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**Problems and Perspectives of  
Accessible Professional Education  
for Disabled People in Russia**

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## **Problems and Perspectives of Accessible Professional Education for Disabled People in Russia**

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### **Abstract**

Social integration of disabled people is one of priorities of modern social policy of Russia. The most important mechanism of social integration is professional education. The article deals with the data of sociological research concerning the development of accessible professional education system conducted in Sankt-Petersburg. Unfortunately the system of inclusive education isn't created yet in Russia. The majority of universities of St. Petersburg could not provide necessary conditions for people with disabilities. In practice such people won't be able to be trained as due to the lack of the space organized under their needs, and special training programs. The majority of citizens of St. Petersburg assign the main responsibility for wellbeing of disabled people to the state, but not to society and not to themselves personally, and concerning education they believe that it would be more convenient for disabled people to be trained in special institution or distant education. People with special needs also aren't rather active and motivated in upholding of the rights to get professional education. At the same time, it is necessary to recognize that in the direction of development of integrative forms of education, certainly, there are positive changes, and the further development of this activity demands close interaction of the state, educational institutions, society and people with special needs.

**Key Words:**

**Corresponding Author:**

## **Introduction**

Social protection and social integration of disabled people is one of the priorities of social policy on the national and local levels in Russia. At the present time in Russia, about ten million people have disabilities. Moreover, due to forecasted population ageing and increasing of life expectancy of people with serious illnesses as a result of new treatments, it seems likely that the proportion of disabled people in the total population will continue to rise. The level of development of civil society in Russia is associated with changing attitudes toward disabled people and the respect for civil rights of this part of the population. Funding of disability benefits represents a considerable part of the federal and regional budgets, and authorities are interested in developing a more effective system of social support for people with disabilities.

One of the key ways of social integration is professional education of disabled people. Education is significant type of social capital, and for people with disabilities the importance of professional education as social resources to overcome social exclusion and economic dependence is increasing dramatically.

The development of inclusive professional education system requires at least the following conditions: firstly, the development of an appropriate legal framework; secondly, the creation of the necessary infrastructure; thirdly the development and introduction of new forms of learning, new educational programs and curricula; fourthly, public opinion supporting social integration of people with disabilities and inclusive education system; and, finally, the capabilities of persons with disabilities to realize their rights to professional and higher education.

The focus of this paper is on the situation with education of disabled people in St. Petersburg. St. Petersburg is the second largest city in Russia. The population of Saint Petersburg is almost 5 million or 3.39% of the total population of Russia. According to the official data, over 750 000 disabled people are registered in St. Petersburg on 01.06.2011, which constitutes about 17% of the total population of the city; among them, 15,2% are people at working age (about 120 000). But the research results can be important not only for St. Petersburg but also for the different Russian regions.

## **Research methods**

This paper presents the data of research “Development of accessible professional educational environment for persons with disabilities in St. Petersburg” conducted in 2012-2013 in St. Petersburg State University.

The background theses of the paper states that, at the present time, disabled people of working age are not adequately integrated into society. The state social policy, which encompasses education, employment, social security, health, housing and information policy, is mainly based on the medical model of disability. Although it is declared that Russian social policy focuses on the

independent life of persons with disabilities, in practice there are many barriers to this approach. There are a number of conflicts between disabled people, state and market, and there is still no effective mechanisms for resolving the conflicts. In many cases, this concerns the enforcement of legislation against disability discrimination. In this context it is extremely important to take into account the point of view of people with special challenges as well as public opinions. These circumstances have determined the tasks and methods of the sociological research conducted in St. Petersburg.

The study uses different research methods, in particular the analysis of the legal framework of the Russian Federation, the telephone survey of 788 residents of St. Petersburg at the age of 18 to 60 years, including 132 persons with disabilities.<sup>1</sup> The telephone survey of 31 leading universities of St. Petersburg has also implemented; the main issues relates to admission and education of people with disabilities in higher institutions

For the purposes of gaining more objective knowledge concerning research questions, expert-interviews were also conducted in the framework of the study. The experts were heads of non-governmental organizations, heads of departments, and professors of universities. These interviews were done with the main focus on the problems of professional education of disabled people.

### **Theoretical-methodological background**

Studies mainly addressing issues of disability have a rather long tradition in Europe and USA. Since the 1970's British scientists and activists (Oliver, Shakespeare, Oliver, Watson, Campbell) argue that disability is the consequence of social institutes and criticize the medical view on disability. Many American studies (Drake, Charlton, Parlin, Richard, Shriner, Hahn) were devoted to the failure of the paternalistic approach in social policy and consisted of analyses of social movements connected with discrimination and other problems of disabled peoples.

In Russia, the study of disability began to develop in the post-Soviet time. Researches on disability relevant for this paper cover both theoretical and empirical results, including main topics such as policy of invalids, inclusive education and education as a factor of social integration, acceptable environment and employment, gender issues of disabilities, disability pensions and insurances, social work with disabled people, disability employment.

In social practice, there are two main models of disability: medical and social. Within the medical model, a disabled person is considered as a person with stable physical, mental, intellectual or sensorial disabilities and, due to this fact, all efforts are directed to improve or to maintain his/her physical and mental condition.

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<sup>1</sup>This telephone survey was conducted by the Center of sociological and internet studies, St. Petersburg State University

The modern approach to social support of disabled people has to be based on the socially-oriented model of disability, which considers disability as a social construction. The attention to the interaction between the disabled person, environment and society as a whole is a key point of the social approach to disability (Shakespeare and Watson, 1997, Hughes and Patterson, 1997). Disability is understood as a social and political issue rather than as a medical one (Oliver, 1996); meaning that disability is not just the condition of a person, but also the result of his/her relations with social environment. Barriers of the existing environment, such as social, legal, cultural issues, are the main reasons for social exclusion of disabled people. Therefore, from the positions of a socially-oriented model, the main efforts should be directed not only to improve and maintain a physical condition of disabled people, but also to overcome environmental barriers, to stimulate the process of interaction of disabled people and others, for their inclusion into social life.

The conception of the social model of disability is closely connected to the conception of quality of life and the concept of independent living. Quality of life appears an integral feature of the daily conditions typical for a particular social environment. Assessment of quality of life appears, on the one hand, as an objective assessment of a range of conditions of life and, on the other, as satisfaction with the quality of life of the people themselves. Quality of life for persons with disabilities depends on the degree of satisfaction of needs and interests of a person, on life function and the result of social interaction of person with existing circumstances in which human potential is realized.

The conception of independent living is not only a way of looking at disability and society, but it is much more a philosophy of living and social movement of people with disabilities working for self-determination, self-respect and equal opportunities. "Independence will change the quality of life for persons with disabilities" - that is the essence of this conception.

In our research five major areas, that particularly determines quality of life and key ways of integration were selected: material well-being (living conditions and income), education and employment, system of rehabilitation, accessibility of environment, public attitudes to disabled people and information policy regarding disability. The results of the study will be presented structurally on these subjects.

## **Research Results**

The current policy of higher education for the disabled, in this case, though, provides quite good chance of professionalization, but significantly limits an option of the program of training and a training place.

Before 1990s social policy for the disabled in Russia was of predominantly compensatory when measures of this policy was to provide universal cash benefits and services. Radical transformation of the political institutions of the Russian society encouraged the adoption of the Federal Law "On social protection of disabled people in the Russian Federation" (1995).



Because of this, as well as a number of other legislative acts adopted in the 90 years (for example, the new Constitution of the Russian Federation, the Education Law (1992), etc.) the new model of disability stated to realize. This has increased the availability of educational programs for people with disabilities, expanded the number and variety of opportunities offered. However, professional education policy is focused on disabled people with disabilities as a social minority, and does not allow the disabled people to choose the educational program and institute for of study; these issues are in the competence of government or educational institutions.

In the main legal regulations regulating vocational training by disabled people, there is an accurate legislative fixing of opportunity to get a professional education in specialized institutions, and rather uncertain requirements concerning needs to equip with technical means of rehabilitation educational institutions, lack of the legislative bases regulating directly process of a choice of specialty and training in educational institution. Similar formulations in the legislation show differentiation two statuses - the student and the disabled person. That is, these statuses don't supplement each other, and to some extent confront (the person or the student, or the disabled person). In case these statuses supplement each other, it would be reflected in curricula, teaching methods, features of the staff list of a higher educational institution, in that range of services and adaptations of the high school environment which will allow the disabled student of a message normal social life and to get an education at university.

For the last 15 years in Russia as a whole, and in St. Petersburg in particular, there was a significant improvement in the field of social protection of disabled people. This progress is expressed that to obligatory forms of support (a grant, means of rehabilitation, medical services, etc.) it was added understanding of need of creation for persons with limited opportunities of full-fledged conditions for full integration into society. In a context of the federal program "Accessible Environment 2011-2015" there is a tendency to intensify measures to support the educational system for the disabled.

Analyzing Russian legislation, it is possible to draw a conclusion that in the sphere of professional education of disabled people, actions of rehabilitation character, than integrative still dominate. And though modern Russian social policy focuses disabled people on an active position concerning the employment, independent life, it is impossible to tell that mechanisms of realization of the legislation are optimum, also there is no system of an assessment of efficiency of implementation of acts in practice and suppression of violations of the rights of disabled people in the field of the available professional educational system.

An important indicator of the level of tolerance for people with disabilities in society is the attitudes of citizens towards inclusive education. According to the telephone survey of 788 residents of St. Petersburg, the majority of respondents (50.8%) support that in the same class there were their children and children with disabilities. 37.1% of respondents have neutral position on

the matter, 5.1% do not know, but 5.8% believe that children with disabilities must learn to separate.

Also, 57.9% of respondents believe that inclusive education in high schools, colleges and universities may affect positively as persons with disabilities, and the ordinary students who will be due to this interaction more human, learn self-help and care. 28% of respondents think that inclusion would have no impact. Only 3.8% of respondents are sure that inclusive education would have negative influence on the educational process. 3.6% suggested that another possible influence. According to them, people with disabilities may be subject to ridicule and even abuse by healthy students. The remaining respondents could not answer this question (6.7%).

Of the respondents 10% were students. Of these, 85% believe that there are not persons with disabilities among students of their schools or universities. Only 7% said they are studying with disabled people (8% did not know about it.). 63% of this groups of respondents (who are students) support the inclusive education, but if the health problem will not interfere with the educational process of whole group. 5% consider that disabled people will be more comfortable to study in special schools and 15% are indifferent to this issue.

The most of respondents evaluate the efforts of the authorities on social support of disabled people negatively. So, with the statement "Government pays enough attention to people with disabilities and takes real actions to support them", 67,3 % of respondents do not agree (answers "rather not" - 31.1% "no"- 46.2%). 70% of respondents who are persons with a disability, also do not agree with the statement. Conversely, with the statement "Government does not care about the disabled, and is only talking about support not doing" 68,1% of participants agree (answers: "yes"- 42,6 and "more likely"- 25,5%. 70.3% of people with disability within their sample agree with this statement ("yes" - 49.2%, "more likely yes" - 21.2%).

With the statement that in our society the rights of disabled people is constantly violated agree 69,5 % of the general sample (44.8% answer "yes" and 24.7% "more likely yes"), 19,2 disagree (8.9% answer "no" and 10.3 % - "probably not"), 12.3% have difficulties to answer. Persons with disabilities also mostly agree with this statement 68, 3% ("yes" 46.2% "more likely yes" - 12.1%) and only 21,9% disagree (13.6% answer "no", 8.3% - "probably not")

With the statement that currently disabled basically have all the possibilities to get a professional education, including higher education, along with other citizens in E, 24.7% agree ("yes") and 17.4% ("more likely yes") of all respondents. 19.2% of respondents rather disagree, 23.7% strongly disagree, 14.5% were undecided. Thus, about the same numbers of people believe that people with disabilities can fully participate in the professional education system, as well as hold the opposite opinion.

The most effective measures to develop professional training for persons with disabilities, respondents: the creation of special resource information centers for the disabled (452 people), the creation of special government programs for education and employment of people with disabilities (435) selection of targeted subsidies for the education for the disabled (430), the

creation and expansion of specialized vocational rehabilitation institutions (364 persons), distance learning (327 people), increasing access to education of persons with disabilities in the educational institutions of the city (226 people) . Thus, distance learning and training in professional institutions is still perceived by society as the most suitable form for disabled people, unlike inclusive education.

As a whole, the vast majority of citizens belong to problems of disabled people with participation, sometimes even considering that position of disabled people is worse, than it is estimated by persons with special needs. Respondents look positively at inclusive education, though, apparently, not especially believe in its efficiency, considering that it is better to disabled people to study separately.

One of the main directions of social policy in the sphere of social support of people with disabilities is connected with the creation of an accessible environment, i.e. environment which is equipped according to the special needs of disabled person or groups.

The research data shows that disabled people are limited in their social activity. One of the main reasons is the lack of accessibility of public places, but this is not the only reason, which is confirmed by data on the accessibility of public places.

67,4% of respondents with disability (N=132) claim that in their area there is no available environment for disabled people (ramps, transport, elevators in public institutions, etc.), hold opposite opinion of 19,7%, and other 19% found it difficult to answer. 50,8% of respondents consider that in St. Petersburg the available environment for people with limited opportunities isn't created. Thus, access to educational institutions (as well as to other social and cultural city facilities) for the persons having disability, is extremely complicated.

It is necessary to note that the level of accessibility of many public places (especially modern buildings, i.e. shopping and recreation centers) is higher than frequency of visiting it by people with disabilities. In the interviews, many respondents demonstrated a passive position, a lack of willingness to be included to the social life and a lack of motivation to have an active social life.

The main prospects for increasing the quality of life of handicapped people might be connected with their professional education (also increasing qualifications and retraining) and further employment. That is why the question of training and professional education is one of the key questions within the system of social protection and integration of people with disabilities.

There are opportunities for disabled people in St. Petersburg to get professional education in special professional-rehabilitation centers. However, most state educational organizations of high and higher professional education are not equipped to provide access for disabled people and still closed for them despite legitimized equal opportunities for all people within the system of general and professional education. Besides, the present system of professional education for disabled people offer a limited number of professional specialties and does not correspond to the demands of the labor market. As a result,

professional education often does not increase the competitive ability of disabled people in the labor market.

In the course of a telephone survey of the state and non-state universities of St. Petersburg it was captured 31 most popular educational institutions (21 and 10 respectively), those actually  $\frac{1}{4}$  part of all number of higher institutions of the city. Generally universities offer full-time tuition in the general stream with all students, also there is an opportunity to be trained in absentia. Thus, the infrastructure for persons with violation of the musculoskeletal device is developed extremely poorly; for example, elevators are present in 4 state universities from 21 educational institutions which have taken part in poll. In non-state universities the infrastructure is developed also poorly, only two of ten can be considered from the point of view of suitability for movement of persons with limited opportunities. The sixth part of state universities offers remote programs for disabled people. In non-state educational institutions of the program of distance learning meet more often than in state that partly it is possible to explain with commercial interest of higher education institutions in expansion of group of students.

The most effective measures aimed at the development of professional education for persons with limited opportunities, respondents consider: allocation of special subsidies for training for disabled people of-73 people; creation of special resource information centers for disabled people of the person - 72 persons; creation of special state programs of training and employment of people with limited opportunities - 67 people; creation and expansion specialized professional and rehabilitation educational institutions - 58 people; distance learning – 42 persons. On the last place (31 respondents) there is «to make more available training of persons with limited opportunities in educational institutions of the city". Thus, disabled people don't trust in the opportunity to be trained in common with healthy people, removing inclusive training on the second plan after special institutions and remote programs.

## **Conclusions**

In Russia today there are serious obstacles for realization by disabled people in their rights to education, work, welfare, which dramatically reduce the quality of life of citizens with disabilities and aggravate social inequality. The Russian system of social support for people with disabilities has invited a lot of criticism from the disabled people and experts. Particularly there were a lot of critical comments concerning the following spheres: a lack of accessible environment; people with disabilities still feel extremely uncomfortable in the city; a significant lack of rehabilitation centers and recreation places available for disabled people; problems of getting professional education, higher education, not enough choice of occupations available for disabled people, and lack of opportunities for inclusive education; .problems with employment;. poor cooperation of public authorities with non-governmental organizations;

problems in getting technical tools of rehabilitation; A lack of information; and, very limited opportunities to organize leisure time for the disabled people.

It is necessary to note that in St. Petersburg and Russia in the whole nowadays there is not enough attention to the problems of inclusive education, which demands the creation of conditions and infrastructure of education not only in specialized social organizations, but also in general educational institutions at different levels (high, vocational high education and higher education).

Professional education is a step to further occupational activities; the majority of the respondents, who were studying at the time of the research, intended to work in a chosen specialty after trainings. The municipal employment centers and specialized branches of employment services for population provide full information about vacancies in different organizations for disabled people and help them to find a job. But, in reality, it is still too difficult for disabled people.

The analysis of the research results allows one to argue that the medical model of disability still dominates in the sphere of social support in Russia. The main efforts of public authorities in the field of social integration of disabled people are directed to the creation of an accessible environment, i.e. an environment created taking into account disabled people's needs. However, for now, accessibility is estimated only from the technical infrastructure's point of view. The social model of disability demands one to evaluate accessibility by the criteria of quality of life, level of social integration, and observation of human rights.

In order to overcome existing shortcomings, public authorities should follow in practice the social conception of disability and admit that disability is a reflection of social, technological and legal aspects of society.

The study confirms the existence of rather strong paternalistic approach among people with disabilities; the expectations on increasing the quality of life of disabled people are predominantly connected with activities of the federal government and local authorities. Of course it obstructs social integration of the target group; social integration certainly requires empowering disabled people themselves. The institute of social work should play a significant role in changing the situation. Social work organizations, besides traditional social services, have to pay more attention to the empowerment of disabled people and to develop the skills and capabilities of people with disabilities to live independently and to manage their lives by themselves.

The research findings also demonstrate that non-government sector supporting people with disabilities is still relatively weak in Russia, despite the expansion of civil institutions in recent years. Strengthening roles of NGOs for improving legislation and advocacy of disabled people's interests is an essential condition for social integration of disabled people in Russia.

Summing up, it should be noted that inclusive education is crucial for the integration of disabled people into society and, in addition to the direct function of obtaining the professional knowledge, adaptive to function and

allows individuals disabilities increase their social capital, get new motivation and skills, thus reduce exclusion.

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