

# International Exchange with a Disability: Enhancing Experiences Abroad Through Advising and Mentoring (Practice Brief)

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## Abstract

Through interaction with an advisor or peer mentor and through exposure to the experiences of role models, students with disabilities gain an appreciation of the potential challenges and benefits of international exchange and make informed choices about whether, where, and how to go abroad. By adopting strategies for inclusive advising and role modeling, less experienced practitioners can develop expertise and understanding for advising prospective exchange participants with disabilities. This practice brief outlines the steps taken by one practitioner in Turkey, where few inclusive exchange resources and role models exist, to adapt a U.S.-based organization's strategies for supporting postsecondary students with disabilities in international exchange. It evaluates the impact of advising on the experiences of three disabled Turkish exchange students and recommends best practices and professional resources for advisors and peer mentors to enhance support to exchange participants with disabilities.

*Keywords:* Disability, international student, student advising, good practice, mentoring, international education

## Introduction and Summary of Relevant Literature

International exchange has the potential to benefit people of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities. As the field of international education more readily recognizes disability as an issue of diversity, more international education professionals and others are conducting research and collecting data related to the participation of students with disabilities in opportunities abroad.

Since 2009, the U.S.-based Institute of International Education has collected disability data on U.S. study abroad (Institute of International Education, 2014), though the disability status for many education abroad students remains unknown. Among those institutions where disability status is known, the number of U.S. students with disabilities studying abroad rose to 3194 in 2012/13, an increase from 2786 in the previous academic year, and represented 5.1% of total study abroad students.

European data reflect much lower participation of disabled students in student mobility programs. Of 198,600 European students participating in the 2008/2009 Erasmus exchange program, a European

Union (EU) student exchange program for EU secondary and postsecondary students to study or intern abroad in participating EU countries, only 213 students disclosed a disability (European Commission, 2010). In response to these low figures, the Erasmus Student Network (ESN), a Europe-wide student organization comprised of 13,500 volunteer members across European higher education institutions (HEIs), launched the ExchangeAbility project in 2010 to increase the participation of disabled students in mobility programs (UNICA, 2011).

Mathews, Hameister, and Hosley (1998) investigated the perceptions of college students with disabilities towards study abroad, ranking perceived barriers to participation and necessary accommodations. Although the concepts of role models or mentors (for example, whether participants have met or read about people with disabilities who have studied abroad) were not included, participants in the study indicated that "lack of knowledge" was a key concern regarding barriers to study abroad, which an advisor or peer mentor could potentially assuage.

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Other studies have evaluated the outcomes of mentorship programs on students with disabilities. A pilot study found that providing mentorship for youth with disabilities transitioning into postsecondary education led to significant improvements in attitudes towards requesting disability-related accommodations (Barnard-Brak, Schmidt, Wei, Hodges, & Robinson, 2013). However, there remains a lack of research regarding the impact of mentoring on disabled students' decisions to study abroad.

Since 1981, Mobility International USA (MIUSA) has administered disability-focused international exchange programs, and since 1995, it has administered the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange (NCDE), a project sponsored by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, to achieve greater representation of people with disabilities in mainstream international exchange programs between the U.S. and other countries. NCDE provides free advising and technical assistance to people with disabilities, study abroad advisors, disability professionals, and others. NCDE provides free advising and technical assistance to people with disabilities, study abroad advisors, disability professionals, and others. In 2014, NCDE responded to over 250 requests from disabled individuals and professionals from around the world (see Table 1).

### **Depiction of the Problem**

Mainstream international exchange organizations and even disability support staff in the U.S., Turkey, and beyond are at times reluctant to provide accommodations to participants with disabilities or to send these students to non-traditional destinations due to perceived lack of access or increased risk, as evidenced by the frequent formal and informal inquiries that the authors receive from such organizations and the students they serve. These attitudes are often in conjunction with a lack of exposure to disabled exchange participants' success stories. Applicants with disabilities, too, may self-select out of an international experience due to lack of information about access and disability supports abroad, among other factors (Mathews, Hameister, & Hosley, 1998). Without guidance from knowledgeable advisors (disabled or non-disabled) or disabled peer mentors to testify that studying abroad with a disability is not only possible but manageable and beneficial, some disabled students dismiss international exchange as an unrealistic option for themselves, while others miss out on important lessons from returned disabled travelers and experienced advisors that could otherwise improve their preparedness.

While these problems persist globally, disabled students who live in countries slower to systematize disability inclusion face additional barriers. In Turkey, despite advances in disability rights and access to higher education made since the Turkish Disability Act (2005) and the Higher Education Council Directive on Disability (2006), disabled people's access to international education is a topic that is rarely addressed in Turkey's higher education or disability rights agenda. Furthermore, disabled people in Turkey have limited access to foreign language learning compared to non-disabled people (Coşkun, 2013), placing them at a disadvantage in exchange programs requiring foreign language competence. By 2010, few Turkish students with known disabilities had participated in the Erasmus program and their experiences went undocumented, so subsequent students had few, if any, role models.

Despite these barriers, three visually impaired students from different universities across Turkey approached one of the authors (Özel) between 2011 and 2013, seeking guidance for accessing their exchange programs.

### **Participant Demographics**

From 2011 to 2014, Özel started remotely advising the three students, two of whom she had never met in person, as they stepped out of their known environments. The students contacted her over an online platform administered by the Turkish Association for Education and Visually Impaired (EGED), where Özel works as an advisor. Having previously established Turkey's first university Disability Unit at Middle East Technical University in Ankara in 2004, which she ran until 2012, Özel had developed a wealth of disability inclusion expertise and had become familiar with practices outside of Turkey for inclusive international exchange. With this background, she was to embark on her first experience advising disabled students participating in mainstream exchange programs. Without discussion around this issue among her colleagues in Turkey, she sought best practices from counterparts in other countries. Although Özel was familiar with MIUSA's disability-focused international exchange programs, from a Turkish perspective, MIUSA's practice of accommodating delegates with different types of disabilities in another country initially seemed non-replicable. However, through various conferences, events, and professional connections over the course of her career, Özel had come to learn about and even utilize MIUSA's one-on-one technical assistance and materials through its NCDE for promoting access to mainstream exchanges, giving her the knowledge and

confidence to enter into an advisory role with the three Turkish students.

The three visually impaired students attended diverse institutions across Turkey, varying in population, years of operation, and academic resources for students with disabilities, although no institution had experience or resources for sending students with disabilities abroad. The students came from disparate family backgrounds and represented different levels of foreign language competence, confidence, personal mobility and independence, and international travel experience. For example, while two students were going abroad for the first time, the third was an experienced traveler; one student was male while the other two were female; one student had strong mobility skills while another was more dependent upon family for mobility. All three students wanted to benefit from the possibilities offered by exchange programs and were committed to going abroad, whether or not anyone was available to advise or mentor them. The first two students to go abroad reported being insufficiently aware of the challenges they would face in the host environment and both expressed feeling “out of their depth” once abroad. However, while the first of these two returned home prematurely, the second student stayed for the duration of her program.

### **Case Studies Following Three Visually Impaired Exchange Students from Turkey**

The first student, “Abdullah” (a pseudonym), had seized his last opportunity for Erasmus before graduation, aware that he might not be fully prepared. His university, new and having never sent a disabled student on exchange, was unaware of how to advise him. Özel recommended that the home institution contact the host institution with questions to assess its disability resources and support mechanisms, but the two institutions exchanged only minimal information. With rudimentary English and no knowledge of the local language, Abdullah lacked the communication skills necessary to ask for assistance when he needed it, nor did he receive orientation training. Faced with the prospect of returning home after only two weeks, he began to engage in frequent email conversations with Özel, who encouraged him to identify his risks, options, and needs. These remote advising sessions enabled Abdullah to reflect on his experience and develop strategies for resilience; he persisted abroad seven weeks longer. Eventually Erasmus program officers required him to return home for failing to pass an English proficiency assessment that had been administered using contracted Braille, a format that

Abdullah did not know. Although his experience was not deemed a “success story” by the program’s standards, Abdullah was proud to have studied abroad longer than he would have had he not reached out for remote advising and felt that his opportunity abroad had enriched him in many ways.

The second student, “Elif,” contacted Özel by email two weeks after arriving at her Scandinavian host university. Away from her usual support systems, she was struggling to live abroad independently and felt that her limited mobility was restricting her full participation in the program. Özel advised Elif to systematically record and analyze her experiences and to approach Erasmus officers and key staff at the host university to resolve the issues. Özel also trained her to track the specific steps she took to overcome her perceived challenges. Elif learned how to use local resources and to express her needs clearly. Having satisfactorily completed the program requirements, Elif returned home on schedule.

The third disabled student, “Semra,” had already had experience traveling internationally and needed minimal guidance. However, just before she was to depart for her Erasmus program, she read Elif’s report. This influenced her to revise her own disability-related accommodation requests prior to traveling. Upon arrival at her host university, she discovered that she would have an excessively challenging daily commute to campus despite having requested a conveniently located dormitory. Through Skype discussions, Özel coached Semra to assertively re-negotiate her request with the program officer, which she did to rapidly reach a satisfactory outcome.

### **Description of Practice**

#### **MIUSA’s Practice**

MIUSA began conducting international exchange programs focused on building the leadership capacity of people with disabilities in 1981 and, by 2015, over 2000 disabled alumni have participated in its programs. Drawing from these decades of designing exchange programs to be as inclusive as possible for participants representing diverse disabilities and countries, MIUSA staff who support the NCDE project provide technical assistance to study abroad advisors, disability services staff, and other influencers for including participants with disabilities in the broad range of mainstream exchange programs. This assistance includes developing practical advising tools, training, and “best practices” profiling leaders in inclusive international exchange.

MIUSA also advises people with disabilities directly. To help address concerns that people with disabili-

ties often have when preparing for new international journeys, it not only shares tip sheets, self-assessment forms, and referrals for disability organizations in the host country, it also draws from the experiences of disabled exchange alumni, recognizing that those who have been abroad can offer an encouraging voice of experience to those who have not. To do this, MIUSA arranges peer-to-peer connections between prospective international exchange participants and alumni upon request, identifying peer mentors by factors such as disability type, assistive devices and disability services used, exchange program type, geographic origin, and destination where possible. For example, it connected two blind international students from the Middle East: one who was eager to study in the U.S., and one who had completed a semester at a U.S. university. Through the connection, the former learned practical tips such as using new assistive technology while the latter had an opportunity to reflect on his time abroad. Complementing peer connections, MIUSA harnesses the power of success stories captured through written articles, videos, podcasts, photos, and recorded presentations to help illustrate what is possible.

### **Adapting MIUSA's Practice to Turkey**

Following Abdullah's return, Özel began incorporating MIUSA's approaches to advise subsequent students more systematically. As per MIUSA's recommendations, Özel considered each student's specific needs and situation individually and, from the outset, she and each student discussed their respective roles and responsibilities. For example, the students were responsible for initiating the majority of communication (via email and Skype). The advising sessions addressed the student's goals and expectations for going abroad, the student's needs and challenges, and the resources available to the student. Özel urged the students to record challenging or successful events and their feelings towards those events. She also coached them on how to approach key contacts with their access-related requests or grievances. Although in Turkey it is culturally appropriate for family members to make decisions on behalf of students with disabilities, Özel empowered these three students to set goals for themselves.

Similar to MIUSA's practice of encouraging returned exchange participants to share their stories, Özel persuaded the students to compile reports about their overseas experience, detailing challenges and successes adjusting to the new environment, ranging from issues related to orientation and mobility to the attitudes of university staff.

### **Evaluation of Observed Outcomes**

As a result of their international travels and ongoing advising sessions, all three students described returning with enhanced personal skills and confidence and a renewed sense of responsibility and independence. In their overseas settings, they learned to view situations from new cultural perspectives, handle unexpected scenarios, and negotiate strategies for improved access.

Before reaching out to knowledgeable advisors, and with little evidence of disabled role models who succeeded in international exchange, the Turkish students described in the case studies were each spending time and energy to "reinvent the wheel." Elif stated that when she set out to pursue her goal of going abroad, "I was flooded with so much new information... I had to make decisions and had no idea how to start deciding. With a mentor I did not panic; [instead] I could think straight." Abdullah floundered abroad until he contacted Özel. Although he was eventually forced to return home early, Abdullah credited his advisor with escorting him through critical times, helping him stay abroad longer than he otherwise would have. "If only this had been formally part of a recognized system, the host organization would have taken my requests more seriously. Any disabled Turkish student going on an exchange should contact Claire Özel."

Each of the subsequent participants encountered fewer pitfalls than their predecessors, benefitting from the lessons learned from their post-program reports, and three prospective participants have since gained useful insights from the information. This information sharing among exchange alumni can potentially have far-reaching effects. Upon her return, Elif submitted a brief to the Turkish National Agency summarizing the issues she had faced on her program. In response, the National Agency's magazine published an interview with her and senior administrators met with EGED to discuss how to improve participation rates and the quality of experiences among students with disabilities. In addition to training new peer mentors with visual impairments, in 2014 EGED spearheaded cross-disability projects to train international exchange participants with diverse disabilities to report barriers to inclusion.

These outcomes suggest that as role model success stories, connections to peer mentors, and ongoing advising services become more prevalent and visible, people with disabilities and their influencers become more confident about disabled people's abilities to participate in international exchange. This is also supported by survey results collected from people who utilize MIUSA's information and referral services. During

one quarter in 2014, the majority (80%) of individual respondents said they were more likely to continue pursuing their interests in international exchange after contacting MIUSA. In an earlier survey, over 78% of individual respondents and 86% of organizational respondents found resources on the MIUSA website “very helpful” or “helpful.” Specifically, success stories and blogs had the highest rating of usefulness among both of these groups. One American student with a chronic health condition even stated that the resources and stories on the MIUSA website convinced her to “take the leap to study abroad,” and went on to participate in an exchange program spanning thirteen countries.

### Implications and Portability

When entering into the role of advising or mentoring a student with a disability in international exchange, the authors recommend implementing the following practices before, during, and following the student’s international exchange experiences:

- Avoid assumptions about where a student with a disability can or cannot go. Even non-traditional destinations or those reputed to be inaccessible can be a good match for a resourceful and flexible student.
- Consult experts and experienced colleagues for technical assistance, tip sheets, alumni stories, and other resources (see Appendix).
- Gather accessibility information about the host institution or overseas placement. Several professionals have developed resources for gathering information about the availability of disability-related accommodations, and one such questionnaire was translated into over a dozen languages (Van Acker, 1996).
- Share reports, stories, and anecdotes collected from former exchange participants with disabilities and offer to facilitate an introduction to a peer mentor.
- Decide on a method for communication with the student (e.g. Skype, email) and clarify your availability. Empower the student to initiate contact with you and to control the frequency and content of the discussions.
- Foster an advising environment that the student perceives as inviting and approachable, not overwhelming or burdensome. Keep messages and advising sessions brief and ask concise, closed-ended questions where possible.
- When a student encounters a roadblock abroad, suggest small, achievable steps that

the student can take towards a solution. Recall Semra’s cumbersome commute between her housing and classrooms. Examples of tangible, achievable steps could include listing the specific hazards on the commute or scheduling a meeting with the housing coordinator to discuss options for either mitigating the hazards, using alternative transportation, or relocating to different housing.

- Encourage the student to regularly document his or her observations, challenges, and successful strategies related to access abroad.

In addition to the above, disability service practitioners can be vital partners to the study abroad office for recruiting and including students with disabilities in overseas programs while consulting with study abroad colleagues on cross-cultural differences. Advising and training study abroad staff on respectful and inclusive disability language, accessible recruitment and program materials (such as applications and forms), anti-discrimination policies and procedures, and disability accommodations options for overseas settings are all areas in which disability service professionals can contribute to inclusive international education. Sharing information and success stories about study abroad on the disabled student services website and in orientations for new students with disabilities encourages students to explore their options to study abroad in college.

More work must be done to ensure that students with disabilities are as represented in study abroad as they are in higher education, and that students with disabilities develop the skills needed to succeed abroad such as foreign language learning and independent living skills. Additional research is needed to assess the effectiveness of peer mentors and professional advisors across larger sample sizes and in other cultural contexts.

The opportunities and benefits made possible through international exchange should be achievable for any student regardless of disability status or disability type. With effective advising, mentoring, and role modeling, higher education professionals and others can offer support to students with diverse disabilities to travel between all destinations, each with their cultural specificities.

Table 1

*NCDE Inquiries Received by Quarter*

	Oct - Dec 2013	Jan - Mar 2014	Apr - Jun 2014	Jul - Sept 2014
Number of queries received requiring in-depth research and referral	45	75	68	55
% queries related to travel from the U.S. to other countries	69	79	71	62
% queries from individuals	44	40	41	35
% queries from international exchange organizations	29	43	38	36
% queries from disability organizations	13	16	18	25
Top sources of referral	Listservs, Colleague/ Coworker, Previous Inquiry	Colleague/ Coworker, Previous Inquiry, Listservs	Colleague/ Coworker, Previous Inquiry, Website & Conferences	Listservs, Previous Inquiry, Conferences
Top types of disability mentioned in queries	Physical Disabilities, Vision Disability, Health- Related Disability	Physical Disabilities, Blind/Low Vision, Deaf/ Hard of Hearing	Non- Apparent Disabilities, Deaf/Hard of Hearing, Physical Disabilities, Blind/Low Vision	Non- Apparent Disabilities, Physical Disabilities, Blind/Low vision
Top countries of interest	United States, United Kingdom, and Spain	United States, Germany, United Kingdom, and Austria	United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and Italy	United States, Chile, France, Japan, Spain
Number of queries (not included above) requiring general information about coming to the U.S.	24 from 14 countries	28 from 14 countries	17 from 11 countries	15 from 9 countries

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## About the Authors

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Claire Özel received her B.Sc. degree in Genetics from Manchester University. Her experience includes establishing the first Disability Unit at a Turkish university, organising the first Annual Turkish Universities Disability Workshops and advising the Turkish Association for Education and Visually Impaired (EGED). She is currently disability adviser at the Department of Basic English at Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey and moderates the Turkish University Disability Platform, uniting over 500 members from 120 universities. Her research interests include development of support for students with disabilities at universities worldwide. She can be reached by email at: [claire.ozel@gmail.com](mailto:claire.ozel@gmail.com).

## Authors' Note

Addressing terminology differences between U.S. and British English, the authors resolved to use terms used in both dialects interchangeably, such as “person with a disability” and “disabled individual.” This approach reflects the authors’ different backgrounds and demonstrates the linguistic differences that exchange participants may encounter abroad. Furthermore, the authors refer to different forms of mentoring in the article. The first refers to technical assistance that experts offer disabled student services professionals and others seeking guidance on including people with disabilities in international exchange. The second refers to the advising of individual students with disabilities provided by professionals who have knowledge about inclusion and who may or may not have disabilities themselves. The third refers to peer mentoring between two (or more) individuals with disabilities.

## Appendix

### Recommended Resources for Advisors and Peer Mentors

The authors recommend that advisors and peer mentors consult the following organizations and professional networks for technical assistance and resources related to disability and international exchange.

#### **Mobility International USA (MIUSA)**

URL: [www.miusa.org](http://www.miusa.org)

MIUSA is a U.S.-based cross-disability organization. In addition to over 34 years of experience administering international exchange programs designed to include people with a broad range of disabilities, MIUSA administers the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange, a project sponsored by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, to promote the participation of people with disabilities in international exchange between the U.S. and other countries. Its free services and resources include technical assistance, trainings, alumni stories, online tip sheets, best practices, and disability accommodations assessment forms.

#### **ExchangeAbility**

URL: <http://exchangeability.eu/>

The Erasmus Student Network (ESN) developed ExchangeAbility as a long-term project to promote the opportunities and support offered for students with disabilities to study abroad in the Erasmus student exchange programme. ExchangeAbility works with ESN sections, HEIs and organizations that are experts in the field to create high-quality experiences abroad for disabled students. Its partners include European disability organizations and its resources include a video series featuring disabled Erasmus alumni and an interactive map depicting accessibility at HEIs across Europe.

#### **International Education for Persons with Disabilities (IEPD)**

URL: <http://network.nafsa.org/communities/migs> (login required)

As one of the member interest groups (MIGs) for members of NAFSA, a professional network of international educators worldwide, IEPD promotes the exchange of best practices for supporting the participation of people with disabilities in international education. NAFSA members may access and contribute discussion to IEPD's online discussion forum and participate in webinars and virtual trainings.

#### **Access and Inclusion (ACCESS)**

URL: <http://www.eaie.org/home/about-EAIE/expert-communities/overview/access.html>

One of the Expert Communities of the European Association of International Educators (EAIE), ACCESS is comprised of members active in increasing the participation and improving the experience of students and staff with disabilities in international higher education. Its activities are designed to exchange knowledge, change perceptions about disability in international education, and influence national and European policy.