

## **Access to higher education for persons with disabilities**

The Ombudsman of the Republic of Latvia is the institution responsible for monitoring the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Latvia. Consequently, in carrying out this function, the Ombudsman, in cooperation with the Association of Disabled Persons and their Friends “Apeiron”, carried out a study/monitoring activities in order to investigate whether and to what extent higher education is accessible to persons with different types of disabilities. The study was conducted in 2016-2017.

Study methods:

- a) a survey of persons with disabilities who have studied in the past, on their experience in higher education;
- b) a survey of persons with disabilities who have not studied in the past, on their willingness to start higher education;
- c) a survey of universities;
- d) an inspection of higher education buildings/facilities — an assessment of the actual situation.

The survey of persons with disabilities concluded that the main criteria for choosing a university/study programme are: study programme of interest; study costs; demand for the chosen profession in the labour market; financial security in the future. Respondents with disabilities prefer full-time studies, as this is the best way to fully master the programme, focus, and have an active social life. Almost a third of respondents with disabilities studying at university face obstacles due to disability, related to the accessibility of both the university’s information-sharing environment and its physical environment. Less than half of the respondents with disabilities who have experienced disability-related obstacles have asked the university to remove said obstacles. At the same time, in cases where the respondent with disabilities has asked the university to remove obstacles, less than 50 % of universities have done so. In some cases, the university study agreement/study rules contain provisions that apply to persons with disabilities and which respondents with disabilities consider to be discriminatory. Only 6 % of respondents with disabilities who have studied at university have indicated that they have used opportunities to study abroad. More than half of respondents do not have sufficient information on the accessibility of universities’ information-sharing and physical environments. According to the respondents, the best way for them to obtain this information would be if guidance was provided on university websites and information leaflets. One-fifth of respondents would like each university to have an employee responsible for providing information on studies and study processes for persons with disabilities in the required format.

The results of university surveys showed that universities do not collect information about students with disabilities. They also do not collect information on the reasons why students choose or are forced to stop their studies, however, universities indicated that in almost one third of the cases students with disabilities have interrupted their studies because they could not fulfil the study requirements. Although it was never indicated that studies were interrupted due to inaccessible physical or information-sharing environments, in the Ombudsman's view, the fulfilment of study requirements in certain cases may be closely linked to the accessibility of the university's physical and informative environment. Consequently, if the physical and/or information-sharing environment of the university is not inaccessible, it may not be possible for students with disabilities to fulfil the requirements of the curriculum. Some universities pointed to discounts on tuition fees for students with disabilities, as well as opportunities for scholarships. Universities pointed out that students are more active in reporting a need to adapt the physical environment, not the information-sharing one. According to the Ombudsman, there may be a number of reasons for this, e.g., fewer students who would need modifications to the information-sharing environment actually study in university; students with disabilities ability to adapt to the circumstances, possibly resulting in the administration's lack of information about the need to modify the information-sharing environment; the small number of students with disabilities in higher education; students' disbelief that the situation might change. The universities have improved their environmental accessibility both on their own initiative and on the recommendations of students.

In 2016, there were 58 universities in Latvia. The following universities were excluded from the list of buildings inspected:

- a) universities which had already been evaluated by the association of disabled people and their friends "Apeirons";
- b) the university used as a pilot project;
- c) universities undergoing reorganisation;
- d) universities which indicated that they cannot admit persons with disabilities due to the specificities of the service or institution of higher education.

Therefore, an evaluation was carried out in 43 universities. In total, this included 164 buildings, 81 of which were study facilities, 42 were university libraries and 40 were student accommodation provided by the universities. Each type of building (study facility, library, accommodation) had its own assessment protocol. An observation protocol was completed for each building. Each building was visited by a team of two people — a representative of the Ombudsman's office, and a representative of the Association of Disabled Persons and their Friends "Apeirons".

**Problems identified:**

1. Lack of information on the addresses of universities:

1.1. Lack of information on university buildings (for example, it is indicated that the university has branches, but it is not possible to find out their addresses; at best, it is indicated in which city the branch is located). The situation was similar for student accommodation and libraries.

1.2. From the information available on the university websites, it was not possible to clearly deduce in which buildings students of certain faculties or study programmes are undergoing studies. For example, it is not clear whether studies take place in the one building or several.

1.3 The university website only indicates a main building, however, after a conversation with the staff of the university, it can be concluded that studies take place in other buildings as well.

2. Universities do not tend to use their existing resources to ensure accessibility, e.g., digital tools for universities.

3. In some cases, incomplete or superficial fulfilment of the technical parameters laid down in regulatory acts, e.g., ramps are too steep, there are no railings.

4. Lack of signs or other guidance systems in buildings.

5. More attention is paid to the needs of persons with reduced mobility than to other persons with disabilities, such as with visual and hearing impairments.

6. Most student accommodation is not suitable for students with reduced mobility, which means that in most cases people with reduced mobility are only able to study in the city of their residence (if there is a university). At the same time, it was pointed out that, in certain student accommodation, the rooms adapted for persons with reduced mobility had not been used at all in the last few years.

7. There is no student accommodation specifically adapted for students with visual impairments, and only 7% of the student accommodation is adapted for students with hearing impairments.

**Examples of good practice:**

1. Universities that have adapted their historical buildings.

2. Universities that have used interesting technical solutions in the adaptation process.
3. University libraries with special reading software for visually impaired persons. Cooperation with the Latvian Society of the Blind, which provides students with visual impairments with all the technical support necessary for studying.

In each section of the study — accessibility of university study facilities, accommodation and libraries — the Ombudsman recommended specific actions and highlighted examples of good practice.

**The Ombudsman made two strict recommendations with specific deadlines:**

1. Update the university websites by including specific information on all study facilities, accommodation, libraries, and branches of the university; indicate the environmental accessibility features in all these buildings, and if the building lacks environmental accessibility, indicate that as well. It is also necessary to specify in which buildings the studies take place, and whether, for example, students from one faculty may have to attend lectures in several buildings.

The recommendation was carried out by all universities.

2. Develop signs and guidance systems in universities. The recommendation was carried out by some universities.

In addition, the Ombudsman provided information on how to adapt information for students with different types of disabilities more easily and conveniently. A separate informational material on the accessibility of documents (Word, Excel, PDF, PPT and scanned documents) was also prepared.