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## ***Butterflies and Icebreakers* – how the support system for students with disabilities works at University of Natural Sciences and Humanities in Siedlce**

*Motyle i Lodołamacze, czyli jak działa system wsparcia dla studentów z niepełnosprawnościami na Uniwersytecie Przyrodniczo Humanistycznym w Siedlcach*

**Abstract:** Two statuettes the *Butterfly* and *Icebreakers* given to Siedlce University of Natural Sciences and Humanities for the program of inclusive education for students with disabilities gave the author of this article inspiration to look simultaneously at the students and the Centre for Education and Rehabilitation of Disabled Students. The Centre operates on three levels Pre-student, Student and Post-student and offers different services for students according to their specific needs, which means making the university physically, educationally, psychologically and socially accessible. Students are compared to *Butterflies* who undergo four stages, from being pupils at school, later are enrolled and adjust to university rules, then become students, take part in all aspects of academic life and finally *Butterflies* when they graduate and find their successful professional career.

**Keywords:** *Butterflies, Icebreakers*, students, with disabilities, Centre for Education and Rehabilitation of Disabled Students, educational support

**Streszczenie:** Dwie statuetki *Motyl* i *Lodołamacze*, które otrzymał Uniwersytet Przyrodniczo Humanistyczny w Siedlcach za program kształcenia integracyjnego studentów z niepełnosprawnościami, dały autorce tego artykułu inspirację, aby przyjrzeć się, jak studenci ze swoimi potrzebami edukacyjnymi wpływają na działania Centrum Kształcenia i Rehabilitacji Osób Niepełnosprawnych. Centrum działa w trzech obszarach nazwanych: Pre-student, Student i Post-student, oferując różnego rodzaju wsparcie stosownie do potrzeb studentów, dzięki czemu uczelnia staje się fizycznie, edukacyjnie, psychologicznie i spo-

łącznie dostępna. Studenci są tu porównani do motyli, które przechodzą cztery fazy rozwoju, od ucznia w szkole, który poszukuje ścieżki rozwoju, następnie zapisuje się na studia i musi oswoić się z zasadami panującymi w tym nowym środowisku jakim jest uczelnia, następnie zaczynają studiować korzystając ze wszystkich aspektów życia studenckiego aby w końcu stać się *Motylami*, które kończą studia i zaczynają swoją karierę zawodową z sukcesem.

**Słowa kluczowe:** *Motyle, Łodolamacze*, studenci z niepełnosprawnościami, Centrum Kształcenia i Rehabilitacji Studentów Niepełnosprawnych, wsparcie edukacyjne



fot. Michał Moryl; DeafArt by Beata Gulati (CKiRON)  
and Jarosław Prasula (Deaf Student)

*Butterflies* and *Icebreakers* two awards which were given to our University inspired me to give this title to my article. Why? After the first ten years of our program we got the prize from the First Lady of Poland and it was a *Butterfly statuette*. Over the years we have received three *Icebreakers statuettes* in the category Institution for our unique program for disabled students by the Polish Organisation of Employers of People with Disabilities (POPON) in 2008, 2012, 2014.

*Butterflies* are beautiful, colourful and so are our students who are from all over Poland, with different social backgrounds, life experiences, successes and hopes for future. The lifecycle of a butterfly consists of four stages which we can compare to our students' educa-

tional path. First, freshmen who do not know anything about university life. They are all freshers but with different school experiences, some were only partially involved in the process of learning, some fully and some were totally excluded. It all depends on what type of support is provided by school, such as speech therapists, psychologists or pedagogues, counselling. They usually know what kind of help they need, most frequently it is sign language interpreters, unless they are from a special school for the deaf or hard-of-hearing students. Moreover, there are many students who still have individual educational programs at their homes. In addition to these, they lack social skills and competences. Therefore, at the preliminary stage we have a schoolboy or a schoolgirl with a very vague idea of their future career at University (First stage of *Butterfly's* life cycle).

Hence, our first task as a Centre and *an Icebreaker* is to inform young people about our program but also to inspire them and analyse what their preferences are and what courses match their expectations and abilities.

Before we start discovering the stages and mutual interaction(s) between the students (*Butterflies*) and the Centre (*Icebreaker*), let me talk about who we are dealing with and what the Centre stands for.

At present, we have 231 students with disabilities. Among them there are 54 students with mild level of disability, 128 with moderate level of disability and 49 students with severe level of disability. The biggest number 110 stands for students with mobility problems. The next is a group of 44 deaf and hard-of-hearing students. We have 18 visually impaired persons and 59 with other illnesses and learning difficulties. They have been studying on different faculties, 96 students at the Faculty of Humanities, 71 students at the Faculty of Economic and Legal Sciences, 35 students at the Faculty of Natural Sciences and 29 students at the Faculty of Sciences. Most of them are on Bachelor's and Master's Studies both on full-time and extramural studies but fortunately there is a growing number of students with disabilities on doctoral studies (six people).

The Centre for Education and Rehabilitation of Disabled Students (CKiRON) is an inter-departmental unit of the Siedlce University of Natural Sciences and Humanities. An interesting fact is that, it was established in 1994 after an agreement between two Ministries: Ministry of Education and Ministry of Labour and Social Politics. It took five years to set up this first official support service centre for the disabled in Poland after the first person with disability had been enrolled as a student at our university in 1989.

I have been the Director of the Centre for 15 years now. I must add that all the key developments which have taken place over those years, are a result of what the disabled students have taught us, about their needs and what we can do to make them students in every respect. They have been the experts who have showed us how to help them to develop and to “fly”, to become fully fledged students and consequently successful graduates. But at the same time they gave us the power to become *Icebreakers* and open the path for future students with similar challenges.

Our office operates on three levels, PRE-STUDENT, STUDENT and POST-STUDENT. The first stage from our office perspective is called PRE-STUDENT or diagnosis. During this stage we organise two main events: *OPEN DAY* and *ADAPTATION DAY* and we stay up-to-date on our website, Facebook and so on and so forth. *OPEN DAY* at University is a day when we meet with candidates and give presentations, materials, guides about the program. We advise about the kind of support available. Candidates fill in a questionnaire prepared by the Centre, which helps us to understand their special requirements. It helps them to go into the second *Butterfly* stage and enrol as a student. Then they become “frozen” until the next event *ADAPTATION DAY*. Next, we organise consultation sessions where the students have an opportunity to meet and talk to the Vice-chancellor (Rector) and the other University authorities. Later, they get to know the staff at the Centre with whom they will soon be having close contact. They meet the interpreters, personal assistants for people with disabilities, psychologists, speech therapists and physio-

therapists. They have the library training, OSH training, they learn how to read timetable and how to place a request for an accessible transportation, sign language interpreters, note-takers, assistants etc. But the most important part is when we have the face-to face session with our candidates where we ask them all the necessary questions to find out what their special needs are. Then in cooperation with all the disability advisors who work at the Centre, we write a classified report. It is given in a written form to all the university teachers on request of the students, to let them know what special requirements are needed during the classes. We underline that lessons need to be adapted, but at the same time the highest requirements towards the students should be restored.

This is the time when our *Butterflies* start to develop their wings. Some of them slowly, some faster, some still remain in the third stage some fly with spread wings from the very beginning.

The second level called STUDENT is of course the time of close and intense cooperation between the Centre and the students. We offer a number of various services depending on students' needs to enable them to be fully included in the life of the University. Our aim is to help the disabled to become University students in every respect (*to spread their wings*).

For students with mobility problems we provide access to most University buildings. All newly constructed buildings have been adapted to meet the needs of our students. All the repair work has been done taking into consideration accessibility. Among many adaptations we can enumerate: elevators, ramps, special non-slippery linings. There are more parking areas for the disabled, spacious classrooms and lecture halls, labs with places for people on wheelchairs. Individual work cabins at our modern library are also adapted. Instead of Physical Education classes we offer rehabilitation sessions and numerous sport sections according to students' interests (volleyball, archery, swimming, hippo therapy, self-defence). In the addition to the above-mentioned services, we help the students to move between the different University buildings providing transportation.

We have a special Van with an elevator to do this. We also offer accommodation in dormitories with rooms specially adapted for students with mobility problems.

For the blind and visually impaired we have talking elevators with signs in Braille. We facilitate mobility training. Students take course in Typhloinformatics. During these classes, conducted by a PhD teacher who himself happens to be blind, students learn how to use computer equipment and different software designed for the blind and visually impaired. Another blind member of our staff prepares alternative materials in the Accessible Resources Unit at the Library. He converts printed text into Braille, records data, recognises scanned materials and then converts into text format files, records on CDs and other alternative forms.

Special equipment and software is provided both in the Typhlo-Lab and the Library. In the Typhlo-Lab there are: DELL Pentium 3ghz desktop Computer, a special 17 inch DELL Monitor, Speech synthesizer Apollo Dolphin, Braille Monitor KTS 40, Brajloterm, Braille Printer Index Everest old series, TGD QUICKTAC, OBR-Recognition, Supernova, Jaws. In the Library and the Accessible Resources Unit there are: Smart Nav, Zy Fuse, Plectalk, Kajetek, Twinkle Bright, Braille Monitor, Big Keys, Trackball, Twinkle Spectrum;

We supply deaf and hard-of-hearing students with flashing alarms in dormitories, inductive loops in most lecture halls, and special seating arrangements in labs. Five sign language interpreters are present at most of the classes. Two of them are employed on fixed-term employment contracts. We also offer a Polish Language course for congenitally deaf students. Most hearing impaired students attend speech therapy sessions. English for deaf and hard-of-hearing students has been conducted by the author of this article since 2004.

For students with learning difficulties we offer: individualised program of studies, pedagogical, psychological support, psychiatric consultations and speech therapy.

In our Library, there are accessible places for work in all units with special equipment and software for students from all the above mentioned groups.

Students' life is not only studying it is also some fun. During the carnival, we organise *Integration Ball*. Many students take part in this event. However, our most important annual festival is the *Integration Day*. On this day we hold conferences and artistic, sports and cultural performances. We invite famous disabled people and present our students' pantomime, theatre, dance shows, signing the music etc. Moreover, very interesting workshops are organised during this festival (Cued Speech, Polish Sign Language, Sign Writing, Bobo-Migi, Deaf Art and so on.)

We cooperate with all institutions connected with disabled people on all educational levels in Siedlce. we started cooperation with other universities in Poland in 2001. We have hosted many guests from foreign universities Dave Laycock, Patrick Mulcahy from University of Westminster in London, Willy Aastrup from University of Aarhus in Denmark, Professor Daniela Janáková from Charles University in Prague in Czech Republic. In addition, we hosted Marnie Roadburg, Director and Pat Geddes, coordinator of Students Disability Services at The University of Edinburgh in Scotland, Peter Quinn from Oxford University, Alan Hurst from SKILL, Karen Robson, Disability Service Manager at UWIC, Martin Smith Manager Disability and Dyslexia Service at Brunel University.

In the third level Post-student, we are in contact with our graduates. We monitor their career. We watch our *Butterflies* and just help them find the appropriate habitat. We are go-between the employers and them. So far, more than eight hundred people have graduated from our University. They are happy graduates, because most of them have been successful in finding jobs. Among them, there are doctors of science, there are teachers, social workers, scientists, tutors. They have achieved success in different fields, in sports, career, scientific research and personal life. Their success is undoubtedly the success of our University.

In this article I have tried to explore the life of our students (*Butterflies*) and the role of the CKiRON (*Icebreakers*). On one hand we have a person in his or her four stages: a schoolboy or a schoolgirl searching for his or her educational path (stage 1), then we have a person who is enrolled at the University trying to adapt and cope with everyday university challenges, first classes etc. (stage 2). Then comes the stage of an active student (stage 3) who finally begins to take part in daily academic life. And finally these full fledged students turn into *Butterflies* (4-th stage) as they graduate and successfully enter the world of professional life.

On the other hand we have the disability office (*the Icebreakers*), a group of professionals who constantly try to enhance their abilities in order to serve the students and master the programme to develop a successful support system for people with special needs.