

EXPERIMENTAL APPROACH FOR WORKING WITH STUDENTS IN THE ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE OF “ACCESS TO INFORMATION FOR PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS”: PERFORMANCE AND PARTICIPATION IN STUDENT'S EXPERIENCES

Sabina Eftimova

University of Library Studies and Information Technologies (ULSIT) (BULGARIA)

Abstract

According to statistics, by the beginning of 2020, one fifth of the EU population has some type of disability. In the 21st century, people are becoming increasingly aware of the ideas of humanism that underpin modern society. These ideas imply discovering and realizing the potential of each person, including the one with special needs. Creating equal opportunities and an accessible education environment, as well as successful integration into the social environment, is of paramount importance to these citizens.

A legal framework has been set up in Bulgaria that follows EU legal practices, seeking to specify these norms according to the Bulgarian conditions. Many of the international documents have been ratified.

In response to the legislative changes and the necessity to create an accessible environment and opportunities for the creation of trained specialists since the 2008/2009 academic year, the optional discipline of “Access to Information for People with Special Needs” has been introduced at the bachelor degree level in the specialty of Library and Information Management at the University of Library Studies and Information Technologies (ULSIT).

The academic course “Access to Information for People with Special Needs” provides students with theoretical and practical knowledge of accessibility to information and education for people with disabilities and the role of libraries and other cultural institutions in this process. International, European and national normative and legislative documents related to the rights of persons with disabilities are being studied. The discipline deals with problems not only of people with disabilities, but also of other groups of people with special needs, such as elderly, sick and with temporary deficits, people in isolation for various reasons, etc.

Forms for interaction with organizations of and for persons with disabilities are presented. Knowledge of the following requirements is acquired: accessibility of the environment; mandatory requirements for the development of services for people with different disabilities; financial instruments; legal aspects and others in providing library and information services to disadvantaged people. The traditional approaches to library and information services for people with different disabilities are discussed, as well as the possibilities of new information and communication technologies for ensuring equal access to information and knowledge for all citizens. The experience of foreign libraries and public institutions, the good practices of Bulgarian libraries and Bulgarian and international initiatives are studied.

The curriculum and the topics in it are updated annually in accordance with the changes in the European and national legislation, current issues are addressed and current trends in the development of this field are outlined, as well as the interests of the students are taken into account.

This report examines new, innovative forms of work with students to enable the broad-based development of their professional knowledge, skills and qualities. An experimental approach is presented for conducting seminars for fourth-year undergraduate students in full-time education studying the discipline of “Access to Information for People with Special Needs”.

Through their involvement in voluntary initiatives, the aim is to create the conditions for upgrading their qualification by building organizational capacity, enhancing their civic position on the problems of persons with special needs and acquiring sustainable practical skills for working in a real environment.

Keywords: Bulgaria, University of Library Studies and Information Technologies (ULSIT), Academic Discipline of “Access to Information for People with Special Needs”, student's experiences.

1 INTRODUCTION

According to Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions Communication on EU Policies and Volunteering: Recognising and Promoting Cross-border Voluntary Activities in the EU /* COM/2011/0568 final */20.09.2011, volunteering is a creator of human and social capital. It is a pathway to integration and employment and a key factor for improving social cohesion. Above all, volunteering translates the fundamental values of justice, solidarity, inclusion and citizenship upon which Europe is founded into action [1].

During the summer semester of 2019, bachelor students from the specialty of Library and Information Management following a full-time study programme, as part of their training in the discipline of "Access to Information for People with Special Needs" took part in a number of volunteer and charity causes published on the Time Heroes platform. As volunteering fosters social cohesion and social inclusion. Volunteering implies sharing and helping others, and in this way develops solidarity. Voluntary activities increase peoples' tolerance towards disadvantaged groups in society and help reduce racism and prejudice [1].

There are more and more forms in which volunteering becomes part of the learning and work environment. Many international universities add extra points to the admission of students because of their participation in various causes. Many employers create environment open to charity causes and volunteer initiatives, which supports the development of a volunteer culture in Bulgaria. This is why at ULSIT the stress is also placed on the active social position of the future specialists as an element of their education. In response to the legislative changes and the necessity to create an accessible environment and opportunities for the creation of trained specialists since the 2008/2009 academic year, the optional discipline of "Access to Information for People with Special Needs" has been introduced at the bachelor degree level in the specialty of Library and Information Management at the University of Library Studies and Information Technologies (ULSIT).

In the Access to Information for People with Special Needs Academic Course special attention is given to teaching methods that enhance student empathy and motivation and increase student involvement in a variety of extra curricular activities such as volunteer missions. Students are given the opportunity to give meaning to the study content by means of practical assignments, as well as to make other improvements aimed at reaching the social model of interaction with people with special needs ensuring their full-value integration and equal participation in public life [2].

The curriculum and the topics in it are updated annually in accordance with the changes in the European and national legislation, current issues are addressed and current trends in the development of this field are outlined, as well as the interests of the students are taken into account.

2 TRAINING SEMINARS IN THE DISCIPLINE OF "ACCESS TO INFORMATION FOR PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS"

Throughout the student learning period, it is necessary to control the process of transforming the learning activity into a vocational one - tracking not only the level of acquired knowledge, but also the progress and results of the students' practical activities. According to K. D Ushinski experience cannot be transmitted, but only thought and theoretical idea, which derive from experience, are transmitted in pedagogical work.

Therefore, students' practical training is based on scientific, theoretical knowledge and is organized in a pedagogical environment adequate to the regularities of the gradual formation of practical skills, habits and experiences. And the learning process should not only form professional competence, but also motivate students to actively work independently, increase professional and cognitive interest, a guarantee of future self-improvement [3]. The training process of Library and Information Management students involves a cycle of disciplines with a highly practical aspect.

Training seminars, which are a part of the various forms of teaching organization, ensure the practical use of theoretical knowledge, technological training and vocational education as they are a flexible form of training that includes the guidance of the teacher in the independent work of future professionals.

The training seminars present an opportunity to form the personal qualities of the students. Today, there are many varieties of training seminars, each of which provides specific conditions for student activity.

Training seminars in the discipline of “Access to Information for People with Special Needs” offer students the opportunity to participate in volunteer missions (social causes). Conducting training seminars in this form is a complex task for lecturers and students, but namely in practice the optimal synthesis between the various stages and layers of vocational training is realized.

The idea is for each student to choose a number of social causes from the TimeHeroes.org platform to participate in. This platform was chosen because it has proven itself through its good and successful practices, which are an example of realizing socially significant causes.

TimeHeroes is a non-governmental organization established in 2011 that created the TimeHeroes.org platform, which is by far the largest and most successful volunteering platform in Bulgaria. For the period from 2012 to March 2020, the platform has offered more than 2000 initiatives to support children at risk, people with disabilities and disadvantaged people, refugees, environmental, cultural and educational projects, etc. and has provided participation opportunities for over 68,000 volunteers.

The platform was created with the financial assistance of the America for Bulgaria Foundation; with their support the following initiatives were created: student volunteer clubs; a volunteer telephone to include retired people in volunteering activities; the HEROES Annual Volunteering Awards for distinguishing and promoting outstanding examples of volunteering; and the BOOST program to create effective communication strategies for NGOs in Bulgaria.

Time Heroes connects people who want to help with causes that need support. It is a platform for charity initiatives - missions where anyone can join on their own or be part of a team. The site can see all the active missions in which you can participate. After selecting a specific mission, the participant receives an e-mail with detailed information about the following: the duration of the mission, the organizer, how and where the materials can be sent (if the mission involves sending materials, books, clothing, food etc.) or when and where one can go to take part, contact details of the organizers, etc. According to the creators of the platform, there one can find “ideas how to turn your time and skills into a super positive force. Because you are a hero even if you don't know it yet!” For them: “one person's most valuable resource is time (plus skills, knowledge and abilities). And if you want to help, then you are a hero. Not the ones who fly and kill the bad guys, but those who make the world a better place step by step [4].

The platform team is made up of seven people. Pavel Kunchev is the director and co-organizer. For his work in developing creative solutions and digital tools that inspire civic engagement in 2018, he was selected as a scholarship holder of the Obama Foundation, Columbia University.

An accomplished group of 12 rising social change-makers from around the world has been selected as the first class of Obama Foundation Scholars at Columbia University. Consistent with the Obama Foundation's mission to inspire, empower, and connect the next generation of civic leaders, the new, year-long academic program based at Columbia will strengthen the expertise and knowledge of individuals with the demonstrated ability to be transformative leaders in their communities, nations, and the world [5]. The dynamic young leaders who comprise the first cohort of Scholars hail from Vietnam, Tunisia, Bulgaria, Cameroon, Burundi, Nigeria, Singapore, India, Paraguay, Colombia, France, and Zimbabwe via South Africa.

According to him, “A positive change is that more and more people are realizing that when they see a problem, there is no need to wait for someone else (in most cases the “state authorities”) to do something, but act, try, handle it. I think this is the best we can do and be.” [6]

Within the framework of the planned training in the 2016/2017 academic year, an experimental approach was also applied to the third- and fourth-year students in part-time study programs studying the discipline of “Access to Information for People with Special Needs” who were invited to participate in a voluntary initiative, related to people with special needs. A registration was made on the TimeHeroes website and, according to the possibilities offered there, the ULSIT team was created. [7] In the 2017/2018, 2018/2019 and 2019/2020 academic years, the same technique has been used again¹.

According to the data presented in the article “*The Discipline of Access to Information for People with Special Needs: Opportunities for Practical Knowledge Implementation*” at the end of 2017, 34 people participated in the ULSIT team who participated in 32 missions and collected 121 points, according to

¹ It is important to note that the discipline is also optional and may be selected in the second or third year for the Library and Information Management specialty which means that for the academic years under examination it has not been out regularly.

the website's ranking the team is in eighth place. At the end of the academic year 2018/2019, there were 50 participants, 64 missions and 319 points, and the team was ranked seventh. This shows a steady increase in the number of participants and the social causes in which they participate.

During the summer semester of 2019, bachelor students from the specialty of Library and Information Management following a full-time study programme, as part of their training in the discipline of "Access to Information for People with Special Needs", took part in a number of volunteer and charity causes published on the Time Heroes platform.

There was a novelty in the methodology, they were assigned two compulsory causes for all students to take part in the course, and it was left to their discretion to join other missions and choose their kind. On the one hand, this develops teamwork skills, raises the level of personal responsibility for the environment, and on the other hand, it opens up hundreds of opportunities to participate in social causes.

Voluntary activities can form either structured learning activities (so-called non-formal learning) in which the volunteer intentionally participates or unintentional and unstructured learning (so-called informal learning). In both cases, volunteers' learning usually is not certified. Recognising volunteering as a form of learning is therefore a priority of EU action in education and training [1].

Through the accumulation of experience in a real-world environment, both the professional and personal qualities of students are developed further. Volunteering initiatives are of great importance for students' education and provide a unique opportunity to work in a real-world environment and to achieve personal satisfaction.

3 MISSIONS INCLUDING STUDENTS OF LIBRARY AND INFORMATION MANAGEMENT SPECIALTY FROM GRADUATION 2020

As a component of students' assessment in the discipline of "Access to Information for People with Special Needs", each student presents, during the exam, in the form of presentation material for the volunteering activity in which he or she has participated. Here are some of the missions accomplished².

The two major missions offered by the lecturer are tailored to the specifics of the discipline being taught and aim to maximize the ability to reflect on and apply what has been learned. They are a prerequisite for building an active citizenship attitude:

THE FIRST MISSION IS "GETTING INVOLVED IN A CHRISTMAS WORKSHOP TO HELP PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES"

It is organized by the Art Workshop of the Worlds Day Care Centre is a project of Maria's World Foundation, for People with Intellectual Disabilities. Through the charity sale of Christmas souvenirs, the Worlds Day Center provides working materials in the art studio, and thus assists in the employment of people with intellectual disabilities.

In the day care center, these hearty and energetic young people learn and manage to communicate fully, to cope independently in everyday life and to take care of themselves. Daily activities help them feel useful, acquire new skills and confidence.

Volunteers should help with some of the tasks that require greater precision and fine motor skills. Volunteers with creative imagination, dexterity and skills in the applied arts are needed, as they gather outside customer care sessions at the day care center and help with souvenir finishing (Fig. 1,2,3).

² The missions description has been taken from the Time Heroes website <<https://timeheroes.org>>



Figure 1, 2, 3. Students at the Art Workshop of the World's Day Care Centre.

Anton Zarev, a full-time student from the specialty of Library and Information Management, and a 2020 graduate, shares his thoughts on his participation in this mission: "It was a great pleasure for me to be a part of this. I met unique people – conscientious, humble, cheerful. In my opinion, each of us should be involved in at least one such initiative. Each of us should change by not looking at people with disabilities away and disrespecting them for one reason or another. They are also people like us who want to be part of what is happening in the world around us."

Natalie Platnarova says: "During one afternoon I put stickers on Christmas toys and colored cones, I met surprisingly young women who supported the organization. I met disadvantaged young people, who were smilingly learning everything useful in our daily lives, the extremely pleasant atmosphere only contributed to the unique experience."

For Victoria Loginova, the day was "... full of emotions and it was a rewarding day. We helped prepare a Christmas charity market to help disadvantaged people, added to their collections of Christmas toys unique, handmade beautiful things. We learned a lot, we drank aromatic, hot tea and we really had fun."



Figure 5. Some of the donated items.

“TEST A MOBILE APP TO HELP ANIMALS IN TROUBLE” – HELP A PAW is a mobile application through which anyone can send and receive reports of stray animals so that the closest volunteers can respond in a timely manner. The purpose of the app is to provide a quick way to inform people about emergencies near them. Nelly Nikolova says: “This app is very useful, user friendly and isn't time-consuming, and it would be great if it gained widespread popularity so that there are no animals in distress in this way.” There are many more ideas and big goals to achieve, and the project creators are a small team of people who develop it in their spare time. Therefore, they need the help of enthusiastic volunteers to get involved in a quick and easy but important task – testing new versions.

“GIVE YARN TO THE KNIT FOR BULGARIAN CHILDREN INITIATIVE” – At the beginning of 2015, Mariana Geleva took up the initiative “With faith in good - give hope”. Women from all over Bulgaria have organized a group called “Knitting for Bulgarian Children” and have been making free toys and other beautiful things, which are then sold for the benefit of children and elderly people in need of expensive treatment. The money from the sale goes directly to the donor accounts of the sick people. In the first six months alone the knitters managed to raise over 15,000 leva. However, the hardest part for them is buying yarn - they usually deal with personal funds and with the help of donors. Students joined the initiative and donated yarn.

“BRING INFORMATION ABOUT FREE LIBRARY INTO YOUR FAVORITE CAFÉ AND BARS” – The Free Library Initiative is launched by the Arrest Bar in Varna and makes a proposal to all establishments in the country to set up a place (a bookshelf) for books, and every visitor can lend or borrow a pleasant item of reading there. The idea is for the books to be used for free, and they count on being borrowed and returned conscientiously by everyone. In order to expand this idea to the widest possible range of bars and cafes throughout Bulgaria, volunteers need to print out the information card for inclusion in the Free Library initiative and bring it to their favorite cafes and bars.

These are just some of the missions that students have been involved in, and here are some of the students' comments related to their assignment:

“While working on these missions, I was definitely confronted with reality. I realized that my problems, however important they might seem to me, were nothing compared to the problems of people around the world. It is sad for me that there are people, young children who have nothing to wear or to eat, or no suitable environment to develop; that there are people with special needs who fight for having a normal life and receive almost no assistance from the state. Instead of falling into the trap of being unnecessarily nervous every day, one should try to help other people who have been unlucky in life and are in need of help. These initiatives made me feel insecure about the environment we live in and the complete lack of empathy towards our fellow men. But nevertheless, they showed me how little time you can spend to make a difference.” *Tsvetelina Pesheva*, № 174-br, 4th year, Library and Information Management, full-time program, the class of 2020

“For me personally, volunteering is an opportunity for someone to get out of their comfort zone by helping people they don't know (or know). It is that pleasant feeling that you are worthy, that you have contributed to the community and life. But donating books and materials (you go to the store, buy

some things there and send them to some address and thus think that you have done something very important) has nothing to do with the feeling of taking the time to work out something personal (that you know will be shown at a charity bazaar and the money from its sale will be donated to a cause), walk with someone in the park, distribute warm food, visit someone's home who longs for a human presence and attention ... It is much more personal now and it makes you feel much better. For me, the most interesting initiative I had got involved in was the Maria's World Christmas workshop, where I saw what volunteering really was like and I met people who literally help others and not just pretending to be and say "I have been a volunteer!" afterwards." *Viden Svilenov*, 175-br, 4th year, Library and Information Management, full-time program, the class of 2020

"I suppose that at any given time, especially around such a bright holiday, like Christmas, everyone has said to themselves that they want to be useful and helpful. In a fast-paced, deep-seated everyday life, when it is difficult to find time for yourself and your loved ones, it is a challenge to set aside time, be it an hour in the month. But until you experience the personal pride and the inner warmth of helping even though doing some tiny gestures, you can hardly understand how filling it can be an afternoon spent coloring cones and drinking aromatic tea with people, who have dedicated themselves in helping others." *Natalie Platnarova*, 178-br, 4th year, Library and Information Management, full-time program, the class of 2020

"I am happy with the fact that I have participated in all these missions and contributed to them. Me, as well as my colleague students, are very pleased that during our training all these opportunities were presented to be part of the volunteer community in Bulgaria. Academic education is increasingly open to the needs of the world which we live in, and I hope more and more teachers to include similar interesting forms of work within the disciplines they teach. People do not stop to pay attention to such activities in a hectic daily life. I wholeheartedly support such causes, and it would be great if more people come together and follow our example by joining in." *Neli Nikolova*, 181-br, 4th year, Library and Information Management, full-time program, the class of 2020

"When I realized that as part of my training, I would be able to get involved in Time Heroes initiatives, I was very excited. I had only heard of this site before and knew what it was like, but I had never found the time and courage to participate. I was excited and worried at the same time. I didn't know what I was going to do or how I was going to handle it. But they greeted me very warmly. The experience was pleasant, the people I met were very positive and kind. They told me what to do, how I could be of any help, and made me feel I was in the right place. I felt very well that I had been able to help. I would love to do it again. The only thing I regret is that I haven't found the time to do it earlier!" *Victoria Loginova*, 184-br, 4th year, Library and Information Management, full-time program, the class of 2020

"Any charitable endeavor can be successfully achieved with the help of volunteers and donors. In a fast-paced daily life, many people have the financial opportunity to help with a cause, but they do not have the time, and many people are willing to help, but they do not have the resources, but they have the time. For this reason, everyone should help with whatever they can. A person with financial capacity cannot do anything alone, but many people who are united can achieve any goal. Anyone who is willing to help with a cause can become a volunteer, donors are important too, but one without the others cannot achieve the same result. There are a lot of charity campaigns, which allows each person to enroll showing a little kindness in their lives, anyone can do as long as they wish. Anyone can donate some of their financial resources or their work, thanks to DMS campaigns, bank accounts, volunteer foundations, etc., thus everyone can be helpful, solidary and empathetic and become a better person. In my opinion, everyone is important when it is necessary to do group work, everyone must be solidary with the cause and dedicated to it. The cause is an emotion, and that emotion must be stimulated and passed on to others because each person is important, a donor, a volunteer, or just someone who wants to put in their feelings and soul and impart good to others." *Yoana Zhekova*, 172-br, 4th year, Library and Information Management, full-time program, the class of 2020³

4 CONCLUSIONS

The last few decades, more and more work was done to modernize the higher education sector in order to meet the new needs of society. A number of world-wide researches were conducted to support this change, analyzing the need to achieve adequacy between higher education and social needs, and building new strategies for higher education [8]. Motivation and involvement of trainees in

³ Students' opinions are shared in the presentation material they prepare for the exam. They have agreed it to be published.

various activities is a serious resource whose professional management leads to the existing social impact.

Students become empathetic, show a high level of interest, responsibility, activity and creativity. The active participation of young people in society can be fostered through volunteering. If young people are well informed about volunteering and have positive experiences when volunteering, they are likely to continue to be active volunteers throughout their life, inspiring other young people to volunteer in their wake [1].

Due to the dynamic changes in the field of education, adequate changes in its content and educational technologies are needed in a timely manner so that it meets the stated goals. In this context, the university education of future library professionals should also be aimed at preparing them to work in an environment with numerous and complex interactions between people.

The process of acquiring a European appearance of the education of students in the specialty of Library and Information Management implies dynamic changes in the structure, content, forms, methods, etc. Nowadays, there is a need to create a new concept for the content of the learning process, based on the idea of innovation and flexibility, enriching and expanding the horizons of future professionals.

Changes in existing concepts and models of education are needed to meet current needs and challenges of contemporary professional activities. They should be consistent with the idea of training based on interdisciplinarity and innovative educational practices. This will contribute to meeting current educational, professional and social needs [9, 10].

Practical training through involvement in charitable initiatives over the years has proven to be an effective approach for working with students from the Faculty of Library Studies and Cultural Heritage, ULSIT. Bringing students together around important social causes is an effective approach for creating a positive attitude and commitment to the problems of people with special needs.

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