

## **Can Diversity Really be Managed? Students with Special Needs as Ombudsmen`s Clients**

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. It is great pleasure and honour to welcome you to our presentation. Ms Rieder and I will put special emphasis on disabled and chronically ill persons and how their problems are dealt with.

I would also like to add a few words with respect to Ms Rieder and her office, the Office for the Disabled. In this office two persons are employed, Ms Rieder as the head of the office and her deputy. Administratively, they belong to the Vice-Rector for Student Affairs and Teaching. But what concerns their work they are not bound by instructions.

Furthermore, there are tutors who help them in their everyday work.

I belong to the Office of the Austrian Student Ombudsman in the Ministry of Science, Research and Economy, who is also not bound by instructions. Roughly speaking, our daily work consists of dealing with complaints about shortcomings in the performance and services of higher education institutions and we keep direct communication with representatives of the tertiary sector. The staff members of the Office of the Ombudsman examine the inquiries and complaints submitted by students. Efforts are made, together with the respective institution, to find solutions. We are legally obliged to write an annual report on our work and submit it to the minister and the Parliament.

In Austria various laws and regulations define the rights of disabled and chronically ill persons. Under the Universities Act 2002 the following provisions concerning disabled persons have been made:

One of the guiding principles that have to be observed by the universities you can find under section 2, item 11: special attention has to be given to the needs of the handicapped.

Under section 135, paragraph 3, there is another short reference to disabled people regarding the representation of interests of university employees.

The most important provision for disabled students can be found under section 59, paragraph 1, item 12 and it regulates that students have the right to be examined according to an alternative method if they suffer from a permanent disability which makes it impossible for them to take an examination in the prescribed manner and the other method does not limit the content and standards of the examination.

Especially the end of the sentence ... *the other method does not limit the content and standards of the examination* often represent an obstacle.

But it also means that we have a clear legal provision that takes account of the needs of disabled people and serve as a basis for the practical implementation of

the rights of disabled or chronically ill students especially in the field of examinations.

*At the beginning of my talk I would first like to say a few words about my work in the Office for the Disabled at the University of Innsbruck and give you several real-life examples to illustrate the particular aspects of my work. Finally, I will try to answer the question: Can Diversity Really be Managed?*

*My work deals with the diversity factor "disability." Students are counseled according to the peer counseling principle, with the prime goals being equal rights and equal opportunities.*

*Managing the diversity factor "disability" is so difficult, because it comprises many aspects:*

*As a general rule we can say that no two disabilities and no two chronic illnesses are the same or comparable. Every case must be considered individually and, of course, only individual or personal solutions are possible.*

*At the University of Innsbruck students can register with the Office for the Disabled or with the university's administrative office as "disabled" or "chronically ill" according to the Disability Pass issued by the Austrian Ministry of Social Affairs, or as "begünstigte Behinderte", meaning persons with an at least 50% disability. Thus, we cannot presume that there is a correct or representative number of disabled and/or chronically ill students. Moreover, the amount of counseling each student receives varies greatly and generally depends on the degree of the particular person's impairment. For example, the amount of time that autistic students need for counseling is quite long.*

*Another factor is that increasingly more students with special needs are faced with financial resources that do not keep pace with the cost of living or that even decrease. Just a few years ago subsidies from the Austrian Ministry of Social Affairs were standard practice for special needs students, for example for equipment for a place where a blind or visually challenged student can work. Now, subsidies are granted only on a personal basis.*

*In recent years we have also noticed that persons with a psychological impairment increasingly enroll to study at our university and consult the Office for the Disabled. However, for persons with a psychological impairment it is particularly difficult and an enormous challenge to come forward and consult the Office for the Disabled.*

*What issues bring students to the Office of the Disabled?*

*Students who come to our office request modified examination modalities according to Section 59, paragraph 1, Item 12, of the Austrian University Act. This paragraph makes it possible for such students with the course instructor's cooperation to have an extended period of time for an examination, to take*

*examinations verbally instead of in writing, or vice versa, to have an assistant help write an examination, etc.*

*In particular circumstances such students can also take their examinations in the Office for the Disabled. This is an advantage because it means that after the regular examination period the student does not have to leave the lecture hall to continue the examination in a different place and thus seriously break his train of thought. This possibility is very much appreciated by disabled and/or chronically ill students, especially those with a psychological impairment.*

*Many such students who have to pass an admission examination also take these in the Office for the Disabled. In such cases our office cooperates with various administrative departments in order to ensure that the examinations are held on time.*

*In some circumstances the students we counsel can also request to be tutored. A tutor is a student who is not disabled and/or chronically ill and if at all possible is pursuing the same major field of study and who assists the disabled and/or chronically ill student in his or her everyday life at the university. Such assistance can be researching literature or taking notes during lectures or seminars, etc.*

*If someone would like to make a petition for a Disability Pass from the Austrian Ministry of Social Affairs, our office also helps the student do so.*

*A very noteworthy fact is that right now seven students with Asperger's syndrome are studying at the University of Innsbruck, and quite successfully too. Most of these students are studying at the Department of Translation Studies. This is made possible by close cooperation with the Office for the Disabled and the tutors granted to them.*

*For students who are blind or visually challenged as well as for wheelchair users the university has a computer workplace that is in frequent use.*

*Moreover, for disabled and/or chronically ill students and university employees every campus has a relaxation room, where students with special needs can take time out and tend to medical needs, such as catheter use or insulin injections. One of the students even does dialysis there. Some of the relaxation rooms have a hospital bed, refrigerator for medications, couch etc.*

*From these examples you can see how different disability and/or chronic illness and the pertinent counseling offered by our office can be.*

*Now I can pass the word to my dear friend Maria De Pellegin*

From January 2013 until April 2014 the Office of the Austrian Student Ombudsman had to deal with 36 cases. This seems to be a very low number of cases, but it is probably due to the fact that all Austrian public universities have already implemented offices or persons who deal with the problems of disabled or chronically ill students, and also some polytechnic institutes and teacher training colleges have established similar institutions. Therefore, students rather

contact the local Disabled Students` Officer than go to the Ministry. In highly escalated cases they possibly involve the Office of the Austrian Ombudsman.

The wise saying : “Where there is a will, there is a way” can be the motto of ombudspersons and of disabled students` officers as well.

Both have to act with caution and care, with utmost sensitivity to the feelings of those involved or to the vanities of some stakeholders who are sometimes inadequately informed about rights of disabled persons or lack interest or concern. However, it is an absolute must to manage diversity, and above all to find a way to deal with the needs of handicapped and chronically ill students.

*Thank you Maria.*

*To close our talk I return to the original question: **Can Diversity Really be Managed?***

*„United in Diversity“ is not only the motto of the European Union . Diversity is also an important potential of our universities and one that can still be developed further.*

*Diversity can be managed if particular factors and structures are in place. Important are cooperation, networking, creativity and empathy. Here I would like to remind you of one important thing: We have an increasing need to manage and regulate everything. In the case of diversity it is important to find the right balance, something that is not always easy. The most important thing is not to lose sight of what matters.*

*Thank you for your attention.*