



## Toolkit 5

# Disability, Chronic Illness and Mental Health Status Hate on Campus



## Overview of toolkit

This toolkit addresses recognised needs around hate that target differences of individuals or groups of students relating to disability, chronic illness and mental health status. The toolkit provides an innovative, open access, skills-based resource, to support the main HE target groups, and other interested stakeholders, to enhance their practice and skills in responding to hate and extremism-based activity on campus, related to these areas. It will provide information on identification of hate speech, cyber bullying in relation to disability, chronic illness and mental health status and case studies and examples to support users in the integration of innovations from across Europe into their own contexts. As there are not open access resources dealing with hate relate to disability, chronic illness and mental ill health currently available in Europe, therefore, we addressed this toolkit 5 for all those interested in students and staff wellbeing in European HEIs and its impact is expected to be high.

## Target audiences for the toolkit

- ❖ Lecturers and tutors in HE
- ❖ Operational and strategic managers and leaders in tertiary education
- ❖ HEI student welfare and support staff
- ❖ Students Unions organizations at national and pan-European levels.
- ❖ NGOs that work closely with HEIs in relation to disability, chronic illness and mental health support for young people, including students.
- ❖ Students Union organizations operating in local, national and pan-European context.
- ❖ Policy makers involved with HE development, but also interested in youth wellbeing and education more generally will be a key target group.

This toolkit was led by TUAS, Finland, and then all partners of the CHECK IT HE Erasmus+ funded project contributed materials. A transnational meeting (M6) was held to discuss face-to-face the content and structure of this output, methodology and steps towards its final creation, task division and timeline leading to production. The toolkit was supported by a dedicated webinar, to further raise awareness and disseminate information on the output across target groups, stakeholders, and other interested parties. The toolkit is one of six toolkits, one report and an app created by the CHECK IT HE project and available at: <https://www.bcu.ac.uk/social-sciences/research/identities-and-inequalities/research-projects/checkit-he>



## Key Terms

### Disability

The World Health Organisation (WHO) on their main website note that, "**Disability is part of being human.** Almost everyone will temporarily or permanently experience disability at some point in their life. An estimated 1.3 billion people – about 16% of the global population – currently experience significant disability. This number is increasing due in part to population ageing and an increase in the prevalence of noncommunicable diseases.

Disability results from the interaction between individuals who have a condition or impairment, such as cerebral palsy, Down Syndrome or depression, with disabling societal and environmental factors including negative attitudes, inaccessible transportation and public buildings, and limited social support. Sometimes national policies will define who has a disability, but the person may not consider themselves to be disabled or may reject this label. Disability may be visible to others or invisible, it might be experienced from birth or be experienced as one's life goes on.

A person's environment and social attitudes have a huge effect on the experience and extent of disability. Inaccessible environments create barriers that often hinder the full and effective participation of disabled and/or chronically ill people in society on an equal basis with others. Progress on improving social participation can be made by addressing these barriers and facilitating support to enable all to be included in their day to day lives.

The main point here is that disability often leads to exclusion because of ableism in societies, which creates barriers and fails to include others. This is linked to issues of 'othering' and discrimination and is something that it is vital to challenge and address, whether in HE or other parts of society.

Unfortunately, negative attitudes to disabled people can extend into disability hate crime and abuse. In many countries, as will be noted below, such hate is recognised and can be prosecuted as a crime through the criminal justice system.

### Mental health status



Everyone has a status of mental health, and it can vary throughout human life. Different experiences and stages in life affect our mental health status. A good mental health status promotes well-being and makes it easier to use a person's potential and participate in society.





## Chronic illness



Chronic illness can be created at birth or occur during one's lifetime, it is a long term and ongoing status. It often has a strong effect on a person's mental health and wellbeing. Chronic illnesses are often not visible to others but may cause a person to suffer pain, tiredness or other things affecting ability to live "normal" daily life or attend work or studies as others.



## Accessibility

A feature in a service (like education e.g.) or activity that can be assessed on how easily it can be reached by all people. Lack of accessibility can be seen from a physical, cognitive, or mental angle. There are often legal duties around accessibility.

## Cyber Bullying



Bullying carried out in social media platforms, mobile phones, online games or learning management systems for studies. Cyber bullying can be seen as easily hidden but it usually leaves a digital footprint. Cyber bullying often happens alongside other bullying and can often have a negative effect on a person's well-being and mental health status.

## Stigma



A negative social labelling based on target persons or groups distinguishable features. Stigma is created by others based on physiological differences or visible disabilities, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, language or dialect, or another distinguishable feature. Stigmatization leads easily to avoidance or covering of stigmatized features.





## The Main areas of focus of the Toolkit:

1. Identification of hate speech in relation to disability, chronic illness and mental health on campus.
2. Identification of cyber bullying in relation to disability, chronic illness and mental health.
3. What kind of case studies (national programs, guidelines, research work etc.) of hate speech and cyber bullying in relation to disability, chronic illness and mental health exist?
4. Best practices and examples on how to deal with hate speech and cyber bullying in relation to disability, chronic illness, and mental health.

### **Activity 1**

Before you read any further and see some of the ways that CHECK IT partner countries HE systems tackle disability and chronic illness in HE, it is vital to reflect upon your own context. Think about the following questions and note down any issues:

1. Does, and if so how does, your HEI or organization identify hate speech in relation to disability, chronic illness, and mental health on campus?
2. Is cyber bullying considered an issue in relation to disability, chronic illness and mental health in HEIs you work in or know of from your country?
3. Are there any national programmes, guidelines or research that you know of, going on in relation to this area on hate speech and cyber bullying in relation to disability, chronic illness and mental health?
4. Are best practices and examples gathered anywhere to help people deal with hate speech and cyber bullying in relation to disability, chronic illness, and mental health.

**Comment:** reflecting on these questions you might have realized there is some development in this field, or possibly you may have found none. There will be different experiences across HEIs in different countries and regions. The sections below examine how these issues are seen and are being addressed in HEIs, and this is designed to stimulate examination of your practice.



## **Consortium Partner Country Evidence and Experiences**

As a consortium, the CHECK IT HE project team have reach in terms of experience of HE hate and extremism across Portugal, Turkey, Cyprus, Serbia and the Western Balkans, the UK and Finland. This provides a strong insight into diverse issues regarding hate and extremism in/related to the wider European student body and HE. Below we include material from the partners on the key issues for HE around disability, illness status and hate and extremism in HE in our countries, and in doing so, this provides exemplars of experiences, issues, policies, and practices. You will want to take notes on issues and responses that might be of use to you within your country and your HE context. However, please be aware that all countries have their own rules, regulations, and policies on HE and on disability and chronic illness discrimination and hate, which may be very different in your own country. Therefore, the section below is a guide and stimulus for thinking, rather than being prescriptive or designing to outline the only ways that HEIs might respond.

### **Cyprus – Disability and Chronic Illness in Society and HEIs**

A recent research study in the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) examining the identification of the views and attitudes of Higher education students towards different forms of hate speech online as well as offline, indicated that more than half of the participants have already experienced hate speech. Findings also suggested that hate speech was more frequent in real life and the offensive behaviour concerned physical appearance and class racism. For the respondents, hate speech is defined as the offensive behaviour which is based on disability, sexual orientation religion, class, ethnicity, etc. and its main cause is rooted in the false sense of superiority, and in certain cases due to insecurities and life disappointment. Individuals who admitted having used hate speech, claimed that they were merely expressing their opinion and two thirds said they did not know hate speech was illegal (Mate, 2018).

The Anti-Discrimination Body which functions under the aegis of the Office of the Commissioner for Administration and Human Rights (Ombudsperson) is an independent institution which aims to combat discrimination and promote equality. The Anti-Discrimination Body examines complaints submitted by anybody regarding discrimination and it can also make interventions relating to discrimination cases ex-officio. The ombudsperson may investigate complaints made against any public service or official for actions that violate human rights. The ombudsperson makes recommendations to correct wrongdoings but cannot enforce them (Ennhri, 2022). If a discriminative treatment or practice is affirmed, the Anti-Discrimination Body has the authority to apply sanctions. OCD collaborates with the Police and other stakeholders such as NGOs and other governmental institutions in guaranteeing the effective implementation of relevant legislation. However, no statistical data regarding complaints submitted to this Body, is available. Moreover, OCD is understaffed and incapable of monitoring and prosecuting hate crime due to inadequacy in



resources. Meanwhile, the response of the criminal justice system is also ineffective as the Attorney General's Office and the courts do not proceed with the collection of data on hate crime incidents (Dilmaç, Kocadal & Tringides, 2021).

### Hate Crime Incidents in Cyprus

The majority of hate crime incidents remain unresolved and/or not recorded as such, due to reasons like (a) inadequacy and/or averseness of police officers to identify (b) police officers' lack of expertise due to lack of training, (c) personal prejudices. Therefore, since offenders are not being punished, a message of impunity is being sent as criminal law provisions against hate speech incidents are not being applied (KISA, 2019). It should also be noted that on many occasions victims who experience hate crime do not report the incident mainly because of lack of confidence in the impact of reporting and lack of awareness of rights (Dilmaç, Kocadal & Tringides, 2021). There is very restricted information on hate crimes towards people with disabilities, chronic illness and mental health issues. The only available data, is based on a hate crime recording website and phone app, from the 203 registered complains, 10 concerned disability hate (Dilmaç, Kocadal & Tringides, 2019), but there is no further information available.

### Prominent issues around Disability, Chronic Illness and Mental Health Status in the HEIs in Cyprus

According to the KESY report (2022), university students indicate higher distress levels than the general population. Namely, a significant percentage of students, consider psychological distress as part of being a student and do not seek professional support. High levels of psychological distress are reflected in many ways, including depression, and anxiety, resulting in reduced capacity for social, work, or study activities. A number of factors seem to contribute to higher levels of distress among university students such as academic pressure, workload, financial concerns, sleep deprivation, transitioning from home and into adulthood. Body image is also of great concern among university students and might become more profound because of various stressors encountered in academic life, such as academic pressure, lack of time for self-care, etc. Body dissatisfaction, which is frequently reported among female and male students, can lead to dieting and maladaptive weight control behaviors. Dieting and psychological distress (such as experiencing intense negative affect) increase the risk for binge eating and other eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia among youth. Self-harm is also a major mental health difficulty among university students, and it is regarded as a coping strategy and a way of surviving and managing emotional pain and stress. Approximately 1 in 6 students have self-harmed, a number which is rapidly increasing.

In terms of performance, research studies have revealed a gap between the performance of young disabled people and other young people. Specifically, young people with disabilities (aged 18-24) tend to leave their studies more frequently than non-disabled peers of the same age groups. Moreover, persons with disabilities (age 30-34) are less likely to complete tertiary education than their peers (and this is reinforced in the wider sample for age 30-39).



## Wider Inclusion Policy and Practice in Cyprus

In policies, disability, chronic illness and mental health status are addressed at the HEIs in the RoC (Republic of Cyprus) as a matter of social inclusion. HEIs in Cyprus state they are committed to offering high quality inclusive education, and attach priority in policy documents to treating all students with respect and care. Institutions accept students with a) Learning disabilities, such as Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, dyslexia, dyscalculia or dysgraphia, b) Chronic health disorders, c) mobility disabilities and Physical Impairments, d) hearing disability, e) psychological or psychiatric disabilities, such as mood, anxiety and depressive disorders, non-severe autism spectrum disorder. Higher Education Institutions are encouraged by the Cyprus Agency of Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education to develop policies for promoting equality to enhance understanding and respect towards diversity (e.g. University of Cyprus, 2020; University of Nicosia, 2008). Therefore, HEIs, have develop a range of mechanisms to ensure that students with disabilities are not discriminated against and are accommodated to participate in education on the same basis as all other students, respond to the diverse needs and strengths of all students, ensure that students with disabilities and additional needs are treated with respect and care, foster a spirit of acceptance of people with disabilities beyond the college community, work on establishing new policies to improve the social inclusion of people with disabilities.

HEIs in the RoC have adopted the Equality and Anti-Discrimination Policy. Acknowledging that people differ from each other because of their gender identity, sexual orientation, religion or belief, ethnicity, race, origin, nationality, age, ability, marital status, language, or socioeconomic background, HEIs adopt specific policies for understanding and respecting diversity, while promoting equal opportunities, using various tools and practices to manage these differences effectively. Discrimination based on abilities, racial or ethnic origin, religion, beliefs, age, sexual orientation or disability constitutes a disciplinary offence and is strictly punished. All complaints and/or grievances of discrimination shall be managed promptly, in a serious manner and with complete confidentiality.

Formal Complaints about disability, chronic illness and mental health based hate and abuse may be submitted with the following institutions and authorities in the Republic of Cyprus: Commissioner for Administration and the Protection of Human Rights (Ombudsperson) – Equality and Anti-Discrimination Body, Labour Department Inspectors, Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance and Police.

To provide an equal access to education students applying to a HEI and have a documented disability, chronic health problems or learning difficulties that might impact their studies are advised to request an intake meeting with a staff member of the University. Additionally, Disability Services are offered to support students with learning difficulties or disabilities. Disability Services are offered in line with the Education and Training of Children with Special Needs Law 1999 and subsequent Regulations, according to the University's 'Students with Disabilities Policy'. These services include:

- Special accommodations / adjustments in class and during assessments (examples include alternative classroom arrangements, notetaking services, extra time on exams / assessments, use of scribe or reader during examinations, information on assistive technology etc).





- Individual Counselling and use of referrals to other University Support Services (i.e. Peer Tutoring, Student Advocate etc) and to external community resources / services /grants.
- Specialised group workshops for academic and study skills enhancement.
- Financial assistance for students with disabilities with limited financial resources.

After receiving student's consent, the Counselling Centre is responsible, to inform faculty members of any accommodations that are granted to a particular student in their courses. The faculty members are expected to provide those accommodations and provide accurate and timely feedback when required regarding a student's progress. At the same time, faculty members should be supported and guided by the Counselling Centre in providing accommodations and creating an inclusive classroom where students with disabilities can excel.

Students with disabilities, health issues, or students facing social problems can visit the Social Support Office to discuss how these affect their studies, in complete confidentiality, as well as to seek ways to handle these problems (e.g. by providing extra academic facilitation and adjustments). The Social Support office aims to provide the best and most efficient support possible to students with disabilities and health issues, so that equal access to their academic obligations is guaranteed. This is achieved through decisions taken by appropriate University Committees which are based on a) "The Education and Training of Children with Special Needs Act of 1999", b) The Regulations "Regarding the Education and Training of Children with Special Needs of 2001 and 2003", c) The University Rules, d) The Code of Ethics in teaching, e) The available funding for supportive measures, and f) The practices followed by other countries. The difficulties faced by students are dealt with in cooperation with the appropriate Committee for Student Welfare of the University, the Faculty Members responsible for students support of each Department, the student's professors, the administrative staff of the University, and other governmental services and organizations. Special care is given in improving the accessibility of the University's facilities for all students.

Despite these policies, as Mavrou, Liasidou, Tsakiri (2021) assert the rights of students with disabilities are violated by current education policies and procedures, and there is little evidence currently of future policy and practice changes that can redress and ensure equal access to non discriminatory and equitable educational provision. It should be noted that students with disabilities, are also excluded from basic rights such as access to qualified personal assistants, who can support the process of their learning and socialisation in HE. This issue was also addressed by the Cypriot HE Ombudsperson, after performing an independent investigation into this matter.

### Hate Speech in Cypriot HE

The vast majority of the national programmes, guidelines, and research work on combating hate speech are in relation to gender, race, and religion. The case studies that do exist in relation to disability, chronic illness and mental health aim to solely raise awareness and strengthen inclusion.

For example, The Centre for Therapy, Training and Research (KESY) which is a non-profit, non-governmental organization that is affiliated with the University of Nicosia has presented a programme



which aims to promote emotional and mental health wellness among University students, raise awareness on important mental health issues such as psychological well-being, self-harm behaviours, body-image and eating-related concerns (attitudes and behaviors) (KESY, 2022).

KISA, an NGO which is focused on the fields of Migration, Asylum, Racism, Discrimination and Trafficking, is a partner to the eMORE Project, an EU funded project and supports the development/improvement of efficient monitoring and reporting mechanisms for online hate speech and hate crime and, in particular, the need to foster the integration between monitoring and reporting tools into a joint innovative knowledge model (Emore, 2018).

The Foundation for the Management of European Lifelong Learning Programmes (IDEP), recognising its key role as a National Service in supporting the participating organisations, in order to strengthen the dimension of inclusion and diversity in their projects, has started the development of a National Action Plan for Integration and Diversity. This Action Plan is governed by the objectives of the Framework for Enhancing Integration and Diversity of the Erasmus + programme and the European Solidarity Corps for the period 2021-2027, and follows the Guidelines for the Implementation of the Strategy for Integration and Diversity within the framework of Erasmus + and the European Solidarity Corps. At the same time, the Action Plan is adjusted to the national framework, taking into account the priorities of the Republic of Cyprus for integration and diversity, as these are expressed by the competent bodies in each case (European Commission, 2020).

The Ministers' Council with its Decision No. 73.519 dated 9.5. 2012 appointed the Department for Social Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities of the Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurances, as the Focal Point concerning the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). The Department for Social Inclusion of People with Disabilities co-ordinated, with the state services responsible for disability issues, the preparation of the First National Disability Strategy 2018-2028 and the Second National Action Plan for Disability 2018-2020. The First National Disability Strategy 2018-2028 is built on the principles of the Strategic Planning Guide of the Ministry of Finance (vision, values, goals, objectives) and is linked to the recommendations made to the Republic of Cyprus by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Committee, the European Disability Strategy 2010-2020 and the Council of Europe's Disability Strategy 2017-2023. Its purpose is to define the vision, values, strategic goals and objectives of the Republic of Cyprus for the implementation of the rights of persons with disabilities, by directing all the state actors towards those actions that will add value and will further improve the quality of persons with disabilities' life.

The Second National Disability Action Plan covered a three-year period from 2018 to 2020. The main expected results of which were to promote: (a) independent living, social inclusion, mobility and social protection of people with disabilities, (b) employment and vocational training, (c) education, (d) the accessibility of persons with disabilities to the natural and built environment, transport and information, (e) provision of health and rehabilitation services, (f) information and awareness raising on disability issues (Department for Social Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities, 2022).



In public schools of Primary and Secondary Education, the “Health Education Programmes” have been established and are considered to be the most appropriate preventive process in education on issues related to diversity of persons with disabilities. Specifically, the Health Education Programmes, amongst others, aim to raise awareness, change attitudes and behaviours, combat stereotypes and prejudices, reinforce non- discrimination / equality, acceptance, promotion of a healthy reaction to diversity, justice, respect for human rights, motivation of students to support and provide facilities for persons with disabilities with the purpose of an all-round development, full and equal participation in education and full social integration. Actions concerning enlightenment and awareness raising, in the form of leaflets, learning activities and workshops are also conducted by the mechanisms responsible for the implementation and monitoring of the Convention, namely, the Department for Social Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities and the Office of Ombudsman and Human Rights — Equality Authority, either on their own or in collaboration with the Cyprus Confederation (Department for Social Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities, 2013).

### Best Practice in HE dealing with Hate Speech and Cyber Bullying in relation to Disability, Chronic Illness, and Mental Health in Cyprus

Awareness and prevention play a crucial role in attempts to eliminate and remove the root causes of disability, chronic illness, and mental health based violence in campuses. Certain actions to make an important contribution to such preventative work are the following: a) Organise campaigns, training, peer-to-peer education to change attitudes; b) Produce leaflets or develop to make information available to the public regarding disability, chronic illness and mental health- based hate on campus; c) Offer training for academics, students, trainers, the police, the justice system, health care providers and other stakeholders to be able to identify, address and respond to based violence; d) Develop tools to promote tolerance and mutual understanding; (e) establish an effective data collection mechanism for recording hate speech

There are few actions that could be taken to raise public awareness of in relation to disability, chronic illness and mental health on campuses -

- Work strategically with a number of organisations for people with disability, chronic illness and mental health to highlight their voices, ensuring their experiences, concerns and perspectives are centred in our work to tackle disability Hate Crime.
- Provide Universities, schools, communities, and businesses with bespoke training programmes that raise awareness and understanding on disability, chronic illness and mental health Hate Crimes.
- Ensure training and services are accessible to everybody.

The most important stakeholders and audiences to instigate debate and change in this field in Cyprus are:



- University lecturers and tutors, university managers, policymakers, student support service providers and student organisations representatives.
- NGOs and other associations dealing with social inclusion operationalise action research projects on the topics, including violence and hate crimes on campuses.

## **Finland: Disability and Chronic Illness in Society and HE**

Disabilities, chronic illnesses and mental health issues are widespread in the Finnish higher education context. In a 2021 study by Parikka et al., higher education students in general universities and universities for applied sciences were asked to answer questions about their general health, ability to study, substance use, mental health and use of health services. In total, 6258 students participated. Among the studied 18-34-year-old higher education students, 28% reported having some kind of a long-term illness or a health issue. 20.9% reported having health issues that limited their lives and functionality one way or another. Mental health issues were also widely reported. 56.2% of higher education students were under mental strain, 13% were diagnosed with depression, 13% with anxiety disorders and 17.4% were at risk of developing eating disorders. (Parikka et al. 2021.)

It has been shown that 7 % of higher education students reported experiencing bullying from other students, 5.1% reported being bullied by the school staff (Parikka et al. 2021). It is not known what percentage of those being bullied are bullied because of their disability- illness- or mental health status. Negative attitudes towards mental health status, at least when it comes to depression, is known to be less prevalent among those within higher education (Aromaa, 2011).

Teittinen & Vesala (2021) studied experiences of discrimination of people with disabilities in educational context. One of the main findings was that almost half of the interviewed people had faced discrimination, mostly in situations that involve making adjustments to their education. Participants also reported discrimination in gaining access to education, communicational aids and accessibility. The educational world, including higher education, is built for able-bodied students and is therefore discriminatory towards the disabled (Teittinen & Vesala, 2021.)

### Prominent issues in Disability, chronic illness and mental health status hate on campuses in Finland

In a study by Teittinen & Vesala (2021) over 60% of the disabled people in education felt they have been discriminated during their studies. As mentioned above, making adjustments to the education was found to be the biggest discriminating factor. (Teittinen & Vesala, 2021.) 34% of disabled young





people found problems with accessibility in their school buildings (Valjakka ym.) Kotamo, a project by the Finnish ministry of education and culture, reports disability as one of the factors that has not been considered in the equality programs by higher education institutions (Jousilahti et al., 2022). Disability is one of the leading causes of contacting the Finnish non-discrimination ombudsman, encompassing about one fifth of all contacts (Kosunen, 2021). Based on these sources it seems safe to say that disability-based discrimination is a prominent structural problem in Finnish higher education. Studies on disability- chronic illness- or mental health- based hate could not be obtained. It is most likely that hate issues do exist in the Finnish higher education context, but studying them is a difficult task.

### How Disability, Chronic Illness and Mental Health Status Hate is addressed as a topic at Universities in Finland

Universities often employ staff whose remit is to support students with disabilities or long term health conditions and to advocate for them. The University of Turku employs an accessibility planner, who's responsible for planning accessibility in the university (University of Turku, 2022a). The Finnish government has a goal of making Finland the leading country in accessibility. Disability, chronic illness and mental health are some of the aspects mentioned in the ministry of education and culture accessibility plan for the future. One of the 38 goals listed in the plan is about gaining information about the current state of physical accessibility in buildings used by higher education. The staff and students are involved in planning of future buildings (Kosunen 2021.)

The University of Turku accessibility planner gives advice for both students and staff on topics of accessibility. To help students and other users of university spaces, the accessibility planner has also gathered lots of information that can be found from the University intranet. For example, every auditorium inside the university is listed and possible accessibility issues are mentioned to help people with disabilities. (University of Turku 2022a.)

### Identification of Cyber Bullying in Relation to Disability, Chronic Illness and Mental Health in Finland

According to statistics, about 70 % of Finnish people use social media and during Covid-19 it has clearly increased. Young people, in the age group 16 – 24, used 2020 mostly Instagram, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Facebook and TikTok according to statistics. (Kohvakka & Saarenmaa 2021; Tilastokeskus 2020.)

Turku University & UNESCO research shows that there is a relatively low prevalence of cyberbullying compared to offline bullying and victimization in Finland. 'General' antibullying programs prevent online bullying and being bullied online seems to be a reliable sign that the person is also bullied in



other ways. It is therefore important to address bullying and cyberbullying holistically rather than try to prevent or intervene in a specific incident taking a specific form. The most prominent risk factor for online bullying is actually offline bullying. (Unric 2021.)

Psychological disorders can make students more vulnerable for bullying (Vartia-Väänänen 2003). Also hate speech and bullying concerning disabled people has been widely discussed in media. According to associations for disabled people many disabled have experienced hate speech and have been victims of structural discrimination. Unfortunately, it is often difficult to help these people because only 20 % incidents are reported to authorities. (Purhonen 2020.) This has been noticed in Ministry of Justice project Facts against Hate. One objective of this project is monitor hate crime reporting and make it more effective (Ministry of Justice 2019.)

It is important to understand the role of the bystanders in cyberbullying. Besides regulation, media education and support, prevention programmes involving bystanders of cyberbullying hold great potential for tackling cyberbullying. The bystanders can be supportive to the victim, passive, or reinforce the cyberbullying. Social norms that are accepted by a group influence how bystanders behave, and bystanders who perceive their friends supporting cyberbullying are likely to join in and reinforce it, while prosocial peer norms lead to less cyberbullying behaviors. This is the reason for many effective interventions that aim at strengthening empathy among young people, as empathy increases support for victims and reduces acceptance of cyberbullying. (Unric 2021.)

In terms of targeted groups and scale of the problem of cyber bullying in the national contexts, most anti-bullying programs (Kiva koulu project, etc.) concentrate on preventing bullying in comprehensive school and high school rather than higher education environment. Cyber bullying is also more rarely reported in universities. That doesn't mean that it is unknown in higher education: according to research 5 % students have experienced bullying. (Lappalainen et. al. 2011.)

Between 2016 and 2020 1232 people were accused of hate speech in Finland. Out of these, 7% were students but the number could be higher as 35% had their job or student status listed as "unknown". Out of all hate speech crimes, 34% happen over the Internet, and out of all defamation cases 10% was based on disability status. (Saresma et al., 2022.) Based on these numbers it can be assumed that among students, hate speech and cyber bullying based on disability is a prevalent issue in Finland.

The situation in Turku University of Applied Sciences is quite similar when compared to Unric project and Finnish higher education in general, as there is no information collected concerning cyberbullying linked with mental health and disabilities and no reported cases.

The Ministry of the Interior has published 2019 a report called "Words Are Actions. More Efficient Measures against Hate Speech and Cyberbullying." This report suggests thirteen different changes or improvements in Finland to tackle the growing and severe hate speech phenomenon. A government led program against hate speech, increased and accurate research and growing responsibility in prevention to different media actors are included among other suggestions. (Ministry of the Interior 2019.)



The Finnish Broadcasting Company YLE launched 2021 a five-year campaign called *Hyvin sanottu – Well Said*. The objective of this campaign is to improve Finnish conversational culture and to create a safe environment in social media. The project also project aims to increase mutual trust and understanding among communities. (YLE 2022.)

### Case studies of Hate Speech and Cyber Bullying in Relation to Disability, Chronic Illness and Mental Health in Finland

Cyber bullying is a relatively new concept and it is hard define an study. It is partly seen as an own phenomen but some researchers see it to be a part of bigger bullying phenomen. There are different special features in cyber bullying that Willard (2007) has pointed out (flaming, harassment, denigration, impersonation, outing, exclusion and cyberstalking) that describe forms of bullying on different electronical platforms. Cyberbullying has multiple connections to mental health since it affects the bullied persons mental wellbeing and is often shown to be carried out by a person suffering from mental health problems. (Nieminen & Pörhölä 2011.)

It is hard to find case studies from the Finnish context that directly look at hate speech or cyberbullying targeted towards persons with disability, chronic illness or mental health. Bullying is often said to have reasons in bullies' own personality and problems (Nieminen & Pörhölä 2011, Paatakainen & Savolainen 2015). Attitudes towards mental health problems are shown in Finnish society so that social distancing because of persons mental health problem is typical and a stigma ei attached to these people (Aromaa 2011).

More research is needed to really find out how much hate speech overall and specifically in cyberbullying is targeted to persons with disability, chronic illness or mental health problems (or recovered mental health problems). Electronic platforms offer an anonymous place for hate speech and bullying. This feature differs cyberbullying from “traditional” forms of bullying where usually the bully is seen or known by the bullied.

### **Disability and Chronic Illness in Portuguese Society and HE**

The Portuguese Constitution Law, Article 13<sup>th</sup>, defines the Principle of Equality:

- All citizens shall have the same social dignity and be equal before the law.
- No one shall be privileged, favoured, prejudiced, deprived of any right or any right or exemption from any duty on the grounds of ancestry, sex, race, language, place of



origin, religion, political or ideological beliefs, education, ideological convictions, education, economic situation or social condition.

As Fontes states (2016), there is no legal recognition of the notion of "hate crime" in Portugal. Crimes committed to people with disability, mental or chronic illnesses must be approached taking into consideration the general legislation, including the Article 240th of the Penal Code which is about crimes based on "race, colour, ethnic or national or national origin, religion, sex, sexual orientation or gender identity"(Article 240th of the Penal Code).

The Practical Guide: The Rights of People with Disabilities in Portugal is a Simplex + measure, which gathers information from several areas of interest and respective public services in Portugal, aiming to promote the autonomy and citizenship of people with disabilities and to facilitate decision making and the promotion of inclusion.

The ENIPD (National Strategy for Inclusion of People with Disability) 2021-2025 results from the proposal presented by the working group created by Order no. 15/MTSSS/2019, of 29 July, of the Minister of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security, and is guided by the fundamental principles of respect and guarantee of the human dignity of the person with disabilities, of their autonomy, independence and self-determination, of participation in all areas of life, of the promotion of equality, equity and non-discrimination, including multiple discrimination, and of respect for difference and diversity.

There is no evidence of highly violent hate crimes involving students with disability on campus, but this kind of hate crime can be veiled and classified as other types of crimes, including those related to gender, sexual orientation, or racism.

Using data provided by different sources (no official statistical data on the matter), Fontes (2016) states that the most prevalent crime against people with disability is rape and sexual abuse, followed by kidnapping and homicide. The same author also says that women are more vulnerable to these crimes than men. In any case, as stated, these crimes are normally dealt with on the basis of general legislation.

Besides the vague legal framework concerning hate crimes involving these groups, there is a high social unawareness of the problem. In addition, there are very few studies on the topic in Portugal about HE. According to statistical data, in 2020/2021, about 2 500 students with disabilities were enrolled in HE. An increase of 11.7% marked this period compared to the previous year. Vanessa Pinto, a former student at the University of Porto with a congenital motor disability, explains in an interview to JPN that discrimination is still present and that it is crucial to create more infrastructures to meet the needs of people with disabilities.

Despite specific regulations for students with disabilities concerning evaluation methods, accompaniment, and regime of assiduity in classrooms., existing studies assert that there are different types of prejudice regarding people with disability, chronic illnesses and mental health at HE.





In Portugal, the three most essential entities are related to the topic in the university context are:

- The National Institute for Rehabilitation, I.P.
- Access Unit | Foundation for Science and Technology
- GTAEDES | Working Group for the Support of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education

According to GTAEDES, the total number of students with disabilities placed in higher education in the 2018/2019 academic year was 231. This is an increase of 28% compared to the previous year. The inclusion for knowledge programme set up by the ministry of science, technology and higher education contributed a lot to this.

### Disability in the Portuguese Context

Portugal made significant progress after 25 April 1974, democratizing the rights of people with disabilities, chronic diseases and mental health problems. However, there is very much to be done. Studies on disability have emphasized that it is a severe social problem in Portugal and that the state also has many difficulties in dealing with people with disabilities in all social spheres, particularly in education and work (Fontes, 2016). For example, since 2001, there has been no collection of information or regular statistics to ascertain the number of occurrences of hate crimes against people belonging to this most vulnerable group.

HE practices differ as regards the type of services they offer to students and other academic personnel with disability. In most the cases, this issue is ascribed to social inclusion offices that also guide students in applying for financial aid (see the answer to the last question).

In terms of mental health, according to psychologist Teresa Espassandim, "a large part of the country's universities and polytechnics persist in not investing effectively, or only superficially, in the prevention of these problems that impact the achievement of their mission." (Espassandim, 2020). She also adds that the number of psychologists and student support services has not been restructured for almost 20 years, and student demand for this type of monitoring is far greater than the resources that universities have available.

The most frequent mental health issues experienced by student in universities of students are:

- 1- Panic attacks,
- 2- Psychotic crises and suicidal behaviour,
- 3- Mental health impacts from situations of violence on campus.



At the universities, mental illness is usually an issue dealt with by psychological services. However, not all HE have a specialized service for students at HE, and in some HEIs, the process takes too long, obliging students to search for private services.

The National Council for Health (2019) indicates that Portugal is one of the European countries with the highest prevalence of psychiatric disorders, including anxiety, mood, impulse control and substance use disorders (22.9%), which are more frequent in the 18-34 age group.

Concerning addictive behaviours, which have a close relationship with mental health, Portugal registers an upward trend in binge drinking and drunkenness among 18-year-olds, as well as the prevalence of illicit substance use. Additionally, the consumption of non-specific Central Nervous System stimulant drugs and Psychopharmaceuticals has increased in recent years: in 2018, almost 10.5 million packs of anxiolytics and 8.8 million packs of antidepressants were sold, with Portugal taking fifth place in the OECD for antidepressant consumption. Antipsychotic and antidepressant drugs are among the therapeutic classes with the most significant burden on the National Health Service, accounting for around Health Service, accounting for around 8.4% of total expenditure on outpatient medicines. In 2016, 1.9 million users had at least one prescription for benzodiazepines. Doctors are aware of the risks of these drugs but report difficulties in motivating their patients to discontinue taking them, as well as in demanding access to psychological treatment and in motivating their patients to discontinue taking them.

### Chronic Illness in Portugal

In Portugal, chronic diseases are not regularly discussed within the HEI contexts. Therefore, the cases of hate speech or hate crimes committed against people with chronic diseases may happen more indirectly, and many of them are not known or reported.

At the universities, chronic illness is usually an issue dealt with by inclusion and social support services.

In theory, students with chronic illnesses are covered by the same law as students with disabilities. However, depending on the disability associated with the illness, they may face additional difficulties responding to academic demands. Unfortunately, there is no data about the strategies adopted. However, many students give up on studying as they have no conditions to correspond to HE evaluation schedules and calendars.

As stated, HE practices differ as regards the type of services they offer to students and another academic personnel with disability. In most cases, chronic illness is ascribed to social inclusion offices that guide students in applying for financial aid. There are no specialized services concerning students' chronic illnesses.



Contrarily to disability that is still very invisible in public debates, mental illness became a topic of great controversy in the last few years. Students from esteemed universities (like University of Lisbon) organized several demonstrations asking for the implementation of measures for helping the students with mental issues. These demos were almost the same moment when a Portuguese student was accused of having planned a terrorist attack at the university (2021). Students who suffer from any form of autism, schizophrenia, or other diseases face additional difficulties in accessing HE, due to the absence of specific programs for them and specific support at the campuses, especially if they are not living permanently with their families.

### Prominent issues of Disability, Chronic Illness and Mental Health Status Hate on Campuses in Portugal

In the national context, research is absent on hate crimes toward people with some disability or in a delicate state of health. Portuguese still feel ashamed of having people with any disability in the family. According to Fontes (2016), children with disability are more prone to suffer from neglect from their families.

The National Health Council says that the costs of mental illness in Portugal are estimated to be around €6.6 billion per year, or 3.7% of GDP, with depression affecting 10% of the Portuguese population and psychiatric disorders affecting 23% of the population, putting the country in second place in Europe.

Regarding mental health, the most frequent episodes in universities of students suffering from mental health issues refer to panic attacks, psychotic crises and suicidal behaviour and effects of situations of violence on campus, as noted above. The project "Write'n'Let Go" is based on so-called "expressive writing", focusing on traumatic, stressful and emotional events and the feelings inspired by these occurrences. It intends to tackle with student's mental problems.

However, the topics of mental health and chronic illness are, as stated, the topic is poorly addressed at the universities. It appears sporadically in institutional discussions but is generally out of policy making. Instead, it is usually considered a matter of social inclusion; and a matter of the existence of public services targeted with the issues.

There are, however, initiatives that universities can join. For instance, the Working Group for the Support of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education: <https://www.gtaedes.pt/> (brings together the support offices at the national level). At the moment, the group is coordinated by the University of Algarve, the Polytechnic Institute of Beja and ISCTE (from 2020 to 2023). Also there are Partner Bodies: General Directorate of Higher Education (DGES); Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT); Agency for Administrative Modernization (AMA); National Institute for Rehabilitation (INR). Again, HEIs can affiliate to these.



## HE Policies implemented to Tackle Hate Speech Concerning Disability, Chronic Illness and Mental Health on Campus in Portugal

The "Balcão incluiES" (Desk for Inclusion in Higher Education) is a branch of the Directorate General for Higher Education that brings together content on support for students with disabilities attending or wishing to enter Higher Education.

The debate inside HE about the measures to implement concerning students with disabilities or mental illness is still underway. In 2017, the Secretary of State for Science, Technology and Higher Education published the final report carried out by GT-NECTES - The Working Group on Special Needs in Science, Technology and Higher Education.

The Inclusion for Knowledge Programme includes 67 recommendations aimed at improving access to higher education for students with disabilities. These recommendations that HEI can implement include great changes concerning the status of the student with disability, possibility of using partial regime of assiduity, total revision of roads and equipment accessibility; mentoring, recruitment of teachers with disability, and many other suggestions focusing on students. Still, there is no mentions to hate crimes, exclusion or discrimination.

In the case of mental illness, the students' unions and other organizations that represent the interests of each of the groups have been querying publically about the need to diagnosis and promote mental well-being at the universities and therefore reduce the incidence and prevalence of mental disorders (prevention and treatment). This usually involves psychology schools of universities, together with the psychological support office, holding some seminars to discuss the issues.

Developing services for people with mental illness and reducing stigma is important and the creation of support offices for students with special educational needs is common in several Portuguese public universities have such offices. In private universities, the existing offices are more directed towards psychological support and not so much towards disability. It is also noted that defining a protocol / platform for dealing with queries, doubt and complains is vital.

Here are some examples of the existing structures that also intent to support students with disability:

- Faculty of Sciences of the University of Lisbon: Psychopedagogical Support Office
- Faculty of Letters of the University of Lisbon: Student Support Unit
- Polytechnic Institute of Beja: Coordination of Students with Special Education Needs
- Polytechnic Institute of Castelo Branco: Support Office for Students with Special Education Needs
- Polytechnic Institute of Coimbra: Social Services
- Polytechnic Institute of Leiria: Student Support Services
- Polytechnic Institute of Porto: Academic and Professional Integration Office
- Polytechnic Institute of Viseu: Mission for Students with Special Education Needs
- Polytechnic Institute of Santarém - Social Responsibility Office and SEN Network



- University Institute of Lisbon - Student Counselling Office (GAA)
- University of the Azores: Monitoring Committee for Students with Special Educational Needs
- University of Algarve: Support Office for Students with Special Educational Needs
- The University of Aveiro: Pedagogical Support Office
- The University of Coimbra: Technical-Pedagogic Support to Disabled Students
- The University of Évora: Student Support Unit
- University of Lisbon: Lisbon NEE Network
- University of Minho: Núcleo de Promoção da Inclusão, Desenvolvimento e Sucesso dos Estudantes (Núcleo de Promoção da Inclusão, Desenvolvimento e Sucesso dos Estudantes)
- University of Porto: NAI – Support for inclusion
- University of Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro: Rehabilitation and Accessibility Engineering Centre

For this purpose, universities make available provision, such as: material in Braille for sight impaired students; Access to educational content in the sound system for those with hearing disabilities; Scholarships for students with 60% disability or more; Procedures and evacuation for people with disabilities and reduced mobility; Autism awareness actions.

### Cyberbullying in the Portuguese HE Context

Identification of cyberbullying regarding disability, chronic illness and mental health is also increasingly important to HE policy and practice. Cyberbullying is a problem that occurs worldwide, and Portugal is no exception. According to data released from Portugal's participation in the European Study Net Children Go Mobile in 2014, the prevalence of cyberbullying was 10%, higher than the results in another project carried out in 2010, EU Kids Online, in which the incidence of cyberbullying was 7%. The studies, as mentioned earlier, corroborate the upward trend in the prevalence of cyberbullying suggested by the results obtained in the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children study.

Research conducted by Francisco, Veiga Simão, Ferreira and Dores Martins (2014), revealed that 27.94% of students had been victims of cyberbullying at some point in their lives, and only 8% identified themselves as the attacker, while 64% identified themselves as the observer. Role overlap may also occur, i.e. an observer may become a bully or victim or just an observer, or even a victim may become a bully and vice versa, a fact little studied in the literature. According to data from the magazine Educação, Sociedade e Cultura from the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences from the University of Coimbra, victims suffer from: sleep and eating disorders; frustration and low self-esteem; impairment of the capacity to socialize; anxiety; stress; depression; demotivation towards school life; absenteeism and lower academic performance; tendency to blame themselves; worse physical health; greater tendency to commit suicide.



A recent feature of cyberbullying that is already having precedents in Portugal is self-cyberbullying, that is, a form of self-aggression. People who practice self-cyberbullying aim to draw attention to their emotional state and provoke a protective and defensive reaction from others about themselves.

### Best Practices and Examples of how to deal with Hate Speech and Cyberbullying about Disability, Chronic Illness, and Mental Health in Portugal

There are some measures that universities can implement to combat cyberbullying against people with disabilities, chronic illnesses and mental health issues. Continuing the preparation of projects and development of tools to report this phenomenon on campuses; There are already offices that provide access to educational content for people who have some disabilities. However, it is necessary to apply for a greater dissemination of these offices within the academic community; Boosting the knowledge of professionals about disability and communication, for example, would be fundamental for students with hearing and oral disabilities; in the Psychology offices, the lack of specialized staff should be overcome.

Greater cooperation between the Ministry of Education and schools and Universities in order to solve or, at least, soften the effects of exclusion that this problem is associated to might include:

- To carry out activities that promote mutual help, equal opportunities and equal treatment among all students, independently of their physical or psychological condition.
- Diversifying alternatives for students with any kind of disability be able to succeed and obtain the degree,

Raising public awareness concerning disability, chronic illness and mental health on campus is vital and can include:

- Generating awareness campaigns for general population understanding of disability, chronic illness and mental health, using media, amongst others;
- Providing educational materials that can empower people to look at disability, chronic illness and mental health from an inclusive point of view;
- Holding lectures, colloquiums, and events open to the community to debate these issues;
- Funding and supporting projects for diagnosing the situation and comparing it between HEI in the country
- Involving stakeholders in designing adequate policies (for literacy and material support) that can be put in place in the HEI;
- Rethinking schedules and calendars, so people with disability, chronic illness or mental disease can cooperate better with evaluation demands;
- Promoting socialization processes that can lead students to know their mates and be an ally in any situation that may occur;



Who are the most critical stakeholders, and which audiences should be reached to instigate debate and change in Portugal?

- Rectors, Vice Chancellors and Senior Management of the HEIs
- Directors of the courses and pedagogical councils
- Doctoral school coordinators
- All staff across the University can act to help support inclusion
- Student's Unions
- Associations concerned with disability, chronic illness and mental health, such as NGOs and other associations and entities concerned with social inclusion operationalize action research projects on the topics, including violence and hate crimes on campuses.
- All of these need to be involved as well as other key stakeholders who have an interest, which includes, students in general, families, community groups, faith groups and other associations supporting these persons and their families should also be involved. Journalists and people working in the media should also raise their awareness about the topic to know how to address these issues better and work to alter society's representations of disability, mental and chronic illness.

## **Serbia – Disability and Chronic Illness in Society and HE**

In Serbian law and public policy there is a rather vague and all-encompassing definition and classification of disability which makes the data collection difficult. The term is usually used to denote reduced physical or mental abilities that put individuals in an unequal, and often subordinate position in relation to others. Consequently, when it comes to the data about students with chronic illness and mental health in Serbia, they have mostly been placed in the disability category.

There are stereotypes and prejudice against persons with disability which inevitably leads to discrimination. Unfortunately, the number of persons with disabilities is rather high and it amounts to 730 000 persons with disability in Serbia which, according to the 2011 census, had seven million people.

Despite some recognition of the need for provision of diverse needs, for instance Text BoxPublic facilities, few education institutions have been fully adapted to persons with physical disabilities. There is awareness, that we still have a lot to do and a long way to go to help disabled people become included in the society. University students have their associations and they state that in many cities in Serbia there are colleges not suitable at all for students with disabilities. However, the number of students with disabilities who decide to enrol for higher education is on the rise.

The most encountered chronic illnesses in Serbia are: cardiovascular diseases, different forms of cancer, chronic non-infectious respiratory diseases, diabetes and musculoskeletal diseases. There



are strategies for prevention and control but the number is still rather huge. Around 30% of higher education students suffer from chronic illnesses.

According to the most current data, about 30% of university students population in Serbia manifest some signs of psychological distress and have mental health issues, while around 10% of the entire population has some form of mental disorder.

The young increasingly decide to turn to professionals but the percentage of suicides in the society among the young is still high (due to bullying, despair, lack of support and understanding in family or among peers, etc.) There are services which offer help, but there is no available statistics on campuses of how many students turn to campus therapists, etc. It is important to point out that in some parts of the country visiting a therapist is still a matter of shame, and this requires additional attention and intervention.

Disabled people, those experiencing chronic illnesses and/or mental health issues encounter various obstacles when it comes to attending higher education institutions. Therefore, one can assert that there are not many higher education students with disability in Serbia, even though the number has been increasing in recent years.<sup>1</sup> They mostly study humanities, while a very small number of students with disabilities studies natural sciences. The reasons for such a small number of students with disabilities can be traced back to the lack of technical and/or financial resources, as well as inaccessibility of educational institutions or a lack of learning tools and literature<sup>2</sup>. For instance, students with impaired hearing face tremendous difficulties because there are no sign language interpreters at their respective faculties and it is quite hard for them to keep up with lectures and lecturers. Furthermore, students who have mobility issues or use wheelchairs encounter difficulties because their respective faculty has not been adapted to their needs.

However, according to disabled people, one of the major problems remains the lack of understanding in one's environment. Students with disabilities are frequently not exempt from paying certain fees, while discrimination against them and exclusion in disability-unfriendly environments is high. Namely, when talking about the availability of higher education for students with different kinds of disability, students themselves point to architectural barriers and also to necessary tools and books, the possibility of moving through the campus for people who have visual or hearing impairment, etc. This quite often prevents disabled or impaired students from being able and feeling confident to attend HE. Students rightfully perceive this as a form of discrimination.

However, in recent years the Association of Students with Disabilities have established its offices in different cities, and as a result of their activism the situation appears to be improving. Namely, some higher education institutions now have special assistants<sup>3</sup> for persons with disabilities (for students with motor disabilities, or visual impairment), Braille books, special software (assistive technology), as well as special studying conditions for students with autism (presence of a parent at the exam, reduced number of people in the room, etc.) Furthermore, the state has foreseen affirmative enrolment measures for students with disabilities, whereby 2% of enrollment quotas are reserved for students with disabilities, and for Roma students. According to students, the quotas should be increased because 2% is not enough because it covers two large minority groups.





According to the Serbian government and Students Societies, the best provision for students with disability can be found at the University of Belgrade and the University of Novi Sad. According to relevant student associations there are no recorded cases of discrimination against students with disabilities in these two campuses. At the University of Niš, one cannot encounter the statistics about the number of students with disability attending the University, but it is assumed that their number is rather small. However, faculties within the University of Niš are increasingly becoming adapted for students with disabilities, at least when it comes to architectural barriers.

### Hate Speech in Serbia

When it comes to hate speech against persons with disabilities, there are no records of such occurrences, either in real life or in cyberspace. Namely, according to a comprehensive research conducted in 2018, the most frequent targets of hate speech and cyberbullying are the members of LGBTQ+ population, Roma minority, migrants and women, respectively. Thus, one can safely assert that, even though students with disabilities are often victims of different forms of discrimination, there are no records that they are also victims of hate speech or cyberbullying. What students with disabilities often encounter in their everyday life are prejudices regarding their physical or mental state which is often treated as a contagious disease resulting in people keeping distance from them without any reason whatsoever.

However, should a person with disability at the same time belong to some other minority group (Roma, LGBTQ+, migrant, etc.), in that case they are at risk of becoming victims to hate speech and cyberbullying regardless of their physical or mental condition. In that respect, one can assert that the impact of political, religious and other socio-cultural aspects rather than health status plays a significant part in encountering hate speech on campuses. Therefore, it should be emphasized that it is not one's disability that initiates those hate speech or cyberbullying occurrences, but rather one's affiliation to some other afore-mentioned minority group.

There are various laws and public policies which also include the protection of persons with disabilities on campuses, and in general. Such laws include the Law against Discrimination, Law against Discrimination of Persons with Disabilities, Law on Protection of Persons with Mental Disorders, and the Law on Higher Education. Furthermore, the protector of citizens is a legal entity who is also in charge of protecting human rights, including those of persons with disabilities.

According to the law around Higher Education, HEIs are obliged to install entrance ramps and remove any physical obstacles to allow the movement of people with disabilities. However, this has not been done on all faculties in the country, and students still face different obstacles in the process of studying.



## Hate Speech and Cyber Bullying in Serbia

According to available sources, there are no obtainable records of hate speech or cyberbullying against persons with disabilities. It is, however, possible to encounter persons with disabilities who have experienced hate speech if they were at the same time members of Roma population, different migrant groups or LGBTQ+ population. Gender-oriented hate speech against women is also present both online and in real life, regardless of their health status. However, in all of the afore-mentioned cases one's disability was not the trigger for hate speech or cyberbullying.

Any form of hate speech is a serious threat to an orderly civil society.<sup>7</sup> Bearing this in mind, one can encounter various round tables, seminars, discussions on different campuses and in the media with the aim of addressing the danger of hate speech and cyberbullying for the sake of society in general. Such discussions are intended for a wider audience with the idea of educating the citizens of the dangers of aggressive communication and hate speech. One of Serbia's eminent psychologists, Žarko Trebješanin, emphasizes that hate speech is not an opinion that one merely shares or expresses, but rather a weapon drawn with the intention of seriously hurting another person<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, a step in the right direction when fighting hate speech or cyberbullying is understanding what it is and with what intention it is used.

As it appears, Serbia still does not have a law regulating digital violence, or any kind of violence committed in the virtual environment. Hate speech in the real environment is regulated by the Law against Discrimination, Article 11, which explicitly forbids expressing ideas, information or opinions that incite discrimination, hatred or violence against any particular person or group.

As previously mentioned, hate speech and cyberbullying against persons with mental health, disabilities or chronic illness in Serbia have not been a topic of purpose-made national programmes, guidelines or research work. However, hate speech and cyberbullying in general have been discussed as priority topics in general. In that respect, one can cite a range of different programmes, guidebooks and research studies whose aim is to prevent and stop the occurrences of hate speech and cyberbullying. These are as follows:

*The Association of Students with Disabilities – Strategic Plan 2016-2024* The Strategic plan is guided by several principles: a) active role of persons with disabilities in an inclusive society; b) active role of the Association in the field of higher education, employment, youth work, political participation, fight against any form of discrimination and systematization of support by developing systemic solutions with the aim of providing support for persons with disabilities in everyday life and social activities.

*Veljković B. et al. 2022. Violence on Social Networks. PONS Medicinski časopis, Volume 18, Number 2* The idea behind this work is to raise awareness among young people about the possible dangers of social media which could lead to negative consequences such as anxiety, depression, isolation, suicidal thoughts and even suicide.



Krstić, I. 2020. Izveštaj o upotrebi govora mržnje u Srbiji (A report on the use of hate speech in Serbia). Savet Evrope, 2020. This report was prepared within the scope of the project “Promotion of Diversity and Equality in the Western Balkans, which is a part of the joint program of the Council of Europe (SE) and the European Union called Horizontal Facility for the Western Balkans and Turkey II, which aims to support the South Eastern Europe and Turkey to align with European standards.

The report presents and analyses international, but first and foremost European standards which are related to hate speech, as well as domestic legal and strategic frameworks with the aim of establishing the potential legal and practical limitations causing the system inefficiency when it comes to protection against hate speech in the media in Serbia. Furthermore, the report also analyses the frequency of hate speech, its forms and circumstances which contribute to its frequent use in the media in Serbia. The report is primarily intended for the Commissioner for the protection of equality, which is the main beneficiary of the project, in order to focus its future activities on specific groups and designed trainings.

Služba za podršku studentima - TEMPUS projekat „Jednak pristup za sve - EQUI ED“ (Student support service – TEMPUS project – Equal Access for All – EQUI ED) This paper aims at (1) offering a short overview of the current state of affairs in universities in Serbia when it comes to student support mechanisms; (2) presenting the key issues that students face and support mechanisms that they resort to; (3) suggesting options for establishing student support offices by also offering an analysis of good and bad aspects of each of the suggested options.

A Guidebook – University for All – a Chance for All – A Guidebook for the future students of the University of Belgrade with guidelines for students with disability (Univerzitet za sve šansa za sve – Priručnik za buduće studente Univerziteta u Beogradu uz smernice za candidate sa hendikepom)

University Centre for Students with Disability at the University of Belgrade prepared this issue containing useful information for all future students who wish to be properly informed about the possibilities at their disposal during their study period. Special value of this publication is the fact that it contains information about services intended for students with disabilities, as well as guidelines about the manners in which young people with disabilities can obtain the necessary support during their study period.

Đorić, G. 2015. Socijalna dimenzija visokog obrazovanja – analize i preporuke. Filozofski fakultet Univerziteta u Nišu, 2015 (Djorić, G. 2015. Social dimension of higher education – analyses and recommendations. Faculty of Philosophy, University of Niš, 2015) This paper was issued within the scope of the project EQUIED - Equal Access for All. The main project goal was to create assumptions for equalising the chances for obtaining higher education at universities in Serbia. The project was guided by three specific goals:

a. Increasing the number of state measures (and improving the legal framework for implementing these measures) aimed at equalizing the chances of all groups of potential students and expanding the existing measures of those groups that were unable to resort to the afore-mentioned measures.



b. Establishing and institutionalizing the practice of systematic data collection and analysis in the area of the social dimension of higher education.

c. Establishing a network of support services for potential and current students at universities in Serbia.

Cicvarić, Ž. J. & Kalajdžić, K. 2021. Vodič za digitalnu bezbednost mladih – zaštita bezbednosti i sprečavanje digitalnog nasilja. Beogradska otvorena škola. (Cicvarić, Ž.J. & Kalajdžić, K. 2021. Youth Digital Safety Guide – protecting privacy and preventing digital violence. Belgrade Open School, 2021). The guide is intended for the youth, high school students, people employed in education, as well as for all those who work with the young and children of all ages, participate in their education and upbringing and wish to inform themselves of the manner in which they can contribute to privacy protection, safe use of digital tools and the Internet.

### Positive Practices in Serbia

Although students with disabilities, mental health issues and chronic illnesses still encounter significant difficulties when trying to obtain a university degree, there are some examples of positive practices currently applied on individual faculties across the country. In that respect, one often encounters the Faculty of Law in Belgrade as a shining example of how students with different kinds of disabilities should be treated by the staff and the institution in general. The Faculty of Economy in Belgrade is the second higher education institution which often appears as an example of good practice pointed out by students with disabilities.

The Association of Students with Disabilities in Novi Sad helps students with disabilities in the process of education as well as in finding adequate employment. It was founded in 2000 and it gathers students of undergraduate and graduate studies in Novi Sad.<sup>10</sup> The main goal of this association is to improve the status of students with different kinds of disabilities. The offices of the same Associations in the cities of Belgrade and Niš also strive for the same goals. As a result, the education system is becoming increasingly sensitive to the needs of students with disabilities.

Associations such as these organise numerous conferences, webinars and training sessions. They have their web sites and YouTube channels where one can encounter different educational videos. They all aim towards a society without discrimination because only a society in which everyone feels accepted can move forward.

In order to reach such a noble goal a wider circle of interlocutors must be reached. The aforementioned associations organise different campaigns such as Academic mentoring, as well as workshops to inform the staff and decision makers about the needs of students with disabilities because those are the stakeholders who have the power to introduce changes.



Bearing all of the afore-mentioned in mind, these are some recommendations regarding the possible paths and possibilities of introducing significant changes to raise people's awareness, improve the existing policies and/or introduce the missing ones:

1. Understanding the reasons behind discrimination, abuse, hate speech (fear of the unknown, lack of knowledge, stereotypes, prejudice, lack of proper mechanisms for law enforcement, lack of fear of punishment among perpetrators, lack of legal regulations (as with cyberbullying), etc.)
2. Act according to the recognised problem and perceived potential causes (raising public awareness, normalising the afore-mentioned states and conditions, promoting tolerance and mutual respect through various channels: the media, schools, higher education institutions, cultural institutions, public events, public debates, round tables, etc.)
3. Introducing people with disabilities, chronic illnesses and mental health issues to their rights, as well as to the mechanisms (legal mechanisms, inclusion mechanisms, mechanisms of social action) at their disposal which can empower them and help them participate in creating a better society for everyone.
4. Creating better conditions for people with disabilities chronic illnesses and mental health issues to realize their true potentials by gaining access to proper services and assistance: easy access to services such as traffic vehicles, education institutions, public services and utilities, shops, rehabilitation and assistive devices, assistive technology, therapy, etc.
5. Providing counseling and guidance (at universities, at work, etc.)
6. Demand public and political figures to react and condemn every case of discrimination, hate speech/crime, abuse and violence against persons with disabilities, chronic illnesses and mental health issues.
7. Public condemnation and sanctioning of detrimental treatment or harassment of any person complaining reporting on the use of hate speech/crime, abuse and violence against persons with disabilities, chronic illnesses and mental health issues.
8. Properly train/educate people who come in touch or could come in touch with persons with disabilities, chronic illnesses and mental health issues or persons who discriminate them (teachers, professors, therapists, law enforcement officers, prosecutors and judges who deal with cases involving hate speech, etc.)
9. Inform the general public about the proper code of conduct towards one's fellow person with disabilities, chronic illnesses and mental health issues.
10. Promote and assist the establishment of complaints mechanisms.
11. Establish adequate ways of monitoring reported cases of hate speech/crime, abuse and violence against persons with disabilities, chronic illnesses and mental health issues as well as the epilogues of those reports.
12. Encourage media professionals to foster ethical journalism and introduce severe penalties for sensationalism and unprofessional approach to the topic in the media.
13. Determine individual responsibilities of authors of hate speech, internet service providers, web providers and hosts, online intermediaries, social media platforms, online intermediaries, moderators of blogs and others performing similar roles.



## **Disability and Chronic Illness in Turkish Society and HE**

According to the research carried out by the Turkish Statistical Institute and the Administration for the Disabled in 2011, 6.9% of the country's population consists of disabled citizens. 56% of the disabled population are male and 44% are female. As for the number of disabled students and staff in Turkish higher education institutions, based on data from YÖKSİS (a database system in our country where the information or data of university students or graduate students are stored), there are currently 51,647 students with disabilities throughout the country. 27,782 of these students are at associate degrees, 23,581 are at the undergraduate level, 236 are at the master's level, and 48 are at the doctorate level. 89% of students participate in open education programs (YÖK, 2020). Based on the intriguing fact that the vast majority of them prefer open education programs to study at home instead of on campus, it seems to be useful to question the accessibility issue or the possibility of discrimination.

The problems of people with disabilities, chronic illnesses, and those who experience mental health conditions are undoubtedly a global human rights issue. Similarly, in Turkey, the integration of people with mental and physical disabilities into society is thought to be likely to create a basis for hate speech and crimes against them since those who engage in hate speech might have psychological reasons, such as power satisfaction (Çınar, 2013) by discriminating the “weak”. Othering, which often starts as pitying the disabled, might lead to hate speech based on the differences of physically or mentally disabled people from those that society accepts as “normal” (Binark & Çomu, 2012). Those with physical or mental disabilities exposed to hate speech or crimes constitute 1% of the victims (Çınar, 2013). On the other hand, the poverty and social exclusion risk of people with disabilities in Turkey in 2007 was 77.1%. Hate speech produced against people with specific diseases can stem from either social/ economic factors or completely independent ones of them (Binark & Çomu, 2012).

The scope of the term “hate speech”, which is frequently used today, has changed since the beginning of the 1990s. The term including only nationality, religion, and belief has also come to include gender roles, sexual orientation, and disability in the last decades (Algan & Şensever, 2010, p. 9). Likewise, the number of incidences of hate speech in Turkey is increasing day by day, and its sources might be social or economic or completely independent from these (Çınar, 2013).

On the other hand, although race, nationality, religion, gender, and sexual orientation are the most frequent targets of hate in Turkey, hate speech against disabilities is not very common. Although research on groups that have historically faced discrimination, such as the elderly, disabled, and LGBTI+ communities, has increased significantly since the 2000s, the following review of available data and research literature shows that hate speech based on disability on campuses is underreported in Turkey. However, there are still various daily cases of abusive language towards the disabled in society and media.



The purpose of the study by Toker Gökçe (2013) was to investigate discrimination on Turkish college campuses. 164 university students from two departments' first, third, and fourth classes at a Turkish university participated in the study. The information was acquired via a questionnaire that the researcher created. The findings showed that students were subjected to discrimination on campus based on their choice of dress, religious beliefs, political opinions, gender, ethnicity, hometown or country, age, and IQ levels. The results of this study emphasize the need for policy makers to support non-discrimination by incorporating diversity courses into higher education curricula, as well as lecturers' awareness of biases and discrimination in their classrooms.

Another study conducted by Girli, Sarı, Kırım and Narin (2016) to explore university students' attitudes towards disability and their opinions of discrimination on a Turkish campus showed that 62.6% of the students agreed on the claim that "In Turkey, people with disabilities are discriminated against more than other members of society," About 50% of the students who took part in the study said that discrimination against individuals with disabilities was less prevalent in Turkey today than it was ten years ago. The majority of students had little awareness of the laws governing those with disabilities and were unaware that it is against the law in Turkey to discriminate against those with disabilities. The majority of participants admitted that there was prejudice against disabled persons, but they believed that other forms of discrimination were more prevalent.

In many countries with large immigrant and multi-ethnic populations, as in many European Union countries – despite the integration policies and the studies on identity and multiculturalism, discrimination and the existence of hate speech on campuses continues (Çelenk, 2018). However, she adds that it will be more challenging to study hate speech on campus in Turkey. Çelenk asserts that studies in foreign literature show that the disabled are exposed to discrimination and hate speech, mostly against the international student population and the immigrant population with groups whose fundamental characteristics and ties of belonging are highly visible. However, in Turkey, there are many more reasons and factors underlying hate speech. Being Kurdish, Alawite, homosexual, “leftist,” or “wearing a headscarf” in Turkey might lead to hate speech in universities in different regions and varying forms. When these identities and belongings are sometimes completely hidden or suppressed, they can be more challenging to notice and examine. In other words, being Alevi and Kurdish on a university campus in Erzurum is unlike being Korean at a Canadian university. Instances of exposure of discrimination and hate speech might vary a lot depending on those variables above.

### Identification of Cyberbullying in relation to Disability, Chronic Illness, and Mental Health in Turkey

Studies on cyberbullying and being an online victim demonstrate that cyberbullying often reveals itself with concepts such as online harm, e-bullying, online social aggression, cell phone text bullying, phone bullying, cyber hate, cyber harm, digital bullying and internet bullying (Ay. Sarak, 2012, pp. 4-20). When the literature is examined, it is seen that studies on cyberbullying in Turkey generally focus on people's ethnic identity/immigrants, religions, and sexual identities, and there are not many studies on people with disabilities and chronic diseases. It is generally seen that individuals with disabilities are exposed to bullying in the cyber environment in the form of expressing their physical





or mental disabilities with different words. Another difference in the exclusionary posts on social media is that people insult each other by using words that indicate physical or mental disabilities. For example, the words “disabled / “zürlü, vitaminless / vitaminsiz, deaf/ sağır, crippled/ sakat, neuropathic / ruh hastası , squirt/ bücür, legless / bacaksız, fat / şişman, cancer / kanser etc. With these discourses, target groups are insulted based on their physical characteristics; at the same time, individuals with visual, hearing, or physical disabilities are humiliated and marginalised (Dinçkırılı& Büyükbaykal, 2022, p:105).

It is difficult to detect who the target group among students, teachers, and other staff are since studies on cyberbullying in universities or other schools in Turkey are mostly conducted on students. However, in some studies (Çivilidağ& Cooper, 2013; Özdemir & Akar, 2011), it was determined that gender, age, and class variables were not related to cyberbullying; In some other studies (Eroğlu, 2011; Salı et al., 2015; Yiğit & Seferoğlu, 2017), it was found that boys showed significantly more cyberbullying behaviours than girls.

In Turkey, the rights of disabled persons are protected by international conventions, the Constitution, and related laws. However, it has been observed that disability rights advocacy in Turkey is generally carried out by public institutions (AY. Fermanoğlu, 2019: 133). However, since the dangers of cyberbullying to individuals and groups in the educational environment are increasing day by day, students, families, teachers, and school administrators should be informed about the administrative and legal dimensions. Administrative measures to be applied at school in case of cyberbullying are regulated by the Ministry of National Education (MEB) regulation, and negative behaviours exhibited with data processing tools and mobile phones in the school environment are within the scope of disciplinary punishment. In this context, the behaviours expected from the students are stated in the 54th and 55th articles of the 2014 MEB Pre-School Education and Primary Education Institutions Regulations for secondary school students under the heading "Negative behaviours of students and sanctions to be applied". According to this, keeping mobile phones on during classes in secondary schools; recording unauthorised images and sounds within the class; organising or provoking acts such as attacking school administrators, teachers, and other staff and friends, in and out of school, are expressed as behaviours that require a school change sanction (Akar, 2019: 417).

For secondary education students, it is regulated by "Behaviours and actions that require disciplinary punishment" in Articles 163 and 164 of the 2013 Ministry of National Education Regulation on Secondary Education Institutions. According to the regulation, those who use information tools in secondary education institutions for purposes other than those defined are punished, and those who harm education and training activities and individuals through information tools or social media are suspended from education for a short time. In addition, those who prevent education and training through information tools or social media, cause serious material and moral harm to people, harass people, friends, and school staff with words and behaviours, slander, incite or force others to these behaviours, share these acts via social media will be subject to a school change penalty. Those who create divisive, destructive, immoral, and incitement to violence, verbal, written, and visual content, reproduce and distribute them using informatics are punished under the penalty of exclusion from formal education (Akar, 2019: 418). At this point, educational institutions provide different consultancy support in order to put individuals' relations with written, visual and digital media not only in school





but also outside of school on a healthy ground, and they strive to take precautions before the issue reaches the point of judicial and criminal action.

Çelik (2018) employed an exploratory survey to examine tertiary-level internet users' cyberhate experiences. The study revealed that participants have observed and experienced cyberhate at different levels targeting their ethnic, religious, gender-based, and political identities. The findings also pointed out that gender, income, and socio-political identities are significant variables in exposure to cyberhate regardless of cultural and educational boundaries. Most survey respondents reported that they had encountered cyberhate mostly on social media platforms.

Universities in Turkey follow the rules specified in the main law on cyberbullying. Moreover, almost all universities have a special office for disabled students and staff, along with providing support to their normal education and training needs. These offices generally organise awareness-raising seminars and training to prevent students with disabilities from being exposed to cyberbullying and provide support services to those exposed to bullying if they are noticed or reported.

In the Turkish Penal Code (TCK), actions such as sending offensive messages and SMS to their peers via social media are sentenced to imprisonment from three months to one year upon complaint. According to Article 125 of the TCK, under the title of crimes against honour, posting messages that offend the honour and dignity of their peers through insults, blogs, etc., is punishable by imprisonment from three months to two years or a judicial fine (TCK, 2022; AY. Eralp, 2014; Küçük, 2016).

In Article 9/A of Law No. 6518, "the way of preventing access due to the privacy of private life" is regulated. According to this law, individuals whose privacy is violated due to the content of the broadcast on the Internet can request the implementation of the measure of blocking the content by applying directly to the Information Technologies and Communication Authority. Upon this request, the ICTA's precautionary access blocking decision is sent to the Access Providers Association as a requirement. The requester must submit the measure's decision for the judge's approval within 24 hours. Otherwise, the precautionary decision will be lifted automatically, and the blocked addresses/addresses will be opened again (EKY, 16.11.2022).

Apart from these, crimes such as directing suicide, sexual abuse, insulting, and harassment can be reported to the Telecommunication Communication Presidency (TİB) via the Internet. Cyber-attack notification is received 24/7 via the ALO 166 Internet Information Hotline, and Bar Associations across the country continue to provide free lawyer support services for disabled individuals in case of need.

### Case Studies (national programs, guidelines, research work, etc.) of Hate Speech and Cyberbullying in relation to Disability, Chronic Illness, and Mental Health in Turkey

TİHEK (Human Rights and Equality Institution), founded in 2016 and preceded by TIHK, is the institution that is responsible for effectively tackling discrimination. Thus it gathers data and evaluates





the present situation, publishes reports and guidelines, and organises workshops and consultation meetings, among others. It published a report on discrimination for 2018, outlining the legislation from top to bottom. It is a report covering various discriminations and groups and provides brief information on the educational system. The role of YÖK (Council for HEI) and its activities to prevent discrimination against the disabled is briefly summarised in this context (Ay.Müc.2018, 2019:26, 45).

It is striking that TIHEK did not publish many reports over the past two years; however, with the beginning of 2022, several publications are accessible on their webpage. One of which provides data on the application in the first quarter of 2022; 28 of the 208 applications are related to disability (2022 Yılı, 2022). In the same year, a report specifically for the disabled provided information on their rights and included cases from international and national courts (Eng.Tem.Ay., 2022). A guide on tackling discrimination (Ay.Müc.Eş.Reh., 2022) was published in 2022, which defines 11 types and areas of discrimination under 10 headings. It also provides information on the mechanisms for applications in case of violations. It further conducts consultation meetings on human rights issues on the national and local levels; in 2020, it conducted a competition for students to raise awareness of disabilities (TIHEK Engellilik, 2020).

In the case of HEIs, YÖK requested the universities to open an office to handle and overcome problems related to the accessibility of universities for disabled persons. Thus each university in Turkey has an office to support disabled staff and students and collect data on the matter. However, they do not act as offices where any form of discrimination can be reported, which leaves the victim no other way than to go through the standard procedure and apply to higher authorities - a way that is too demanding for many.

There is a bulk of research concerning disabilities (also carried out with university students), but few are related to hate speech and (cyber) bullying. Several studies point out that some kind of training on issues around disabilities changes people's attitudes toward the disabled. Thus, it is at least possible for them to learn how to communicate better, leading to a healthier relationship. However, it is also often emphasised that these trainings need to be supported with a practical aspect because theoretical training often is not sufficient to achieve a positive result (Top, 2018; Akbuğa & Gürsel, 2007; Açak & Nariç, 2020; Gökçe et al., 2016; Şahin & Güldenoğlu, 2013; Altunhan et al., 2021; Çalbayram et al., 2018; Şahin & Bekir, 2016). Kale and Demir (2020) researched primary school students to understand whether it is possible to change bullying and peer pressure behaviours. They applied a program called ODGEP and found that it positively affected the students' behaviours. However, they also highlighted that such trainings could not be a one-time event because students tend to return to their previous behaviour patterns. A study by Büke (2021) analyses the topics shared on social media with hashtags on disability. The study provides information on what themes these merely focus on but not any results on the outcome of these postings. According to the study, the problem areas for disabled people seem to be “denial of identity”, “secondary positioning,” and “exoticization” (Büke, 2021:176).

#### Best Practices and Examples of how to Deal with Hate Speech and Cyberbullying - Disability, Chronic Illness, and Mental Health in Turkey



At the nationwide level, the rights of individuals with a disability are protected by three main laws: 1) the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2) Turkish Disability Act No 5378 (TDA), and 3) the Constitution of the Republic of Turkey, which is the foundation of all other legislative laws and regulations in Turkey (with three main articles).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which Turkey signed on 30 March 2007, emphasises the equal rights of individuals with a disability to be fully included in social life. Moreover, Turkish Disability Act No 5378 (TDA)<sup>1</sup> also ensures the equality of rights and opportunities for the disabled through the regulations jointly issued by the Turkish ministries of Labor and Social Security, National Education, Family, and Social Policies, Finance, Education, and Health. Through the laws in TDA, all forms of discrimination based on disability, including direct and indirect discrimination, are forbidden. Necessary measures are taken to make arrangements for the proper treatment of people with disabilities to ensure equality and eliminate discrimination. For instance, the Turkish “özürlü” (after the 2000s) and “sakat” (before the 2000s) were frequently used before and connotated negatively (Ertürk et al., 2014). The concepts of disability (engelli in Turkish) entered the literature after the "Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities", which was accepted by the United Nations in 2006, and after was published in the Official Gazette in 2009. Words play an important role in tackling the problems, such as improving the social position of disabled individuals and the attacks they experience.

As well as all these legislations mentioned above, the General Directorate of Disabled and Elderly Services within the Turkish Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services<sup>2</sup> is one of the important stakeholders which determines the principles, procedures, and standards regarding the social work activities carried out for the disabled; coordinates the work of determining policies and strategies at the national level in order for the disabled to participate in social life by benefiting from their human rights without discrimination; and ensures cooperation and coordination between relevant public institutions and organizations and voluntary organizations in this field.

As for the regulations for the disabled in higher education institutions, the Turkish Higher Education Council (YÖK) is the main stakeholder responsible for organising counselling and coordinating services for the disabled. With the regulation<sup>3</sup> published by YÖK, Counselling and Coordination Boards have been established to organise and regulate offices for the disabled within HEIs. It is obligatory to officially have a disability coordinator in all higher education institutions in Turkey. These institutions aim to take the necessary measures and make arrangements to prepare the necessary academic environment and to ensure their full participation in the learning processes to facilitate the educational life of disabled students who receive higher education at universities (2010). These coordination offices for the disabled in HEIs organise activities across universities to provide better education for the disabled, such as sports activities, symposiums, artistic events, and so on. Moreover, disabled students are supported digitally through the “Barrier-Free-Android project”, “YouTube projects”, and audio and touchable books.

One of Turkey's first offices in this field, Middle East Technical University, founded in 2004, has established the centre of “Coordination Without Barriers”. It has aimed to carry out the legal procedures regarding students with disabilities, make the campus physically and educationally accessible, and enable them to foster self-confidence and socialise. The centre has also contributed



to the development of nationwide regulations regarding disabled students and led to the establishment of disabled units in other universities. The centre also aimed to support people with disabilities, both at the university and outside, through its policies to eliminate existing prejudices and raise social sensitivities and academic awareness.

As well as these coordination offices for the disabled, OSYM (National Examination Center) Counselling and Coordination of the Disabled<sup>4</sup> struggles to build more inclusive settings at the higher education level in Turkey where disability is noticed for examinees. This centre ensures the accessibility of exams for the disabled.

The Turkish Higher Education Council also aims to make its higher education institutions accessible to all our students with its policy targeted at providing "Accessible and Barrier-Free Education". To promote positive change in the status of disability on campus and encourage the universities to be accessible for education, and socio-cultural activities, the council offers the Barrier-Free University Awards, which were given for the first time in 2018 (YÖK, 2020). While there were 318 applications from 41 universities in 2018, when the awards were first given, this number increased to 841 from 116 universities in 2020. Many universities have accelerated their work by forming commissions.

In a more local context, Necmettin Erbakan University embodies a centre for disabled students<sup>5</sup> established in 2012, and it provides various services for more than one hundred disabled students and staff. The vision and mission of the Disabled Student Centre are to meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of disabled students and administrative and academic staff. The centre works on their problems and solutions and provides counselling to them and their families living in our city. In this regard, they also inform these individuals about the relevant laws, legislations, regulations, and personal rights. Further services provided to disabled individuals and their families in this area include vocalising and scanning books, and carrying out support activities for their social, psychological, and educational needs. In the 21st century, these individuals must also be equipped with the skills of media and digital literacy to help them be compatible with the needs of the century and increase their employability. This centre also aims to contribute to their ability to access communication tools, analyse and interpret the media and distinguish between the real world and the media world.

Furthermore, the Turkish National Agency has asked higher education institutions to appoint social inclusion officers, which will help universities develop amendments and guidance programs for more inclusive and sustainable education policies. Such an initiative should end with introducing social inclusion offices into universities to fight against all kinds of discrimination and hate speech on campuses. Through the establishment of social inclusion offices in higher education institutions, it might be achieved to increase awareness of the inclusion and diversity strategy within the organization, develop strategies related to communication and social assistance, promote inclusion opportunities within the institution, provide necessary information to other units and personnel involved in the inclusion processes; and ensure the necessary communication and adequate support to the disadvantaged students.



Today, 'discrimination' originating from factors like class, race, ethnicity, poverty, gender, religion, being a 'foreigner', and being disabled should be considered an academic problem and a political problem. Universities can contribute to the education of society on how to fight hate speech.

Above all these practical state policies, such as awareness-raising public campaigns, public protection of these disadvantaged groups, and creating a responsive, sensitive justice system to fight against hate crimes, the most important thing we need is to build a conscious society, which is only possible through education. Children from an early age should be trained as individuals who think out of the box, respect differences, value variety, and show empathy. To achieve this, critical pedagogies must be adopted at higher education levels and at other levels of education. Specific courses also need to be designed to strengthen the university curriculum in the fight against hate speech, and these courses' teaching methods and approaches should be determined accordingly.

In her examination of the curricula of universities in Turkey, Çelenk (2018) points out that the subject of "hate speech" in university curricula in Turkey is not handled much since it is thought to be involved within the framework of human rights; and it is covered in only one or two weeks during a term. On the other hand, hate speech might be kept out of the campus with the speech codes that define the rules and limits of speech that must be followed while using freedom of speech and expression. Still, speech codes might be problematized based on freedom of expression. In this respect, through the project CHECK IT-HE, we might contribute to developing and introducing appropriate speech codes into campuses to combat discrimination and harassment on campuses.

Last but not least, it is also crucial to foster self-empowerment of disabled people. To encourage more active participation of students, those with disabilities need to be strengthened through advocacy and empowerment initiatives. Lectures in the form of seminars might increase student participation and discussion in the classroom as much as possible. Materials such as literary texts, films, and documentaries allowing critical thinking and social skill training might be frequently used in the lessons. In the lessons, instructional practices might be conducted to enable students to see and confront their ethnic, linguistic, and cultural prejudices.

## **United Kingdom and Disability and Chronic Illness in Society and HE**

Disability, chronic illness, and mental health are issues which have been thrust into the spotlight in recent years in the UK. The Office for National Statistics reports that an estimated 14.6 million people in the UK had a disability in the 2020/21 financial year (see Kirk-Wade, 2022). This equates to approximately 22% of the current UK population. This number is not too dissimilar from the number of those who are estimated to have chronic illness, with the Department of Health and Social Care releasing a report suggesting that approximately 15 million people in the UK have some form of chronic illness (see Department of Health and Social Care, 2012). Additionally, a study conducted by the University of Leicester, on behalf of the National Health Service (NHS) in 2016 found that the amount of people with common mental health problems went up by 20% between 1993 to 2014 (see McManus et al., 2016). Indeed, as Sahakian et al. (2010) note: *"Mental ill-health is more widespread*



*than many realise, with 16% of adults in the UK having a common mental disorder, such as depression, at any one time. Nearly 10% of children aged 5–16 years have a clinically diagnosable mental health problem which can often persist into adult life”.*

In examining these statistics, it is important to remember three key points: first, some definitions used by different UK health organisations overlap. This is evidenced in the Department of Health and Social Care’s report, where depression and “mental health” are categorised as chronic illness. These mental health conditions are also considered in the categorisation of mental health in the report conducted for the NHS by McManus et al. Second, co-morbidities of disabilities and chronic ill health are a frequent occurrence, meaning that physical and mental health conditions often occur together. Importantly, different health conditions need to be viewed as separate entities that can all influence an individual in different capacities and for different reasons. In other words, co-morbidities may not be caused by one issue facing an individual, but rather can exist simultaneously for a host of other reasons. For example, a person with diabetes may not experience anxiety because of their diabetes but may have an anxiety disorder which is completely unrelated (and they may never feel anxious about their diabetes). Third, it should also be remembered that while statistics provide a useful starting point for understanding how widespread different conditions are, statistics will never fully capture lived experiences of individuals. While statistics might tell us, for example, how many people live with a mental health condition, they do not necessarily tell us what it is like to live with that condition, what an individual might think about that condition, or the daily struggles that someone with that condition might face.

With regards to these conditions on campuses, many students do not report various conditions to the HEIs they attend (see Office for Students, 2020). Although several Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have provisions to support students with disabilities, chronic illnesses, and/or mental health conditions, many students choose not to inform university administrative teams or tutors, and struggle alone. A number of campaigns and funded projects have been run in order to address this. For example, Student Minds is the UK’s student mental health charity and in July 2020 the Office for Students and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) made £3 million available for Student Minds. This money was directed to Student Minds to support them in the development of a targeted programme of mental health support called *Student Space*. This online platform has a wide range of information and includes, for example, resources that students can access which address several aspects of mental health and wellbeing. The website also contains a directory of services students can access at their own university or college.

## Accessible Environments

Under UK law, UK HEIs are required to make all facilities on campus accessible to all and not to discriminate against disabled students. However, there are differences in accessibility across HEIs. For example, a HEI might provide a ramp into a building, but that ramp might be some distance away from the main entrance. The architecture of different universities might mean that accessibility is sometimes viewed as an after-thought, rather than an integral part of the design of universities. For example, the Institute for Employment Studies (2019) released a report demonstrating on a small



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number of UK HEIs have mentioned that physical accessibility should be embedded into their built environment from the conception of the development of new estate facilities. The same report also notes a number of barriers which students with disabilities face on campus, which prevent a good portion from progressing through their degree schemes. Although this kind of discrimination may not be explicit in the way that hate speech is, it does demonstrate a prejudice towards disabled students, and it might make a number of students feel both unwelcome, unwanted and be unable to achieve their potential. It also sends a message to other students that disabled people are not included, which can reinforce negative stereotypes.

Finally, it should be noted that under the Equality Act (2010), discrimination against disabled people is illegal. This does not necessarily mean that people will not go on to discriminate against disabled students, those with chronic health conditions, or those with mental health conditions, rather it demonstrates that the UK Government has implemented legalisation by which those who perpetrate such hate can be prosecuted. There are potential consequences to hate and HEIs need to be prepared to seek external police and other external agency support to deal with serious cases.

### Prominent issues on Disability, Chronic Illness and Mental Health Status hate on UK Campuses

One of the biggest issues facing students with regards to disability, chronic illness and mental health status hate on campuses, is discrimination. Some work has addressed the fact that disabled students are likely to be discriminated against, though has warned that there is not sufficient data on the reporting of hate crime directed towards such students (see Advance HE, 2021). Importantly, at an event hosted by Advance HE in 2021, Dr Leah Burch, Senior Lecturer in Social Science at Liverpool Hope University, UK, noted that a number of hate-based incidents tend to be unnoticed – they are not necessarily huge rallies to demand that disabled students do not attend; but they tend to be more coded in ways of speaking to/about disabled students. Dr Burch also noted that UK HEIs need to start recording and collecting data on disability-related hate crime, as this seems to be an area lacking. Indeed, a more extensive survey of current literature indicates that there are a lack of concrete figures around disability, chronic illness and mental health status hate on campuses.

In the same vein as acknowledging that hate directed towards students is often implicit, various systemic cultural problems within universities can be seen as discriminatory. Although it may be unconscious bias and discrimination, these are still forms of hatred, and by regularly othering those who are disabled, live with chronic illness and have mental health issues, there is an implicature of unwelcomeness which can sustain problematic ideologies that normalize both othering and hatred. During the COVID-19 pandemic, one such example of this might have been requirements to be taught face-to-face, despite being clinically vulnerable (see Scope, 2022). This may have had implications for how clinically vulnerable students were viewed, especially if in-person data collection or group-work was required.



## How Disability, Chronic Illness and Mental Health Status Hate is Addressed at HEIs

As noted in the previous section, some work has begun to address disability, chronic illness and mental health status hate on UK HEI campuses. This includes, for example, running workshops and seminars addressing hate towards people who face such hate.

Outside of events to address disability, chronic illness and mental health status hate, a number of HEIs have various policies and procedures in place in order to ensure they meet the requirements of the Equality Act (2010). A number of these policies, include, for example, a discussion about the disciplinary procedures for students who break laws around hate speech. A number of students unions are also involved in the development of these materials, and often have a disabled student representative. This also typically includes, for example, ways in which UK HEIs will make accommodations for those with disabilities, chronic illness, and mental ill-health (see, for example, this guidance from The University of Cambridge; also see Disabilityrightsuk, 2022).

However, while these policies and ways of protecting people are useful, there are fewer active campaigns on campuses to prevent hate based around disability, chronic illness and mental health status. There are some campaigns to promote the prevention of these (e.g., campaigns to promote mindfulness), but these are not always specifically focused on countering hate specifically (although there are implications for how these ideas can be transferred to countering hate).

## Identification of Cyber Bullying in relation to Disability, Chronic illness and Mental Health in the UK

A report by Zafeiriou and Manyande (2012) explored the experiences of 219 undergraduate students in the UK and they found that about 34% of respondents experienced some form of cyber bullying, with 21% of respondents reporting that they had frequently been bullied. Some previous reports, for example, by the Anti-Bullying Alliance have suggested that students in secondary education are typically more likely to be the victims of cyber bullying. Indeed, the Office for National Statistics (2020) reported that the prevalence of online bullying is significantly higher for children with a long-term illness or disability (26%) than those without (18%). It is not a particularly large step in logic to assume that a number of the issues which face students in secondary education are also likely to continue to affect the students in higher education.

Most of the work on cyberbullying relates to students with special educational needs but focused on students in secondary education, rather than higher education. A lot of this research focuses specifically on what schools can do in order to protect such students (see Department for Education, 2018). For example, the Department for Education recommends that schools create a welcoming environment for those with disabilities. This kind of advice is not too distant from what HEIs can implement: creating environments where disabled students feel welcome and comfortable enough to report cases of cyber bullying.





With regards to work on cyberbullying on UK HEI campuses, little work seems to have been done to address the reasons for such bullying and what identities cyberbullies attack. For example, while it is known just how prevalent cyberbullying is, it is not known whether this all relates to disability, sexism, or some other identity.

Cyberbullying can happen to anyone with an online presence. The National Bullying Helpline (2022) outlines that there are several types of cyberbullying: trolling, mobbing, stalking, grooming or any form of abuse online. UK HEIs are made up of a complex number of people: teachers, students, staff, visitors, contractors, etc. All of these people might face these forms of bullying at some point and, given how extensive and diverse the body of people on UK HEI campuses is, might also perpetrate these.

Despite an extensive search of the literature, it does not appear as though there is data related to the demographics of the main victims of cyber bullying on UK HEI campuses and, as such, the extent to which this specifically relates to disability, chronic illness, and mental health on UK HEI campuses is unknown.

### Public Policies and Cyberbullying in the UK

Most schools, colleges, and universities have policies on cyberbullying (for example, this paper by Harrison et al., 2020). Although it is not a legal requirement for Universities to describe how they will tackle bullying per se, most UK HEIs have publicly available policies detailing their anti-bullying stance. Elsewhere, Universities UK (2019) highlighted the need for HEIs to pioneer the way in tackling cyberbullying. The report from Universities UK primarily suggests the need to develop prevention strategies, as well as strategies for how UK HEI management should respond to issues around cyberbullying.

However, most public policies which address cyberbullying typically focus on cyberbullying for children (between the ages of 5 and 18). For example, Governmental advice from the Department for Education (2017) is focused on providing information for headteachers, staff and governing bodies of primary and secondary schools. In a similar vein, there are several resources for children these ages, including, for example from the NSPCC (The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children) (2022). While charities like the NSPCC recognise that cyberbullying can happen at any age and be due to any protected characteristic, they also focus primarily on the protect of children (as this is within their remit).

In terms of more national policies, there do not seem to be any particular policies or blanket advice for UK HEI campuses.



## Existing UK Case Studies (National Programmes, Guidelines, Research Work etc.) of Hate Speech and Cyber Bullying in relation to Disability, Chronic Illness and Mental Health

One of the biggest programmes to address hate speech and cyber bullying in relation to disability, chronic illness and mental health was a taskforce established by Universities UK. This taskforce explored harassment and hate crime affecting university students (see Universities UK, 2016). Although this taskforce specifically looked at how these affect women, they took an intersectional approach to exploring hate crime (including hate speech). The findings demonstrate that most universities tend to include hate speech and cyber bullying as part of their overarching policies on bullying and harassment. In addition to this, the report from the taskforce highlighted a number of inadequacies across several policies and suggests the need to rethink a range of advice given to the victims of online abuse.

The taskforce established by Universities UK is a good case study of the current situation for what is currently being done in the UK: there are several people working on different elements to address hate speech and cyber bullying in relation to disability, chronic illness and mental health, but many of these are either in their early stages or are relatively unknown to the broader general public.

One possible, but more tangentially related, national programme related to mental health is the mental health first-aid scheme. Mental health first aid training is a professional qualification from Mental Health England. This training provides, usually HEI staff, with the tools to sign post students struggling with their mental health and allows members of staff to act as a “first point of call” for students experiencing mental ill health. This is particularly important in the case of cyber bullying related to mental health status: there are a number of mental health conditions which might be exacerbated by cyber bullying and having trained first aiders who people experiencing such issues can provide a vital support network in a time of need.

## What could be done at HEI Policy Level to Promote Positive Change Concerning Disability, Chronic Illness and Mental Health on UK Campuses?

One of the first things that UK HEIs could do would be to establish policies which specifically relate to disability, chronic illness and mental health discrimination and hate crime on their campuses. For most this is already underway and is often led by Equality, Diversity and Inclusion specialised units established in HEIs. Most of these work closely with disabled students and staff to ensure lived experience is at the core of initiatives and policy development. It is important to develop specific policies around slurs relating to these topics and how they are dealt with in day-to-day interactions. One of the major barriers to discussion about policies related to disability, chronic illness and mental health related hate on UK HEI campuses is the severe lack of policies which relates specifically to these topics, rather than the more general policies.



In addition to these, many new buildings and designs need to take into account students with different types of disability and how they interact with the environment. For example, does particular wallpaper or visual decals make it harder for visually impaired people to see someone in front of a wall? Are ramps and lifts put in reasonable places so those with mobility-related disabilities can still access buildings with their peers? Are spaces likely to induce stress in those with anxiety or other conditions? For instance, policy which UK HEIs might want to implement could be around ensuring that all stairs have an accompanying ramp or lift within a short set distance (e.g., 10 feet) or that lifts are designed with those who experience stress in enclosed spaces, in mind. This kind of policy would also involve a good degree of self-reflexivity for HEIs: getting higher management at UK HEIs to consider what areas they could improve in terms of accessibility.

Ensuring all policy, practice and educational work involves and prioritises the experience of those with disabilities or chronic illnesses is vital. The importance of lived experience on Committees or working groups is crucial and such groups should be formed at every level of HEI infrastructure and department.

### Raising Public Awareness in relation to Disability, Chronic Illness and Mental Health on UK Campuses

As it stands, although there are a number of public health campaigns around mental ill health (for example, Movember is a yearly campaign where people grow beards for charities promoting men's mental health), more work is needed to address hate in relation to disability, chronic illness and mental health on UK HEI campuses. There is a focus on campaigns which support people with disabilities, chronic illnesses, and mental ill health – or which support charities and services related to these. However, less is done specifically around addressing hate speech and drawing attention to people who have been the victims of hate speech because of these prejudices. In other words, a move is needed from awareness of issues to addressing the consequences of hate speech and hateful acts.

There are a number of challenges in addressing hate speech in relation to disability, chronic illness and mental health – such as how slurs around these have become somewhat normalized in everyday language. This is something which scholars (e.g., Higbee et al., 2010) and journalists (e.g., Nović, 2021 – writing for the BBC) have drawn attention to. There are several terms like “turning a blind eye” or calling someone a “psycho”. There is lots of language which positions those with disabilities, chronic illnesses and mental ill health as undesirable, through associating negative things with terms used by these communities. Something which could be done to raise public awareness of these issues might be to run a series of campaigns. In 2008, GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network) ran a series of campaigns called “Thinkb4youspeak”. This program was designed to address anti-LGBTQ+ hate speech which had become normalized in every day conversation (e.g., calling negative things “gay”). GLSEN ran a successful campaign for a long time, with a series of advertisements such as “that’s so...”, which made people question their use of terms like “that’s so



gay”. Similar ideas could be transferred to addressing these normalized terms for disability, chronic illness, and mental ill health.

### Who are the Vital Stakeholders, and which Audiences should be reached to Instigate Debate and Change in the UK?

Regardless of what policies are implemented or what debates are held, we must always remember to centre the voices of those who these issues face the most: those with disabilities, chronic illnesses and mental ill health. Many UK HEIs have representatives for student members with these identities and conditions – such as disabled student officers. In addition, there are many staff networks and collections of people who often act as representatives of these groups of people. When considering any policy implementation, these groups should be consulted, in order to ensure that needs are met adequately.

There are a number of UK societies, voluntary sector organisations and community groups in the UK for those with disabilities, chronic illnesses and mental ill health. For example, Mind is a charity which specialises in supporting those with mental ill health. These kinds of charities work closely with those who are the most important stakeholders in any policies around disabilities, chronic illnesses and mental ill health – and therefore have a wide range of expertise which could benefit any HEI wishing to implement change. Although workers from these kind of charities do not always have the same lived experiences as those whom they serve, people from these kind of charities and NGOs have a good awareness of trends across a range of lived experiences, and often produce materials to help encourage policy changes to benefit the people they serve.

## **Activity 2: Similarities and Differences Across HEIs**

Having read the materials above on practice in disability and inclusion across the CHECK IT HE countries, do you see any similarities or differences in the ways disability and chronic illnesses are seen across these?

**Comment** – Policies are different in each country, but the overriding factor here is that despite public and policy change, much needs to be done to encourage inclusion and prevent discrimination and hate. The reality is that disabled students or those with chronic illnesses of all types face high levels of barriers, discrimination and difficulties within HE. You may also have noticed that there is very little relating to staff disability and chronic illness. Those matters are seen as often covered by employment public policy or as human resource matters. However, the fact is that how disability and



chronically ill people are supported is a wide, societal and indeed organisational matter. It is about how the HE ecosystem, holistically includes and supports people, whether students or staff.

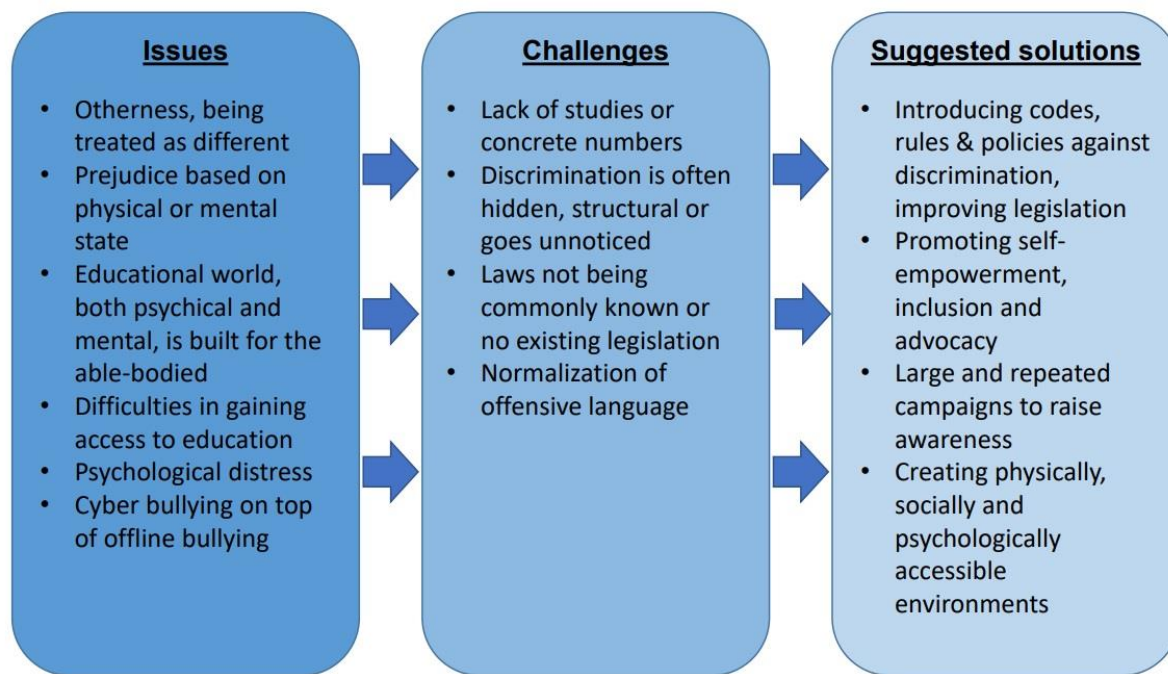


## Summarizing The Output Main Results



The main results of this CHECK IT HE project output highlight the significance and importance of addressing disability and health status hate, discrimination and exclusion in HE. It must be remembered that these are urgent matters, disabled and chronically ill students are sometimes forced to abandon their studies because of exclusion and/or abuse. Data regarding hate speech and discrimination in HEIs has been shown to be lacking. But according to the data we have gathered, prejudice and discrimination are significant issues in HEI settings.

Additionally, it is shown that the environment of higher education is generally unsuitable for those with disabilities because of lack of HEI support and response to ensuring equality and inclusion. We have demonstrated above that both concrete reforms and cultural/attitudinal changes, in relation to disability and health statuses, are required in HEI communities. It is important that we pay attention to the campus location and educational access for all groups to ensure inclusion and equity and this needs to be monitored to ensure implementation. It is also crucial to acknowledge one's ableist beliefs and behaviours, both personally and professionally. On a wider level across HEIs, this requires implementation of cultural change, through educating students and staff on the topic, as well as changing leadership and policy cultures around the issues. For instance, chronic conditions, physical impairments, and mental health problems are not publicly discussed on college campuses. Currently in many European jurisdictions, there are limited resources to promote mental health and disability policies in HEIs and in EU partner countries, but policy and practices are developing.



This framework is based on the workshop answers provided by the CHECK IT HE teams from the UK, Turkey, Finland, Serbia, Portugal, and Cyprus.





## Most Prominent Issues

Otherness/othering comes from being treated as different by others and this impacts on disabled students and those with chronic illnesses who are othered by peers, staff, university structures and societally. In most countries, discrimination against disabled students manifests in the ways of talking to and about them. Even what societally might be thought of as good-meaning words and actions such as pitying and being paternalistic, are ableist (or disablist) and must be challenged in HE and beyond.

Despite lack of concrete numbers or studies, most countries reported that people with disabilities, chronic illness or mental health issues face prejudice based on physical or mental state.

The educational world is built for able-bodied people, which is evident from the fact that many disabled students prefer studying from home or online, rather than at campuses. Access to gaining education is a challenge. Even if it is required by law to make campus buildings accessible, it is often an afterthought rather than the focal point.

Higher education students are often under extreme psychological distress, which can be exhibited by eating disorders, anxiety, and actions of self-harm. It should not be ignored that HE life can cause some students to experience mental health disability or even attempt suicide.

Cyber-bullying is a prominent issue, but linking it to discrimination based on disability, chronic illness or mental health status requires further research. From what is known, most cases of cyber bullying happen at the same time in parallel with offline bullying. This is abuse and it is in many countries reportable as disability crime. HEIs need to be ready to report, and to support those reporting, hate crime.

HEIs must become familiar with local police, other authorities and the law, and support students with hate crime reporting. Widespread training of staff in this area is imperative, as well as around internal disciplinary mechanisms.

## Challenges

One of the challenges when tackling the issues of discrimination or hate towards disability, chronic illness or mental health is that even if it is widely known to be a problem, there is still a lack of research or concrete data on the subject. This makes understanding the size of the issue difficult.

It is also difficult to fight discrimination because the way it manifests in the way of speaking and in the attitudes of people. There is also a problem of underreporting. This makes the problem hidden and mostly systemic or structural. It was also pointed out how offensive language, actions and even slurs are so normalized, that people do not realize they're being offensive – but that does not make it acceptable. HEIs must be proactive in ensuring such language is challenged – staff can be part of this in running sessions or pushing for HEIs to do so.





Discrimination based on disability, chronic illness or mental health is illegal in most countries, but several teams reported that the lack of knowledge about these laws can sometimes be an issue. People using hate speech might view their harmful words merely as “expressing their opinions”. In some countries hate speech is not determined by law, whilst in other countries classification of the word “disabled” is vague. However, in many countries the legal systems are increasingly identifying hate speech and hate crime and developing policy around this. HEIs must be prepared to work with criminal justice and policing professionals to challenge hate.

## Suggested Solutions – Toolkit Activities/Actions and Practice

Challenging disability discrimination and hate in higher education institutions is a critical endeavour in the creation of an inclusive and supportive environment for all students and staff. You may have read the sections above with great interest but then be thinking, “what can I do?” There is much you can do at an individual, group and institutional level. Do not forget to get others involved in instigating change, this is vital and, depending on your role in the institution, you may need to link to staff in specific roles, or at senior management levels, to aid in creating change.

You could:

1. Encourage your HEI to conduct a thorough assessment of the current state of disability discrimination and hate on campus. This needs to capture the lived experiences of disabled people and those with chronic conditions. People with lived experience should be at the forefront of this group.
2. Carry out a policy review – what is already available within the policy portfolio of the institution? What is missing or out of date?
3. Advocate for your HEI to create an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Unit or Department (if one is not already set up). Such specialist units can support the development and improvement of policy to challenge disability and hate, to lead training and to be a visible presence to ensure that equality issues are high on the HEI agenda and are addressed. Employing dedicated Equality, Diversity and Inclusion staff and sections within HEIs to challenge ableist attitudes, practices and policy and advise on the issues can be very useful. As these are professionals in the field, they are best placed to help lead change.
4. Raise awareness among faculty, staff, and students about the importance of addressing disability discrimination and promoting inclusion. Can you work with others to run events to challenge negative beliefs or ideas? Are staff and students aware of the legal and ethical contexts of disability hate in your country and in HE?



5. Can you modify or improve your curriculum content and teaching and learning strategy to ensure inclusion? This might be about topics you cover, pedagogy used, or support systems for teaching and learning.

You could also encourage your HEI to:

- a) Develop and review policies related to disability discrimination, harassment, and accommodation to ensure they are up-to-date and comprehensive. Again, this should be strongly user-led.
- b) Establish clear and confidential reporting mechanisms for incidents of disability discrimination and hate. This should include the facility to report anonymously if individuals so wish.
- c) Establish clear consequences for those found guilty of discrimination or hate crimes. The disciplinary processes need to be robust, transparent, and advertised. Anyone on campus should be in no doubt that if they express hate or discriminate, they will be challenged and that there are consequences with institutional backing. Moreover, for serious cases, the HEI will seek external advice and action, where required.
- d) Establish mandatory training and workshops for all staff, faculty, and students on disability awareness, inclusion, and sensitivity training? Specialist training should also be provided for staff in relation to teaching and learning, content, and approach to disability and chronic illness issues and how to support students. Moreover, there should be specialist training for all staff involved in student support services.
- e) Ensure accessible campus environments? The reality is that anyone can need physical accessibility across their life-course, implementing necessary infrastructure changes, like ramps, elevators, and accessible bathrooms, is vital for all.
- f) Foster self-empowerment through advocacy and initiatives, providing those with disabilities, chronic illness, or mental health issues with help, such as helping with laws, regulations, scanning books etc. is important. However, self-empowerment also requires being given spaces to use for peer support, along with being treated respectfully. Anything offered must come from what disabled people want and from their voice – not from imposition from others with no lived experience.
- g) Run large and repeated pan-HEI campaigns to change attitudes when it comes to slurs and abusive acts/practices. This is important in HEIs but learning harmful attitudes starts early, so education is also needed that starts from a younger age, not just at higher education institutions. The same is the case when talking about cyber bullying.
- h) Check all digital content, including websites and learning materials, for accessibility for all students and staff. Do not forget that in some countries this will be a legal requirement, part of the HEIs' duty of care. In other countries, it may not be a legal duty, but you can argue to your HEI that the HE sector should lead in this area, showing leadership in relationship to equality, rather than merely following public policies.



- i) Strengthen mental health and counseling services to provide support to disabled students who may face emotional challenges, including from experiencing disability hate and abuse?
- j) Encourage the formation of student organisations and support groups, focused on disabilities and or chronic conditions, where students can share experiences and provide peer support. Can you help by requesting resources for such groups to organise events and awareness campaigns from your HEI?
- k) Enhance disability support services, including accommodations and assistive technology, to ensure students have equal access to education.
- l) Promotion of an inclusive curriculum across the organisation. Training for staff is mentioned above, but there will be cultural issues and a lack of understanding to challenge. Perhaps your HEI can deploy an EDI unit, or other staff, to support wider faculty to incorporate disability-related content and perspectives into their courses? Promotion of the development of courses focused on Disability Studies is also an option that could be considered.
- m) Lead on engaging NGOs or community organisations in inclusion policy - preferably involving groups who are led by disabled people or those with chronic illnesses. Collaborating with local disability advocacy organisations and experts can help your HEI to engage in awareness campaigns. This might include co-hosting events and forums that promote discussions on disability-related issues.
- n) Take part in regular evaluating and auditing change in the institution. You might be able to encourage your HEI to undertake regular audits of how they are performing in this area – incremental and continual improvement is needed.

Creating a more inclusive and welcoming higher education environment for individuals with disabilities is an ongoing process that requires commitment, resources, and a collective effort from all stakeholders within the institution. Regularly reassess and update your plan to adapt to changing needs and challenges.

Besides education, it's important that wider actions are taken. This includes forming committees, making sure rules about inclusivity are enforced and creating environments that are accessible physically, psychologically, and socially. All of these must include disabled people and those with chronic illnesses, again, prioritising and supporting lived experience as knowledge. Moreover, rather than creating general inclusion policies, to create specifically targeted policies or actions to address cyber bullying or accessible campuses for disabled and people with chronic illnesses. However, these must put disabled people's voices at the heart of those policies – as participants in policy making - not as just the 'object' of policy creation by others.



## Prioritised Concrete Actions:



Create infrastructures within HEI systems to support development of best practices towards all differences, including disability and chronic illness. Develop Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion practice through creation of dedicated units/departments to lead on this area.



Create workshops and student union participation, with representatives from disabled students in procedure planning on hate speech, hate crime and inclusion. Make this a prominent strategy. Ensure lived experience is at the core of this work.



Create training for all staff in EDI practice and also for students. That training should be based on lived experience of disability and chronic illness. Think about having students and staff with that experience running the training – but, of course, they should be fully paid!



Make attending teaching on campus easier for disabled chronically ill students with specialized aids, tools, & procedures. But ensure that anything offered/used is what disabled students & staff want. The priority is their needs & views, not those of others.



Collect more data! Carry out surveys and qualitative research. Realisation of equality has to be monitored and change measured.



Protect by raising awareness of cyber bullying, promoting proper online behavior, ensuring disciplinary policies clarity that hate is unacceptable and will not be tolerated.



Protect through development of policies, written with disabled students and staff, and robustly implemented. Ensure disciplinary mechanisms that deal with incidences of abuse and hate are publicized and understood. Where necessary, bring in external stakeholders, such as the police or NGOs working to address hate crimes.





Make active changes to used language so that problematic and stigmatizing saying do not harm anyone. Slurs and sayings can be targeted to different disabilities, groups, or illnesses – do you talk about “turning a blind eye?” or suggest someone behaves as if “crazy”? Excluding language must be challenged through awareness raising & training.

### **Activity 3: Applying the Learning to your Practice – Action Planning**

Now we are at the end of the toolkit it is imperative that we reflect on how you can integrate the learning from the toolkit.

- Why not make a plan for how you can influence practice, using the ideas above? What you do/can do is going to depend on your position in the HEI and the policies already in place but the suggestions above provide a foundation for your action planning.

Your action planning will be personal, but every change makes a difference. Why not write to us through our webpage and let us know how you get on? If the CHECK IT team can be of any assistance, or maybe you would like to run an event that we can be involved in or support, please let us know.



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