

# Students with disabilities in higher education in germany



## **Abstract**

### **Introduction**

About 600 million persons or one-tenth of the world population are estimated to be disabled in one form or another e. g., visual, auditory, physical, speech, cognitive and neurological. The proportion of the disability varies from country to country. According to the Federal Statistical Office, German had a total population of approximately 82. 5 million people in 2005, 8. 6 million population had a disability. Of that population, 6. 7 million people were classified as severely disabled and 1. 9 million were classified with less significant disabilities. Also, 54 per cent of them were male and 46 per cent were women. Official statistics about the prevalence of disability only register people with severe disabilities. Thus there is no data available concerning the overall prevalence of disabilities. Disability limits access to education and employment and leads to economic and social exclusion. Poor people with disabilities are caught in a vicious cycle of poverty and disability, each being both a cause and a consequence of the other (Elwan, 1990).

The idea that the state should be generally responsible for the welfare of its persons with disabilities is comparatively new. In Germany it was only at the end of the nineteenth century, with the introduction of Bismarck's social security system. The function of German disability law developed continuously – interrupted by the periods of National Socialism, away from a mere material support for the war invalids to the social integration of all persons with disabilities. Consequently, German society's ideal concept is no longer that material provision of persons with disabilities but their equal and self-determined participation in social and working life.

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The enactment of SGB IX (Rehabilitation and Participation of Disabled Persons) in 2001 was a significant step, marked a change of paradigm of shift in German disability law. The act aims ‘to promote their autonomy and equal participation in society, and to avoid or counteract disadvantages.’ This new orientation was the result of the 1994 amendment of the German constitution’s Article 3, which included the prohibition of discrimination on grounds of disability.

### Defining disability

Disability is a complex phenomenon to measure for a number of reasons. People’s understanding of definitions of disability and the concept of disability itself vary. The term ‘disability’, which is central to this study, has been defined by the relevant institutions in Germany in different ways.

Within the German school system the term “disability” has been out of use since 1994. In that year, the term “disability” was replaced by the term “special educational need(s)” in a declaration of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (KMK; 1994).

On 1 July 2001, Book 9 of the Social Code introduced a new definition of disability and changed terminology. Instead of the ‘the Disabled’ now the terms ‘people with disabilities’ or ‘disabled people’ are used interchangeably in legislation and documents. This new definition is influenced by the concept of participation in the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF). According to section 2 (1, 1) of Book 9 of the Social Code, people with disabilities are defined as persons whose physical functions, mental capacities or psychological health are

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highly likely to deviate for more than six months from a condition which is typical for the respective age, and whose participation in major life activities is therefore restricted. It also states that, persons are accorded equal status with ‘severely disabled persons’, if they have a degree of disability less than 50, but of at least 30, and if they are, because of their disability, unable to find or retain suitable employment.

## **Students with disabilities in higher education institutions in Germany**

The Federal Republic of Germany is made up of 16 Lander, as a result of German unification through a Treaty between the Federal Republic of Germany and the Germany Democratic Republic on October 3rd, 1990. Each Land has its own constitution and government. The federal Constitution stipulated that the Lander have the right to legislate insofar as the Constitution does not confer legislative power on the Lander. Educational legislation and administration of the educational system are primarily the responsibility of the Lander. After the Constitutional reforming 2006 the federal level has only minimal influence on educational policies in Germany.

According to the official statistics, approximately 292, 000 German students and foreign students with a German education were enrolled in their first semester in the year 2005. Whereas half of all first year students were female during the 2002/03 winter semester, the proportion of women in 2005 had fallen back to 48 per cent.

The national Association for student’s affairs (Deutsches Studentenwerk, DSW) periodically conducts a survey on the social situation of students

including students with disabilities in higher education institutions in Germany. These samples are regarded as being representative, and data are based on anonymised information of the survees about students. The latest survey was conducted in the summer semester 2000 (DSW/HIS; 2001). According to this survey, 2 per cent of all students consider themselves as students with disabilities, and 13 per cent have chronic disease. Of the students with chronic disease, 8 per cent from chronic psychological disease, 17 per cent from disease of the musculo-skeletal system and supporting tissues, and 52 per cent suffered from allergies and disease of the respiratory tract.

However, this may not be considered as an indication that all or even a majority of those students who consider themselves disabled have an officially recognised disability status, nor can it be taken as proof that higher education institutions in Germany integrate severely disabled persons in to their body of students proportionate with disabled persons in society generally. The data given can only be taken as a basis for legitimising or improving further support services for students with disabilities in higher education (DSW, 2001). Taking into consideration the present numbers of students and entrants, these data lead to the information as presented in Table 1.

Approximate numbers of students with disabilities and chronic illnesses in institutions of higher education in 2000 (DSW/HIS – Survey)

Category

Students

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Entrants

Disability (2%)

36 000

6000

Dyslexia (1%)

18 000

3000

Chronic illnesses (13%) of which

234 000

39 000

- physical illnesses

216 000

36 000

- mental illnesses

18 000

3 000

Total

288 000

48 000

Source: DSW/HIS (2001); Original representation

## **Legislative framework**

In 1982, the Standing Conference of the Ministries of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder published recommendations for a code of practice aimed at improving the educational conditions of students with disabilities (KMK, 1982). They are

Special counselling in secondary schools carried out in a coordinated approach including transition and career guidance services of the federal employment agency, schools, universities, welfare authorities, and associations for student affairs.

Modification of the studying and examination regulations and arrangements according to the individual disadvantages of students with disabilities, thus granting them equal chances.

Improvements to technical and architectural features of buildings and other facilities, such as the installation of ramps, specially designated parking places, loop systems and halls of residence with integrated care resources.

Promotion of the student's involvement in social life on the campus as well as within halls of residence.

Designation of coordinators for disability affairs in all higher education institutions who look after the needs of students with disabilities, offering and coordinating counselling, and regularly reporting to the institution on the situation and problems of students with disabilities.

These recommendations primarily aimed at the integration of students with disabilities in to the existing structures of higher education institutions, rather than suggesting segregative solutions such as “ universities for students with disabilities” or courses of study designed especially and exclusively for students with disabilities.

In addition to this, section 2 of Framework Act for Higher Education stated that all institutions of higher education have to cater to the special needs of SWD in such a way that they are not disadvantaged in their studies, and giving them the opportunity to make use of all the institutions facilities. In practicem however, the role of higher education institutions, of affiliated institutions such as the national or local associations for student affairs (Studentenwerke), and of the coordinators of diability affairs is resticted to striving for barrier-free campuses, to supplying certain forms of counselling, support and equipment for higher education, and to guiding swd through a jungle of responsible bureaucracies and authorities, many of which are located off-campus.

## **Objectives of the study**

This study focuses on the availability of opportunities to students with disabilities in higher education institutions in Germany.



To look at the legislation, regulations, organizations, funding support and governing higher education institutions

To identify forms of assistance and support available both to students with disabilities and to higher education institution in Berlin.

## **Method of the study**

The present study was an exploratory nature. For this study qualitative research methods were used. Qualitative research methods are aimed at giving real and stimulating meaning to a phenomenon, while looking at the phenomenon as a total and complete context (Tylor. 2000). Qualitative forms of investigation tend to be based on recognition of the importance of the subjective, experiential “lifeworld” of human beings, describing the experiences of people in-depth (Patton, 1980). According to Burns (2000), there has been a greater acceptance of qualitative methods in educational research since the 1970s.

This study attempted to discover the higher educational opportunities available to students with disabilities including support services, legislations, rights, funding support from different organizations.

## **Data Sources and Methods**

This study was based on both primary and secondary data. Due to lack of much research on students with disabilities in German context as well as lack of much literature on this study in English language the researcher could not much secondary data. The secondary data includes papers from the OECD Conference on Higher Education and Disability held in Grenoble in

1999, official website of German government. The information in the publication of conference proceedings was therefore encoded, entered and processed.

For this study primary data was collected with help of semi-structured interview schedule. This study was conducted in Freie university; Berlin, which is capital of Germany. For this study interviews were conducted with official bodies including coordinator responsible for students with disabilities in the university, librarian, and representative of organization in the university which is called as Studentenwerk. The interview questions were focused mainly on policies and provisions for students with disabilities in higher education institutions, supporting services, higher education organisation, and funding patterns. Almost all of the discussions were open-ended to explore issues the participants of the study considered to be important.

## **Data analysis**

The discussions of the study from the interviews were audio taped, video recorded, transcribed, coded and analyzed through thematic analyses. Ethical issues regarding confidentiality, and access to data and study findings were discussed with participants who gave an informed consent prior to data collection. The emerging themes from the discussions with disability coordinator, officers from Studentenewerk, librarian, and students with disabilities included policy, support services to students with disabilities, higher education organization and funding patterns.

## **Limitations of the study**

The purpose of this study is to understand the higher educational opportunities available to students with disabilities, forms of assistance available to students as well as institutions in Berlin. The study captures information from official bodies including disability coordinator, other service centres and students with disabilities at one university. Therefore, the results of the study are not intended to be generalized to other higher education institutions as results may vary across institutions. In addition, the sample of student participants do not represent the diverse types of disabilities in this university, thus the results may vary across types of students with disabilities.

## **Findings of the study**

### **About Disability Officer**

I am the commissioner or representative for students with disabilities at FU, Berlin. My name is George Glassen. Since 1990 I have a part time job, I am working here for last 20 years onwards on part time basis. I am working here as a part of university administration. I am responsible to support students with disabilities in the universities including counselling the students and providing support services to them, giving advice to the construction department in case if they plan new buildings, or modifications to the existing buildings or old buildings like adopting ramps, elevators, lifts, automatic doors, toilets and parking places for persons with disabilities.

Policies : U have review the literature regarding laws and acts in HE for SWDs

## **Structure of the disability cell**

No person is working under me but we have service centre centre working for students with visual impairments. This centre has separate room with all type of assistive devices and technical equipments including scanners, printers, breile printer, TV;

This centre also allocates scribes and readers, financial support to write exams.

This is funded by university but it is done by government by law to support students with disabilities. Each student with disability has individual rights to get support from the university.

This centre pays 10 euros per hour to persons who assist students with visual impairments. They allocate other students as a scribes to write exams, helping in their and also helping them in mobility, opening the doors or moving around the campus per their classes and course work.

## **Cooperation with other Organizations**

In case students need any equipments or technical assistance it fulfilled by the university. University cooperates with the Studentenwork, with assists the students get their support

## **Admission procedures**

We have certain rules for admission. They have a better chance to get to study here with their disability if they prove they have a disability. Two percent of students with disabilities enrolled under this rule like we have 5 percent students from aboard and outside European union.

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## **Information about services and facilities**

Disability office is the right place to get information about support services available to them. Even university website or internet, we have also central info services, call centre, central students counselling services and we all are work together and have a good network which provides information and support services.

## **How policy is convey to teachers, non-teaching staff and administration**

It is very difficult for me to work together with university teachers. We have so many teachers.

If student comes here and gives me some document regarding disability and says about his problems or needs the I will write a letter this student has disability he need some adoptions for example if he has visual impairment he needs PowerPoint presentations which he can take print out and study, and extra time for house work, examination. I will explain in my letter to that particular teacher about the situation of the students and their needs.

## **Discussions**

They are some cases but not every body. 95 percent of teachers agree with me. For example few years ago we had discussions about wheelchair user in chemistry department. Because it was question of accessibility how students with wheelchair can work in laboratory in chemistry department. Then we had some discussions with student, teachers, university management, our law department and university security department. We tried together to find solution. Finally we found out solution that the law say that we have to

support each student with disability. The law department also said that it is not a question if the student can study but how he can study and it is not a question if we support but how we support him and so we had some equipment like adoptions in laboratory, we allowed him to continue his study. He does not compulsory to do alone; he will get some assistance from his fellow students, some personal assistance. Finally we succeeded in this case, and got first laboratory where wheelchair students also can study this kind of courses. Some teachers didn't liked him to study but he was very strong, active and finished his course successful now and right now one new student with wheelchair enrolled same department. Now for him much easier due to availability of equipment and accessibility to laboratory because in first case we have done and provided all facilities.

We were also failed in some cases like invisible disabilities like students with some psychological problems need some support like extra time or extensions but teachers didn't agree in few cases. Since some disabilities are not visible it is very difficult to convenience teachers to support students. Teachers say that it is not a problem student can easily get disability certificate. So they didn't believe some students with invisible disabilities.

We have meeting with representative of students with disabilities in other universities in berlin. We will meet frequently and discussions and arranging conferences on disability and support to students with disabilities.

## **Transport facilities**

We have public transport which is accessible to persons with disabilities.

Review about transport services.

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Students can use public transport. This is not paid by the university but paid by public social service. It is kind of social aid.

## **Academic support services**

Assistive technology

Centre for visual impairment – Studentenwerk

## **Studentenwerk**

We have a contract with studnetenwork. University should this by law but it is difficult to manage. So all the universities in Berlin have contract with studnetenwork. It is an organization which is supported by Berlin government: they run like Mensa, students houses, counseling, career guidance. Students can apply for their financial assistance it may be technical or equipments.

They are active and give you support very fast. Earlier it was part of social aid. It takes so much time to get financial assistance. But with network works are going very fast. This centre also next to my room. If we have any problem we will work together and find out solution.

## **Financial problems**

We are having problem with sign language interpreters. We had some discussions, problem with interpreters. We are getting resources from Berlin government, part comes from university management, we are having discussions to renew the contract with studnetwork because of more expensive for sign interpreters.

Question of construction like laboratory, accessibility.

Students: in Germany there is a scholarship system where parents who do not have enough income will get this support. It is nearly 20 or 25% get this fellowship. Students will get longer time. In case if they could not finish their course due to their disability their fellowship will be extended longer.

International exchange programme. It is called Erasmus. This pays some extra allowances to support students with disabilities to go abroad and for assistance persons.

### **Counselling services**

I am the counsellor also. We work together with academic counsellors, job centre, registration process or admission, how to fill form

### **Facilitating factors**

Law situation is quite well

Students have right to get financial support

Law says that they have the right to get adapted equipment, they can use technical devices, sign interpretations, what they need.

### **Hindering factors**

I am having 20 hours in week but campus is very big one with 35000 students. It is very difficult to deal with all people like students, teachers, administration.

Financial problems: we have discussions on priority like accessibility

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Usually administration accepts what I am doing but I am not independent. I don't have right to take major decisions. I am just part of administration

### **Ur suggestions to other universities**

I think it is very important to have legal situation. Right of the student to get his rights, adaptation, financial support. It is very important to have coordinator who does not do this job besides other job. This job should be the main job. Lot of universities having this kind of problems. Most of coordinators are teachers working as a part as coordinator who don't know much about any services to students with disabilities.

It is also important if we have some training ppl who counsel swds it is also important who tells how we can do best to improve services

Need professional coordinators

Legal support

University teachers also need some training but it needs time and money.

### **Suggestions to policy makers**

It could be important to introduce the system which support the swds.

Coordinators who work as a disability professional