

# International Conference on Higher Education and Disabilities—Innsbruck, Austria: A Brief History

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## Abstract

Access to higher education for people with disabilities has been a concern and motivation for change internationally. Collaborative discussions about the attitudes and policies addressing these issues began many years ago with several organizations and agencies representing the interest of people with disabilities. There were international conferences in the U.S. and Europe addressing topics such as assistive technology to accommodate people with disabilities. However, these conferences addressed broad issues of accommodating someone with a disability rather than focusing on fair access to higher education. To address this, the Training, Resource, and Assistive Technology Center (TRAC) based within the University of New Orleans worked within a Friendship Treaty with the University of Innsbruck, Austria to establish what has become a triennial event. This article provides a brief history and description of how the International Conference on Higher Education and Disability started in 1992 and the developments that have occurred since. It has two sections. The first section provides a perspective from the Conference organizers whilst the second offers some reflections from a participant.

*Keywords:* International, higher education, disability, students

## A Historical Perspective

A combined international forum that focused on higher education and disability in Europe did not exist until 1992 when advocates for the rights of students with disabilities representing universities from several European countries and the University of New Orleans (UNO) in the U.S. spearheaded an ambitious goal to bring down barriers to entering post-school education for people with disabilities. The University of New Orleans and the University of Innsbruck (UI) have a Friendship Agreement. This formal partnership provided a venue for an exchange of educational opportunities and established the Center Austria at UNO and the Center New Orleans at UI. These developments pre-dated the first International Conference on Higher Education and Disability in 1992. It is this Friendship Agreement that allowed the International Conference on Higher Education and Disability to take place.

We should also consider that the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which was signed into law

in 1990, was in the early stages of implementation in 1992. The ADA would remove many barriers to higher education for people with disabilities in the United States. Many disability leaders/advocates in European countries did not have the benefit of such a law at that time, but were interested in removing barriers to higher education in their countries. Oliver St. Pé, the founding director of the Training, Resource and Assistive Technology Centre (TRAC) based at UNO, and several European colleagues discussed the possibility of a forum on higher on education and disability in Europe.

In 1991 Mr. St. Pé met with Dr. Friedrich Luhan, then Director of the University of Innsbruck, about the possibility of UI being the host site for the first international conference on higher education and disability. Dr. Luhan not only supported this idea but also wanted to take the lead in making the University of Innsbruck accessible to students with disabilities. The Friendship Agreement paved the way for the two universities to work in a partnership to accomplish these goals. It was agreed that the first conference would be

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held in the summer of 1992. Center Austria at UNO has periodically acted as liaison between TRAC and UI, which was very important when leadership at UI changed, introducing TRAC to the new leadership and vice versa. This conference has taken place every three years since then with the most recent held in 2013.

TRAC took the lead in coordinating the conference, locating accessible housing and addressing all special needs requests. Colleagues from three other European universities were invited to become key players in establishing this inaugural and, hopefully, recurring event. The other disability leaders were Dr. Joachim Klaus from the University of Karlsruhe in Germany, Professor Alan Hurst from the University of Central Lancashire in England, and Myriam Van Acker from the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium. As TRAC's Co-Sponsors, they marketed the conference in Europe, solicited presenters from European countries, and gave critical advice regarding cultural, educational, and political attitudes towards people with disabilities in Europe. The University of Innsbruck provided resources, staff, the conference venue, and organized very important social events that incorporated municipalities such as the City of Innsbruck and Province of Tirol, a deliberate and socially aware move that changed the landscape in Innsbruck and possibly Austria. Other conference sponsors at this early point in time were the Forum Europeen de l'Orientation Academique (FEDORA), Skill: National Bureau for Students with Disabilities in the U.K. (which was forced to close in April, 2011), the Trans-European Mobility Program for University Studies (TEMPUS), the European Union's Initiative on Human Resources (HORIZON), Mobility International-USA (MIUSA), and the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD-USA).

The first conference was intentionally kept to no more than 50 participants so that intimate networking could develop a cohesive base for future events. The focus of the first and subsequent conferences has been on innovative programs, international exchange opportunities, and public policies affecting university students with disabilities. Other topics have included alternative curriculum formats, reasonable accommodations, and self-advocacy. The target audience was and has continued to be disability service coordinators, researchers, and faculty or staff with an interest in disability affairs, and postsecondary educators and university administrators who bridge the gap between students with disabilities and campus accessibility issues.

One of the conference's most significant assets is the opportunity for participants to develop a social network that facilitates the exchange of knowledge, procedures, and practices. Participants have enjoyed and

derived value from comparing and contrasting various approaches to accessible accommodations, programs, services, and the establishment of new legislation in the countries represented at the conference. The home countries of some participants have enacted legislation but lacked the ability to enforce their disability-related laws. Consequently, participants have learned over the years about the absence of a venue to lodge a complaint or bring a non-compliant university to court, and how this restricted students with disabilities' access to higher education. In that vein, a theme that emerged from the 2007 conference was how infrequently individuals with disabilities around the world have challenged laws when they were implemented and how the U.S. has emerged as an exception to that pattern. Anecdotally, non-U.S. countries instead tend to report a belief that institutions of higher education would do the right thing in providing access to students with disabilities without an enforced legal mandate to do so.

Legal issues aside, presenters have reported over the years that numerous universities have been very proactive in accommodating students with disabilities. The message has been that the dedication and advocacy for the rights of students with disabilities by faculty, administrators and students have made these changes happen even when there was no specific legislation requiring them to do so. In the more distant past, this was the case in the U.K. More recently it seems to be happening in some of the newer countries of the European Union (EU), aided by the activities of small, effective, but inadequately-funded charities such as IMAGINE in Croatia and DSIS in Slovenia. Both countries now have disability access legislation following their membership of the EU.

Other questions regarding international exchange opportunities and the available accommodations at a host university could vary significantly from the student's home country or even from university to university. The conference has provided the opportunity for an exchange of valuable information between colleagues eager to learn from one another.

Many JPED readers live in the U.S. or Canada. This conference has provided countless opportunities over the years for North American disability services providers and faculty to "compare notes" with colleagues from other parts of the world. Such exchanges, of course, are not designed to determine which approach is better but to help all participants understand how a given country is developing wider accessibility for students with disabilities in a culturally-specific way. For example, pioneering conference organizer, Myriam Van Acker, first explained her vision for accommodating students with disabilities at the Catholic

University of Leuven at the 1992 conference. At that time she acknowledged that many people found it difficult to believe such a dream was possible. Her vision was to build a fully-accessible student dorm that would house students with and without disabilities, all of whom would want to participate in the Assisted Living program organized by Student Services. In the ensuing years, participants at the conferences heard about the great success of this innovative program. Students selected to participate live together and share the various benefits of the program. Students with disabilities have 24 hours of volunteer student support that is coordinated by Student Services. Students without disabilities are provided with subsidized housing costs and the opportunity to expand their social and organizational skills and develop new friendships. This program continues to be a feature of provision at the Catholic University of Leuven. However, in the U.S. and in some other countries such as the U.K., there would be cultural and professional barriers to such a program including contractual and liability issues.

We would like to point out that this conference does not exist as the result of a group of individuals who wanted to do something *for* people with disabilities. Rather, it owes its success to the participation of people *with* disabilities. We rarely think of our former Director, Oliver St. Pé, as having a disability. He was blind. There are other key players involved with this conference who have disabilities, as well as numerous participants throughout its history. This conference is reflective of what self-advocacy can accomplish.

From the bold vision of the conference's founders and the determination of disability service coordinators, university administrators, and student disability advocacy groups, the International Conference on Higher Education and Disability has had a tremendous impact on changes that have helped students with disabilities achieve their goals in many countries around the world.

### **A Participant's Perspective**

The comments and personal reflections that follow are based around my participation in all of the eight Innsbruck conferences that have taken place since 1992, a qualification which is shared with very few others. From being simply a delegate, I have become more closely involved with the organization of the event over the past twenty-three years and so feel able to offer some important and valid views.

One of the aspects in which I have become more involved is the planning of the event. In addition to circulating information about the conference throughout the U.K., I have also solicited contributions from

U.K.-based colleagues. The initial proposals from those wishing to present are grouped in a number of themes such as assistive technology, international exchanges, staff training and professional development, and supporting students with learning difficulties. Next, the proposals are circulated amongst a small team of experienced staff from a number of countries who then complete a pro-forma regarding the acceptability of the proposal for inclusion in the conference program. Feedback is provided, too, about possible overlap and repetition in some instances, a position that might be resolved by asking proposers to collaborate in a joint session. What the proposal evaluators welcome are papers from as many different countries as possible. Sometimes, the content might be seen to be something addressed already in many countries, but my view is that it is useful for us to be reminded of our earlier struggles and of the progress we have made.

Also, in the period since 1992, there has been a clear change of major interest. In those early days the focus was on making reasonable accommodations, a process that in the U.K. and elsewhere tended to be undertaken once students with a disability had enrolled in a study program. Today, there is a much greater concern with anticipating what might be needed and ensuring that it is in place prior to the recruitment of students with disabilities. Thus, attention has shifted to UDL and on inclusive pedagogy and this has been reflected in conference sessions. Arguably, this might offer increased possibilities for transfer between countries and cultures, especially when accompanied by effective anti-discrimination laws.

Regarding the "international" dimension of the event, in 2010 104 proposals were submitted from 20 different countries whilst in 2013 there were 112 proposals from 27 different countries. The largest number usually comes from the U.S. and Canada (64 in 2013) whilst the majority of the others are from Europe and elsewhere (48 in 2013). Submissions from Africa, Asia, and Australia have been relatively rare whilst I cannot recall seeing a proposal from a Central or South American country. Within Europe, there are also interesting differences. For example, it is rare to encounter both paper proposals and participants from France whilst countries in southern Europe (e.g., Portugal, Italy, Greece) have seldom been represented. An underlying reason for this may stem from the conference using English as its first language. The shift in balance between presenters' home countries may indicate the growth of international interest in higher education and disability or it could reflect the economic problems facing U.S. universities, which usually sponsor presenters.

Moving on to explore aspects of the actual event, the first point to note is that it has been held at roughly the same time on every occasion. The conference is held over three days, not usually involving a weekend. Choosing dates in July means that rooms are available for use in the University of Innsbruck since students are on vacation. It means, too, that many possible participants are free to attend since it is out of term. On the other hand, there are some drawbacks to holding the event in July. Innsbruck is a popular tourist venue, so living accommodations for delegates need to be vouchsafed as early as possible. Also, other organizations choose to hold events in July for the same reasons as those listed above. Finally, and certainly in the U.K., as staff are put under greater pressures in their work roles, they are becoming more reluctant to give up valuable free time to attend job-related conferences. This, coupled with a much-reduced budget for conference attendance, might be factors to be taken into account when planning future events. The timing of events remains a recurring issue; there is no “best time” that suits everybody.

All of the conferences so far have started with an opening plenary session in which the organizers and representatives from the University of Innsbruck have addressed the delegates. Sometimes there has been a keynote address and perhaps there might be scope to make more of this. One addition to the session is the presentation of the Myriam Van Acker Award, which was introduced at the 2004 event following her death. It is given to honor the contribution made by an individual to furthering the cause of improved access to higher education for people with disabilities. The first recipient was Amanda Evans, who works for the European Agency for Special Education; the most recent recipient was Ann Heelan, Chief Executive of AHEAD- Ireland. There is also a closing plenary. At the 1992 event when there were so few participants, the session took the form of feedback from a number of working groups. Sadly, with the increase in numbers attending, this feature has been abandoned. Another small activity associated with the closing session was the taking of a group photograph of the participants, which has also disappeared.

Given the conference focus, it is regarded as supremely important that people with disabilities (especially students) participate and that they have equal access to all sessions, materials, and activities. Adapted living accommodation can be arranged and personal assistants are welcomed. At least one room used for the small-group sessions has simultaneous typing to aid those who are deaf or hard-of-hearing. Sign language interpreters are used although sometimes participants

are accompanied by their own sign language interpreters. All materials used by presenters have to be made available in different formats (e.g., large print, Braille). With the advance of assistive technology that has taken place alongside the development of the conference, access has become easier. After the event, all presentations are available electronically.

Turning to consider the small group sessions, the first point to note is that many of these have taken the form of mini-lectures. They have been of the “show and tell” kind where those attending have only a passive involvement. PowerPoint presentations are the most common format. However, in my view, attending many of these is challenging for delegates with a low threshold of boredom. My personal preference is for a workshop format built around some of the principles associated with effective learning, especially the active involvement of participants, the varied range of tasks, and the “learning can be fun” approach. Hence, when considering conference proposals, I look to support a balance of presentational and interactional styles.

Prior to every one of the conferences held so far, the number of proposals received has been far in excess of the time available. Consequently, in order to provide the opportunity for as many participants as possible to have a role, poster sessions have been organized, often during lunch breaks. In the early days, a room had been set aside for participants to leave any materials they thought would interest colleagues. Such materials now form part of the poster sessions although the development of electronic means of communication and use of the Internet have rendered this a little superfluous.

For many of those who have attended the Innsbruck conferences, it is the relaxed atmosphere and the friendliness of the event that they remember. There is a social program often taking the form of a civic reception hosted by the city and/or one that the University of Innsbruck has sponsored. Also, there is a bus tour of the city to see its tourist attractions. Alongside these are the informal activities that occur on an ad-hoc basis. Many colleagues have developed strong links (and personal friendships) as they have taken the cable car to the top of a mountain or ridden the tram on the scenic route to the village of Igls. I am greatly indebted to the Innsbruck conference for developing my own links with colleagues working outside the U.K.. Having this knowledge has benefitted my work with students with disabilities. One outcome of this was my editing a collection of papers describing policy and provision for students with disabilities in a number of different countries so that colleagues could be aware of developments in other parts of the world. The book, *Higher Education and Disabilities: International Approaches*,

was published in 1998 and is now out-of-date so there is scope for a second edition. I have also worked with TRAC colleagues to arrange for two students who use wheelchairs to spend a semester at UNO, an experience one described as “the making of me.” More pertinently, perhaps, there is my role as guest editor of this special international issue of JPED since it was during the 2013 conference that the then-Executive Editor David Parker invited me to take on this task.

So what might the future be for the Innsbruck conference? Given growing limitations on budgets in relation to both institutions and individuals and increasing pressures on individuals’ time, the attraction of the event might wane. Some might suggest that greater use might be made of developments in information technology. Certainly, some presentations might be accomplished remotely and there are computer programs that allow for so-called “conference calls.” However, what these possibilities ignore are the benefits accruing from face-to-face interactions and the spontaneity of ideas and thoughts that spring from conversations with colleagues from different backgrounds and cultures. For me, there will always be a need for conferences like that which TRAC at UNO created and has organized so successfully for over twenty years. My hope is that this triennial venture will continue and flourish but, if it does, it is likely to be within changed circumstances. At this time, the most important change to note is that there will not be a Ninth International Conference on Higher Education and Disability to be held in Innsbruck, Austria in 2016. The leadership has shifted to the University of Innsbruck and Center Austria at UNO and the University of Innsbruck has tentative plans to organize a similar conference in 2017. However, no additional information is available at this time.

New participants often note how warm, welcoming, and friendly the conference is. The prevailing atmosphere is quite remarkable in my experience. Current decision-makers, whether in large units like national governments or smaller ones such as universities, appear to have an obsession with budgets and finance whilst simultaneously neglecting to consider unquantifiable benefits such as value. Participants in the Innsbruck conferences have gained immeasurable benefits, both personally and professionally. More importantly, their efforts to create a fairer, more inclusive society for the students with disabilities with whom they work have had a universal impact. It would be a poorer world if this collaborative gathering was to be lost, especially as a result of actions by those who claim to know the costs of everything and who may actually know the value of nothing.

## References

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### **About the Authors**

Ken Zangla received B.A. in History at the University of Dallas (Texas) and a M.A. in Vocational Rehabilitation Counseling at the University of Texas SW Medical Center in Dallas, Texas. He is the retired Director of the University of New Orleans, Training, Resource and Assistive Technology Center (TRAC). He has worked there since 1990, holding several positions where he was involved in program development to promote independence through training and accommodations/assistive technology. His most recent position as Director allowed him to Co-chair the International Conference on Higher Education and Disability since 2007. His work experience includes working with a wide range of people with disabilities. He currently works with New Horizons Independent Living Center, Alexandria Louisiana, where he works with the Deaf and people with hearing loss.

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