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It takes more than just learning effort in order to successfully complete a university degree. In some moments, your path is blocked by barriers from around you. Support in tackling such barriers is provided by a system of assistance to students with special needs run by Charles University's Faculty of Arts. PhDr. David Čáp, coordinator of assistance to students with special needs, explains.



To begin with, could you define the type of person who receives your assistance. Who does the term “students with special needs” apply to?

They are a comparatively wide range of people, covering students with sensory handicaps, i.e. the deaf, hard of hearing, blind or sight-impaired. The group also contains students with physical handicaps, with limited ability to move their arms or legs. Other people with special needs include students and applicants with specific learning disabilities, i.e., in particular, dyslexia, dysgraphia and dysortographia, as well as those with chronic physical or mental disorders.



What does an admitted student need to do in order to be eligible for the assistance?

It is, above all, a good thing to indicate in the application form that you are interested, based on your handicap, in a modified version of the admission procedure. If the person is admitted, I can approach them with an offer of assistance and include them in the registry of students with special needs. Another important thing is called functional diagnostics. The purpose of this is to identify exactly what modifications of the degree programme and of the testing procedure the student requires in order to meet their special needs. And having gone through the diagnostics, the student may make full use of the services. Functional diagnostics also lead to recommendations for the relevant teachers and departments, guiding them on how to accommodate the particular student's needs in order to allow his/her potential to develop and be fulfilled.

What forms of assistance are provided to handicapped students?

First and foremost, there are the five key assistance services provided by Charles University Rectorate's Office for Students with Special Needs. One concrete example is promotion of language education, i.e. language instruction with modified teaching materials. Equally, sporting activities modified for students with special needs are provided centrally. Another form of assistance, targeted for the blind, in particular, is digitization of study materials. The deaf and hard-of-hearing make use of interpreting services which include taking notes and copying texts in addition to interpreting as such. The last of the key services is study assistance – this includes accompanying, tutoring, but takes a number of other forms as well.

The Faculty of Arts itself runs a Psychological Counselling Centre, implements modifications of the study and exams, arranges barrier-free premises for study, equips lecture rooms and other premises with suitable technologies and ensures overall support for students with special needs.

And what are your duties as Coordinator?

The Coordinator acts like a liaison officer of sorts, mediating between two parts of the academic world, communicating with the staff at the Rectorate as well as the Faculty of Arts academia and students. And, apart from being a communicator, the Coordinator is, to an extent, an organizer and provider of care, and is also responsible for functional diagnostics, preparing modified versions of the admission procedure and receiving tips from students and teachers for improving conditions for students with special needs, trying to put these ideas into practice. The Coordinator may also provide specific aids and promote construction changes. In some cases, the Coordinator will intervene with teachers, asking them to accommodate to the students' needs by, among other things, introducing suitable learning materials (such as editable online documents readable by specialized software for the blind), individual consultation and instruction, and ensuring short waiting times in exams for students who might suffer from extreme stress due to long waiting periods, which might potentially affect their exam performance).

I happen to be a psychologist and teacher at the Department of Psychology which means I am on the team of the Faculty's Psychological Counselling Centre.

In your opinion, is there anything that may still be improved regarding assistance to students with special needs? Are any changes planned?

The most burning issue is most probably that some of the Faculty's premises are still not fully barrier-free, especially the building at 20 Celetná Street. Another thing worth improving is the awareness among students about the services provided; students currently seem to be very little informed. Apart from other factors, this fact has resulted this year in a new role of the Coordinator who is now expected to take more action. It is because of these new responsibilities that I have been trying to identify FA students with a handicap who have so far been unregistered, and to introduce them to the services they could make use of. In addition, I have been seeking to improve the availability of information about this assistance among other members of the academia so that they know about the opportunities in time to successfully solve the students' problems.

PhDr. David Čáp has a degree in special pedagogy – ethopedy from Charles University's Faculty of Education and in psychology from the CU FA. Currently a teacher and Ph.D. student at the Department of Psychology, CU FA, he serves as coordinator for assistance to students with special needs and member of the Faculty of Arts' Psychological Counselling Centre, providing psychological counselling and psychotherapy specialized in personality development, crisis and interpersonal relationships.