



Summary 21st of September 2022

University Forum

Working and Studying with a Disability

Working and Studying with a Disability

On Wednesday morning, September 21st, 2022, the members and guests of the University Forum digitally discussed working and studying with a disability. After a plenary introduction to the theme by three guest speakers, those present split into groups to discuss the four sub-questions below. The results of those discussions are summarized in this report.

Questions & propositions

Do we recognize a stigma around disability in the workplace? If so, what could we do about it?

1

How do we ensure that students and employees with a disability can count on tailor-made solutions, regardless of where they go for help?

2

The facilities related to digital education that we set up during the corona crisis should also remain available after corona for students with a disability.

3

We should offer students the option to register their disability and automatically share it with teachers of courses that the student has enrolled in.

4

Guest Speakers

To introduce those present to the theme, three (guest) speakers took the floor at the start of the meeting: Priscilla Pengel, Maurits Huijbrechtse and Nina Westzaan.

Priscilla Pengel

Priscilla Pengel is an inclusive education advisor at ECIO: the Expertise Center for Inclusive Education. ECIO supports universities and other institutes with issues related to educational accessibility. How can we ensure that students with support needs can optimally participate in education? Students with a disability are an important group within this group, for whom there is currently not always sufficient attention. Institutions often struggle with the question of what exactly is possible, allowed and effective. The ECIO can help with this. Priscilla therefore concluded with a helping hand to contact us if there is a need.

Maurits Huijbrechtse

Maurits Huijbrechtse is a history student at the UvA and a student assistant at UvA IDEAs. IDEAs is a platform for and by students with a disability. They are committed to, among other things, better facilities, visibility and a general culture change to make education more accessible for students with disabilities. They are therefore an important discussion partner for other bodies within the UvA that deal with the theme and are part of the UvA Knowledge Platform Disabilities. Maurits tells the members that it is important to involve students as much as possible in policy making and to find out together with them what is desirable and possible. That involvement can really be improved.

Nina Westzaan

Nina Westzaan is assistant program coordinator at the MA Private Law at the UvA, mentor and herself a member of the University Forum. From her experience as a mentor, Nina shared her observation that the amount of students with a request for help due to physical or mental limitations is much greater than people think. We are not talking about a small group, but a limited visible group. Improving that visibility could be an important step towards cultural change. Furthermore, it appears that there are large differences between students with regard to access to the correct information. As a result, the student does not always have a good idea of what the student is entitled to and what is possible. Attempts to expand those possibilities often meet with the rebuttal that we must prevent abuse of the schemes by students without disabilities. Nina emphasizes that we should not focus on that abuse, because it unnecessarily distracts us from the real problem: that studying is currently unnecessarily inaccessible for a significant group of students.

Do we recognize a stigma around disability in the workplace? If so, what could we do about it?

If we understand 'stigma' as a strong negative label or even a taboo, we think that would be too strong to properly describe what is going on. Incomprehension would be more suitable. Colleagues usually do not know about each other who has which disability and what that entails. There are also many misunderstandings and prejudices about disabilities. Colleagues and managers often have the expectation that you should be able to do the same as the rest and do not always have an idea of what exactly having a disability means. Certainly the less visible and psychological disabilities sometimes remain under the radar, so that the employee in question can count on less support from the environment. We take it for granted that we should try to accommodate a colleague in a wheelchair as well as possible, but for colleagues with a mental disability this is not yet the case. We need more awareness of the entire range of disability.

Mutual understanding is essential to improve support for employees with disabilities. One way to work on this is by providing more information, but also by discussing the topic at team and department meetings. A central question in this regard should be what exactly we mean by 'disability'. Ultimately, it is up to the employee to decide whether or not to share their own experiences, but it is the responsibility of managers to create a space in which everyone feels safe enough to share them. We must do this not only for colleagues who are already working at the UvA, but also for all potential colleagues who are not currently working with us because they feel there is no space for them. The UvA would benefit from greater diversity and inclusivity, especially with regard to staff and students with disabilities. For example, (neuro)diversity can definitely add value within a team. Let's not only focus on what someone can't do or less well, but on what someone is good at. The right time to discuss that is now and not just when it is too late and problems arise.

How do we ensure that students and employees with a disability can count on tailor-made solutions, regardless of where they go for help?

The issue differs significantly depending on whether we are talking about employees or students. It was decided to focus mainly on students in the discussion in the University Forum. In general, we recognize a great willingness among student counsellors, study advisors and coordinators to offer students with a disability the right facilities to give them the opportunity to follow the study in question despite their disability. At the same time, we also notice in practice that students do not always receive the facilities they need. During this session of the University Forum, several reasons for this were identified. There is fundamentally a lack of a widely shared understanding of what it means to study with a disability and what it entails. The visibility of the theme is lagging behind. It would therefore help to look for role models and to build a community of students and staff with disabilities, as well as staff and fellow students without disabilities who, for whatever reason, would like to learn more in that area. We should be grateful for the students and staff with disabilities who are already investing a lot of time and energy with perseverance in representing this – not insignificant – group of UvA students and have thus already taken the first steps in building that community.

Another obstacle is a lack of expertise among the people responsible for organizing the right facilities. The request for help differs per disability, but can also differ between students with at face value the same disability. This means that a lot of customization is necessary, but also a lot of knowledge of what is allowed, possible and reasonable. Reasonableness will always play a role, as long as there are limitations in terms of money and capacity, but also depends on the learning outcomes and which exceptions can be made without running the risk of no longer being able to meet the learning outcomes. This consideration is complicated and study advisors feel insufficiently equipped to make it, especially when it comes to psychological disabilities. The call for a central expertise center is widely supported. In addition to technical knowledge, experiences can also be exchanged there. Students who are the first to study with a certain disability have to figure out a lot themselves, and the relevant student counsellors, study advisors, coordinators

and teachers also learn a lot, but once the student has graduated, that experience disappears when staff changes position. A central center of expertise can provide the necessary continuity by building up such experiences and thus providing a frame of reference for handling a new case.

The UvA is a predominantly decentralized university, but centralization is always possible if we deem it necessary. In the context of studying and working with a disability, there are good reasons to look at more centrally organized policies. In addition to the above mentioned expertise center, it may also be wise to organise financing centrally. Small-scale programs and ailing faculties offer lesser facilities than larger programs and prosperous faculties, while your choice of study should not have a major impact on whether or not your right to education can be realised. The costs of, for example, hiring a sign interpreter should be financed centrally, in order to reduce the differences between study programs and faculties.

We will also have to recognize that too often organizing extra facilities or exceptions is expected as an extra effort from the teacher (or other staff member), on top of an already heavy workload. Too often we see efforts for students and employees with a disability as an 'extra', while we should structurally make time and money available for this. This also means that any future expertise center and the students and staff who work there must be sufficiently financed. It is right to be critical of The Hague for its lagging funding per student, but it is certainly not something the UvA can hide behind. If the UvA is serious about improving the accessibility of education for students with disabilities - and this is apparent from the signing of the declaration of intent to implement the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities - then the UvA must also demonstrate this by putting the right structural (financial) basis in order.

The facilities related to digital education that we set up during the corona crisis should also remain available after corona for students with a disability.

First of all, it is good to consider the fact that the post-corona situation is not the same everywhere. Hybrid has become the norm in some places, including for students without a disability, but not everywhere. In addition, not everyone can speak of 'after corona' yet. There are students and employees with an increased vulnerability to covid, who therefore still have to take the virus into account continuously. Should programs that have now completely switched to physical education still offer students with a disability the opportunity to join digitally? Most students and employees will look back on 'corona education' as being of lacking quality and are pleased that they can now teach and follow education on location. However, we must note that not everyone has the same perspective. For many students with disabilities, digital participation offered a good outcome. For example, it saves students with a mobility impairment a trip to campus and makes studying less psychologically taxing for students with autism. It is therefore difficult for students with disabilities to understand that lecturers do not want to make digital participation possible for them, especially now that we know that it is in principle feasible.

Digital participation in lectures can count on a lot of support, just like during previous meetings of the University Forum on digital education, but there is more doubt regarding tutorials. First of all, there is concern about abuse, especially among teachers. Teachers may not (and do not want to) ask their students for a health certificate, but they also want to prevent making it possible for students to abuse facilities. In principle, we want to tailor these facilities to the group of students for whom it would make a big difference because of their disabilities. The concern regarding possible abuse should not be the guiding principle. Having to apply for the facility can be a sufficient barrier, but it is also wise to have more basic trust in the students in the first place. It is also not necessarily the case that digital participation for some students would be at the expense of the quality of education for the other students. This is a risk that could be avoided with the right support for teachers.

In the covid period, we have noticed how real the risk is that we lose sight of vulnerable students. Maintaining (preferably physi-

cal) contact moments could also be very valuable for students with a mental disability. In itself, this concern is not sufficient to refrain from offering hybrid education for this group, but it does mean that extra contacts are then needed to reduce the risk of isolation and loneliness. Other concerns are of a more practical nature. Hybrid education turned out to be very labour-intensive in times of covid. Given the workload, we cannot expect even more effort from teachers without providing extra support. We are talking about capacity, for example in the form of more student assistants, but also about expertise. Hybrid education can work, but it does require some know-how, which not all teachers have. This also applies to knowledge of the relevant policies.

Following the discussion of the second sub-question, it is important to consider the enormous diversity of requests for help. It is therefore questionable whether a uniform measure such as the proposition proposes is sensible. Perhaps it would be better to add the digital teaching methods with which we have built up experience in times of covid to all the different possible interventions that study advisors and teachers can draw on to aid students with disabilities, in consultation with them.

We should offer students the option to register their disability and automatically share it with teachers of courses that the student has enrolled in.

Improvements in the process from application to granting of facilities should be examined and applied in conjunction. That starts with identifying the problems to be solved. One of those problems for the student is that the student in question has to explain again and again what is going on to each new teacher. This is one of the reasons to further explore registration. There are other reasons for this as well. For example, there are legal obligations in the context of safety that are easier to implement if the UvA knows who needs which kind help without having to ask for it again and again. Organizing facilities and exchanging information between different departments and faculties would also become a lot easier with a registration system. On the student's side, a registration is especially attractive because it means that the student in question does not have to explain again and again their predicament. Furthermore, it would be easier for study programs to find out very early with such a registration with which help requests a student is going to start the program, instead of that information only being exchanged in conversation with the study advisor later in the academic year.

However, there are also reasons to be cautious. Sure, registration should be voluntary, but if registration becomes the norm, we could inadvertently make it more difficult for students who, for whatever reason, don't want registration to arrange the right facilities. In this way, we unintentionally exert pressure to share your disability. A possible solution would be not to register your disability, but your specific request for help. In this way we can reduce risks related to stigma and privacy, even though we will never completely eliminate them in this way. Another concern is that the exact request for help is not always completely clear to the student himself. It is wise to formulate these in consultation and not to leave this entirely up to the student. Ultimately, people are positive about the idea of voluntary registration, although it is still necessary to look closely at what happens with that registration and what expectations we create with it among teachers, among others. The problem of lack of expertise and limitations in terms of time and money, as discussed extensively in other break-out sessions, also remains with the registration. We cannot – at the moment – fully rely on the professionalism of teachers in this area. Not because of unwillingness, but because of ignorance.



Vragen? Neem dan contact op met secretaris
Roeland Voorbergen
universiteitsforum-bb@uva.nl