	87

The above-presented data in Table 1 indicates significant growth in the number of students with specific needs, especially with physical disabilities, specific learning difficulties, autism, other psychological disorders or chronic illnesses. There has also been a gradual increase in the number of students with combined impairments. This situation demanded an active involvement of a specialized university department – Disability Student Service.

Disability Student Service

In 2013, the Academic Advisory Centre of the University of Pardubice was extended to include the so-called Disability Student Service department. Both teams immediately started a very close collaboration and thus they provided the students with all the assistance and support needed on their way towards obtaining their dream education and a future job.

An interdisciplinary team of advisors offered a wide range of interventions, which might be categorized into several areas:

- psychological counselling,
- social counselling,
- crisis intervention,
- special-pedagogical counselling.

The University of Pardubice has been traditionally offering its students an open and interconnected support system in all aspects of their lives. The complex support network was established due to the participation of external subjects, especially the providers of social and related services, via the regional policy of the City of Pardubice, the so-called community planning. The main aim of community planning is to identify the needs.

The support network exists not only at the university and regional levels but is also guaranteed at the national level, due to the Association of the service providers for the students with specific needs at the universities.

Owing to systematic support provided for inclusive education, the university carries out other activities that are closely related. Every year, the university organizes the seminar "Get a first-hand experience", where the students or the general public have an opportunity to learn about the life of the disabled students, about the demands of their university studies and their movement around the university campus. It includes also a practical demonstration of adaptive equipment available for the disabled students of the University of Pardubice.

Other activities aimed at supporting the inclusion involve e.g. the collaboration with the Department of Physical Education and Sports, which allows the disabled students together with the non-disabled ones to complete the study subject focused on alternative physical activities for the students with SEN. As a part of its professional activities, the university also exchanges the experience and knowledge acquired in the area of students with

SEN with other universities, both in the Czech Republic and abroad (Šándorová, Růžicková, Azatjan & Kafjan, 2019).

Picture 1.

Example of work with university students with SEN at University of Pardubice



The internal directives guaranteeing the optimal conditions and facilities for studying at the University of Pardubice

The University of Pardubice prepares high-quality facilities and optimal study conditions for its students. The specialized university department responsible for creating equal study conditions is the Centre Alma, which previously existed as the Disability Student Service (DSS) department. The Centre Alma used to offer the specific technical support, diagnostics and other provisions and services according to Directive no. 3/2013, entitled Support for the Applicants and Students with the Special Needs at the University of Pardubice, and the Directive no. 7/2014, entitled

Guidelines for Support and Creating Equal Conditions during the Entrance Procedure and the Study of the Individuals with Special Educational Needs at the University of Pardubice.

Directive no. 3/2013 determined and regulated the study conditions for applicants and students with SEN, including the organizational arrangements of all the related particulars. An integral part of this document was the specification and a prerogative for adequate accommodation at the students' halls of residence at the University of Pardubice.

Directive no. 7/2014 was intended to define the way of creating equal conditions not only during the study but also within the entrance procedure at the University of Pardubice. This directive was based on the Higher Education Act and also the Long-Term Plan for Education, Scientific, Research, Development and Innovation, Artistic and Other Academic Activities of the University of Pardubice. These guidelines were addressed not only to the university employees but also – and mainly - to the students with SEN.

Currently, the principles and rules of support and creating equal conditions for access to education at the University of Pardubice are determined by the Directive RPO/19, which was issued on September 1st, 2019.

SUMMARY

Over the period 2012 – 2020, the University of Pardubice has established a good quality of conditions, support services and provisions in pedagogical, economic, technical and human resource areas, for the benefit of the students with SEN.

The support services included the establishment of the Academic Advisory Centre of the University of Pardubice (APUPA) and the department of Disability Student Service (currently the Centre ALMA). The service extension provided by the university in the area of the support and care for the students with SEN belongs to significant priorities of the university development. By means of creating equal conditions, it endorses the principles determined by the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms, and therefore, it ranks among those higher education institutions that aim at the fulfillment of basic requirements on equality in education.

CONCLUSION

Providing the students with SEN with access to university studies leads to an equality of their educational opportunities. Besides, the number of applicants and students with SEN represents one of the quality indicators of the particular university. The adherence to these trends is being openly declared not only at the University of Pardubice but also at almost all other institutions of higher education in the Czech Republic.

REFERENCE LIST

1. Act No. 2/1993 Coll., Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms.
2. Act No. 111/1998 Coll., on Higher Education Institutions.
3. Directive no. 7/2014. Guidelines for Support and Creating Equal Conditions during the Entrance Procedure and the Study of the Individuals with Special Educational Needs at the University of Pardubice.
4. Directive no. 3/2013. Support for the Applicants and Students with the Special Needs at the University of Pardubice.
5. Directive no. RPO/19. Support and Creating Equal Conditions during the Entrance Procedure and the Study of the Individuals with Special Educational Needs at the University of Pardubice.
6. Education Act No. 561/2004 Coll. (2015), Education of Children, Pupils and Students with Special Educational Needs” in pre-school, basic and secondary education.
7. MŠMT ČR, National Programme for the Development of Education in the Czech Republic. White Paper. Praha: Tauris, 2001. ISBN 80-211-0372-8.
8. National Plan for the Promotion of Equal Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities 2010-2014.
9. National Plan for the Promotion of Equal Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities 2015–2020.
10. Project The University of Pardubice and the Campus without Barriers. Education for Competitiveness Operational Programme (OPVK- IP – Area of Support 2.2).

11. Šándorová, Z. (2014). Inkluzivní aktivity ve prospěch studentů se SVP na UPa v akademickém roce 2013-2014. In: Pospíšilová, I.(Ed.). Vysokoškolské studium bez bariér: sborník příspěvků z IX. ročníku mezinárodní konference zaměřené na trendy ve zpřístupňování studia na vysokých školách lidem se zdravotním postižením a specifickými potřebami, 25. – 26. 9. (s. 45-53). Liberec, Česko: Technická univerzita v Liberci,
12. Šándorová, Z., K. Růžicková, T. Azatjan a E. Kafjan, ed. (2019). Current topics in Czech and Armenian special pedagogical theory and practice. Pardubice, Česko: University of Pardubice,
13. Šándorová, Z. (2015). Čtyřleté praktické zkušenosti v oblasti vzdělávání a podpory studentů se specifickými potřebami na Univerzitě Pardubice. In: Iveta (Ed.). Sborník příspěvků z X ročníku mezinárodní konference "Vysokoškolské studium bez bariér", 17.-18. 9. Liberec, Česko: Technická univerzita v Liberci.
14. Šándorová, Z., & Fricová, R. (2019). Mapování současné situace studentů s tělesným postižením na Univerzitě Pardubice. In: Sociální začleňování v kontextu sociální práce: Sborník textů z XVI. ročníku mezinárodní vědecké konference Hradecké dny sociální práce Hradec Králové, 12. a 13. 9. (s. 224-232). Hradec Králové, Česko: Gaudeamus.
15. UN (2006). Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.