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Lifelong education of persons with disabilities – obstacles, support, and recommendations for the improvement of university segment²

Extended summary

Lifelong education of persons with disabilities can represent a strategy for improving their quality of life and social position as well as support to their autonomous living. Since 2009, educational reforms have been implemented in the Republic of Serbia for developing the lifelong education of persons with disabilities, with a special focus on the fragment of the pre-university education. Despite the implemented reforms, we do not have much data on individual fragments of the lifelong education of persons with disabilities, especially not from the perspective of the persons themselves. In the entire body of research on inclusive education, teachers are most often examined as agents who should put the designated education policies into practice. Research that focuses on persons with disabilities and seeks to examine their experience of education, especially in the domain of university education, is extremely rare. Consequently, those for whom inclusion in education is “intended” are marginalized in academic research and the process of knowledge creation. In order to include students with disabilities in the process of knowledge creation regarding their university education and identify important aspects of the experience of university education of persons with disabilities, we conducted a focus group study with a total of seven students with disabilities at the University of Belgrade. Based on the obtained data, recommendations were formulated for improving the quality of university education as one fragment of the lifelong education of persons with disabilities.

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The research questions were the following: What is your general impression of the education you have had so far? What was your experience with the transition into higher education? What obstacles did you have to face in higher education? What forms of support are available in higher education? What forms are missing? Do you have any recommendations for the improvement of higher education? The research was an opportunity to hear students' perspectives and to expand the corpus of knowledge about the experience of the students with disabilities with higher education. The research focused on the aspects of the subjective experience and perceptions and the technique of focus-group conversations was used for this purpose. The analysis of the obtained data enabled the identification of domains in which, in the opinion of the research participants, it is necessary to develop university education for students with disabilities. We presented the research results by referring to the structure of the research questions, within which we presented the students' experiences of the transition to the world of university education, the obstacles they encountered in the domain of higher education, the available forms of support and recommendations for improving university education for students with disabilities. We grouped the presented recommendations into three separate categories of recommendations for improving university education: the first category refers to various aspects of the organization of university teaching; the second category of recommendations refers to individual segments of the work and professional development of university teachers; the third category refers to infrastructural improvements and the development of services that make university education more accessible and viable for students with disabilities. The defined categories represent those aspects of university education that need to be further improved, with the aim of providing a higher quality education for students with disabilities and improving (their) educational and social reality.

Keywords: lifelong education of persons with disabilities, inclusive lifelong education, students with disabilities, university education

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