Universal Design University: Removing Barriers and Enhancing Accessibility
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Innumerable traditions of the European university since the founding of the *Università di Bologna* in 1088 are worth maintaining. Among these, research and teaching are foremost. Engaging diverse publics and providing models for the betterment of society are also crucial. Indeed, many regions of the world look to European educational practices and the contemporary Europeanization process in higher education, under the title 'Bologna', as a model to emulate to strengthen intercultural cooperation and joint scientific advancement within a common European higher education area.

However, outdated customs hinder the future of science and society instead of fostering their advancement. These customs certainly cast doubt on the university's claim to be a source of enlightenment and an engine of innovation. Among the most glaring of these is the institutionalised discrimination – visible in persistent attitudinal, architectural, and social structural barriers that have excluded disabled and disadvantaged people from most of Europe's universities for most of their history. Nevertheless, we live in an era in which Stephen Hawking and Temple Grandin, among other globally recognized disabled scholars, routinely make key contributions to science. Despite barriers of exclusion, segregation, and stigmatisation, such scientists demonstrate their talents and perspectives – knowledge and points of view society cannot afford to do without. Given this discrepancy, we must ask: How much stronger and more prominent could universities be if they would open their classrooms to diversity and make their programs and campuses accessible to all?

Since the student protests of 1968 that aimed to secure civil liberties, gender equality, and environmental sustainability, but especially during the current transformation of the European higher education landscape via the Bologna process, the future of the university in European democracies is at the very top of political agendas. However, myriad barriers to full participation and social inclusion of disabled people in Europe's universities persist. These institutionalized barriers require enhanced attention and concrete efforts by all those groups involved in making higher education a force for innovation and mobility on the path towards the 'knowledge society'. A significant tool for such change is the *International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (United Nations, 2006). Mandating inclusive education – at all levels, including tertiary education – this treaty stands to benefit all, not only disabled, people.

In contemporary reforms that elaborate a new European model of skill formation, key goals include the support of global competitiveness and individual employability as well as the maintenance and enhancement of the quality and attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area. Across Europe, the flexibility of pathways and enhanced permeability between vocational training and higher education pathways are further goals in Europeanization (Bernhard, Graf & Powell, 2010). However, the social dimension, including inequalities in access to higher education on the basis of social and ethnic background or individual dis/ability, has less often been discussed in

these reforms, and issues of architecture and learning environments have hardly been expressed. Yet throughout Europe, as elsewhere, there are lasting disparities among social groups in entering and graduating from higher education (Shavit, Arum & Gamoran, 2007), and the physical state of university facilities is often appalling.

A decisive response would be for universities to embrace the principles of *universal design*: the design of services, products, and environments "to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design" (Mace, 1997, p. 1). Seven principles guide universal design: equitable use, flexibility in use, simple and intuitive, perceptible information, tolerance for error, low physical effort, and size and space for approach and use (Mace, 1997; see Preiser & Smith, 2011 for examples). Given exemplary organizations that embrace such principles, the Universal Design University is no longer just a figment of imagination. Universal design offers useful tools, described below, to help universities meet expectations held for higher education. Yet to be realized throughout Europe, education and design for all must become a fundamental goal for the remarkable diversity of teachers and learners, planners and personnel, who together guide, sustain, and enrich higher education.

From Barriers to Accessibility in the Universal Design University

To explore necessary steps towards the Universal Design University, this contribution discusses barriers and identifies strategies already used to increase accessibility on multiple levels. Firstly, around the world, *attitudinal barriers*, from prejudice and stereotype to stigmatisation and marginalisation, have seriously limited the contributions of disabled people to community life. Social, scientific, and legal changes provide increasing opportunities to challenge such views and treatment of disability, which have moved from containment and beyond compensation toward care and citizenship (Drake, 2001; Richardson & Powell, 2011). Yet this likely most tenacious barrier is exemplified in the taken-for-grantedness of meritocratic myths, such as the faulty belief that only those who are 'able' should or could access university education and succeed. We simply do not know how many disabled youth would succeed in postsecondary education were their aspirations not voided by institutionalised discrimination. The Universal Design University would open itself to the idea that individuals, previously excluded, could contribute to it as it simultaneously supports them in reaching their learning goals.

Secondly, *social, cultural and educational structures* exhibit institutionalised selection processes and discriminatory practices that reduce the learning opportunities and expectations of disabled children, youth, and adults or those who are socially and educationally disadvantaged. Having negative effects early in the life course, such structural and cultural barriers have often given universities an easy way out: the group eligible to apply for entrance is kept low (Powell & Solga, 2011). As we have witnessed, while women once had to battle to gain access to universities, in many countries they have quickly become the majority in participation and attainment (Schofer & Meyer, 2005, p. 909). In contrast to strides made toward gender equality, racism and disablism remain pervasive, despite the fact that with each further social group, the extension of opportunities has proved successful. The extension of the quintessentially *private* and *public* good of education has been self-amplifying. The Universal Design University would identify groups whose contributions have been artificially limited by oppression and selection processes and ultimately provide bridges for these groups to enter and participate fully.

Thirdly, disabled students who do make it onto campus are confronted with a range of *environmental and communication barriers* that hinder their academic and social participation. Innovations on many campuses range from adapted signage and disability service centres to diversity-oriented instruction

and disability studies, a multidisciplinary field of enquiry that sharpens critical dialogue on the social and political constructions of dis/ability and 'ab/normality' (Powell, 2011). Universities around the world directly address such known obstacles and, in implementing new principles and programs, provide a pathway to the future Universal Design University.

The following sections discuss such barriers and strategies to overcome them, from the global and national to the local. All universities orient themselves to international norms of scientific advancement and professional development. Whereas Internet-based universities serve user networks varying in size and shape, brick-and-mortar universities also relate to neighbouring spatial environments and diverse local communities. In any case, universities serve a much larger group than current students because the campus is a source of community services and the public expects universities to both guard established knowledge and search continuously for discoveries that will improve human well-being.

Universities Serve as Role Models & Provide Community Services

Because of both their cultural influence and economic significance to their towns, universities are uniquely positioned to be important role models, to set new standards, and to provide community services. Their responsibility to realise both excellence and equity in their programs is heightened by the considerable state and philanthropic support that they enjoy. No longer reserved for a small minority, university studies have become an integral part of lifelong learning for many. Offering cultural events and intellectual resources open to entire communities, universities that improve accessibility can better achieve their extended mission to provide possibilities for learning far beyond the group of faculty and staff members or currently-enrolled students. All the more reason to rethink how the university can better serve all citizens – those who have already passed through its doors as well as those who will in future come onto campus.

From Educational Expansion to Inclusive Education for All?

Every level of education has expanded in countries throughout the world, including university studies, since World War II (Schofer & Meyer, 2005). Such educational change interacts in myriad ways with broader societal developments, such as shifting paradigms of dis/ability. Concrete legal innovations – such as prohibitions of disability discrimination in dozens of countries – were brought about significantly due to the global disability movement's advocacy initiatives (Charlton, 1998) and protest activities (Barnartt, 2010). But before activists and advocates succeeded in securing their rights and gaining access to integrated public schools and inclusive classrooms in the last quarter of the 20th century, they had to survive asylums, eugenic forces, and educational exclusion prior to World War II and in the first decades thereafter (Powell, 2011, p. 36). Aligned with growing citizenship rights and notions of personhood, the past half-century has witnessed an unmistakable shift in emphasis from medical to social and political models of dis/ability, based on the core idea that not individual deficits but rather cultural and structural barriers disable people. This has facilitated a redirection of research and policy initiatives away from rehabilitation and treatment of individuals and towards contextual conditions and barrier-filled environments, human rights charters and anti-discrimination legislation, and mechanisms of social control and exclusion.

Today, the debate about strategies to reduce educational exclusion have been superseded by those to realise inclusive education for all. International organisations and especially the United Nations have been influential in both the establishment of human rights (including education rights) and the calling for equality and social justice for hundreds of millions of disabled

people worldwide. To reach such overarching goals, education is assumed to be absolutely vital. In the international calls for 'education for all' and then for inclusive education – a range of organisations has provided ideas, standards, and legal texts to facilitate such transformation.

United Nations Convention: Rights to Inclusive Education & Access to Universities

On December 13, 2006, a quarter century after the 1981 *International Year of Disabled People*, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the *International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (ICRPD) with similar goals: to promote and protect the human rights, dignity, and freedom of disabled people around the world (United Nations, 2006). As did its ancestors, this first human rights treaty adopted in the twenty-first century – since then ratified by ninety-six countries – aims to raise awareness about disability as it insists on the reduction of discriminatory practices and stigmatisation that have limited the participation and contributions of disabled people throughout history.

Educational rights extend to the university via its vision of accessible environments and an inclusive educational system. The ICRPD's Article 24 on education clearly states the conditions needed and the extent to which different levels of access to education are to be guaranteed. Educational systems that are inclusive are viewed as fundamentally important to the development of individuals and societies. Without such inclusive systems, persons will neither be enabled to become fully participating citizens nor individuals who reach their potential and freely develop their personality in order to maximize their capabilities (Nussbaum, 2006). Lacking prior schooling and credentials, individuals who suffer 'cumulative disadvantage' (Mayer, 2005) are unlikely to access higher education or to find adaptations or accommodations sufficiently compensatory – and thus have limited access to formal learning opportunities in future.

Alongside debates at national and local level about how to ensure democratic participation by citizens and how to achieve highly qualified workforces, at the international level the ICRPD sets a progressive and ambitious agenda of learning throughout the life course. However, the steps necessary to achieve lifelong learning for more than a highly educated few depend on concrete reform processes that will democratize access to learning opportunities. To be successful, such reforms must engage the ideas, norms, and policies evident in institutionalized educational systems that continue to segregate or separate, such as those in Germany and the United States (Powell, 2011). Without high quality primary and secondary schooling and permeability between school forms or tracks, learning opportunities at postsecondary level will be limited. Reflecting the stratified societies and educational systems of which they are an influential part, universities and those responsible for their governance have in fact carefully guarded access to these hallowed grounds, upon which elite civil servants and professionals have been prepared for power. Nevertheless, especially over the past half-century, universities have considerably broadened their missions. Among the common trends that have shaped and shape higher education systems are the evolution from elite to mass to universal participation in postsecondary education, increasing labour market opportunities and rising incomes for highly educated experts, the self-amplifying growth of knowledge, and increased government patronage and supervision (Clark, 1993).

The ICRPD emphasises not only primary and secondary schooling but also adaptations, such as the reduction of architectural barriers, to ensure equality in terms of vocational training as well as higher and adult education. Without such modifications, the playing field will not be even for all. Even in the wealthiest European countries, such as Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, education and training opportunities beyond primary and secondary

schooling are still seriously lacking for individuals with recognized 'special educational needs' (Powell, Felkendorff & Hollenweger, 2008). Thus, the persistence of stratified access to tertiary education and the reproduction of class inequalities – based upon elaborate social selection procedures in tracked secondary schooling – is among the most significant challenges facing European universities. Mobility and permeability may be buzzwords of European reform processes in higher education (the 'Bologna process') and vocational training (the 'Copenhagen process'). But highly stratified secondary schooling and the persistent division between vocational education and training and higher education, in such countries as Germany, determine the life chances of each cohort and hinders higher education expansion (Powell & Solga, 2011). Yet the ICRPD emphasises that countries

> shall ensure that persons with disabilities are able to access general tertiary education, vocational training, adult education and lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis with others. To this end, States Parties shall ensure that reasonable accommodation is provided to persons with disabilities (United Nations, 2006, Article 24, Section 5).

Progressive policies and practices show the way forward to meet global norms of educational equality. As the ICRPD's mandates are carried out on multiple levels of governance, there is still much to learn from others and to transform university campuses throughout Europe.

Universal Design Principles Facilitate Access
to and within the University

Disabled youth who have obtained the certificates necessary to access tertiary education are often hampered in doing so by the lack of available support services they require. Such services have long been provided on campuses in the United States and United Kingdom, where they show that the previously taken-for-granted boundaries of student dis/ability were illegitimate, as disabled students succeed and contribute to these learning communities. Aiming to extend the above-discussed changes, the ICRPD demands adjustments in education policies and university programs around the world. Yet to surpass compliance and create a truly welcoming community that recognises and values diversity requires more than rules and regulations. Equally, if not more important, cultural shifts in attitudes, awareness, and analysis are necessary. Indicators of such shifts include the existence of academic offerings that examine disability as a universal human experience that nevertheless exhibits tremendous cultural and policy differences, even within Western Europe. Next to attitudinal and architectural adaptations, innovative instructors implement "universal instructional design" (discussed below) to facilitate the learning progress of all their students. Usually, such adaptations require few additional resources even as they benefit all participants.

In architectural structures and communicative diversity – such as ramps, way-showing systems, Braille signage, sign language interpretation, and accessible websites – improvements have been steady but gradual. Universal design has focused on the built environment, spatial mobility, and product use. Such considerations are particularly important in campus planning, restructuring facilities, and building projects. Just as ramps facilitate access for a wide range of users, from parents with prams to wheelchair users to delivery personnel, signage can assist everyone to navigate both familiar and unfamiliar spaces. For example, the *International Symbol of Access* facilitates individuals' mobility and provides daily interactions with issues of accessibility, even as it represents the most prevalent symbol of disability worldwide (Ben-Moshe & Powell, 2007).

International Symbol
of Access (ISO), 1969

International Symbol
of Access (MoMA), 2009

The diverse local interpretations of this icon mirror the shift from exclusion to inclusion of disabled people in the human rights revolution: whereas the traditional icon displays an object (the wheelchair), newer icons show the human user as an active rider – asserting the primacy of personhood and participation (Powell & Ben-Moshe, 2009). Symbols, buildings, and legal conventions all indicate the significant transformation in disability paradigms from medical to social models and from exclusion to inclusion.

Towards the Universal Design University

To illustrate contemporary trends, a few universities' attempts to implement elements of the Universal Design University are discussed here. An urban campus with a range of building types in the heart of the British capital, the *London School of Economics and Political Science* (LSE) has placed campus maps indicating accessible entrances, installed automatic doors, and provided adjustable computer workstations in the lift-equipped library. Decades ago, when Sally Sainsbury was appointed the first Disabled Students' Advisor, she faced antiquated attitudes of staff who questioned the necessity of even minor changes that would enhance accessibility (personal communication, 14 April 2010). Twelve years ago, a *Disability and Well-Being Office* was founded that now provides an array of services to over 900 students a year, from advice and counselling to practical study and social supports to a peer/staff network. Director Nicola Martin says the *Disability Discrimination Act*, which stipulates how public authorities should act proactively on disability equality issues and tackle institutional disability-related discrimination, was crucial in expanding these services, as the university was required to establish a *Disability Equality Duty Action Plan* (interview, 2 September 2010). While other UK universities, such as Leeds, have well established and internationally-known disability studies research groups, the LSE relies on collaboration among many London universities, made possible through the *Disability Equality Research Network*, to bring disability studies scholarship to campus and to involve students from a wide variety of disciplines and countries.

Access Signage (LSE)

Good practice in the work of service providers that are 'barrier-specific' instead of 'impairment-based' are transmitted via the *National Association of Disability Practitioners*, a professional association for disability and support staff in further and higher education. More broadly, the UK's *Equality Challenge Unit* (ECU)[1] helps higher education institutions promote equality and realise the potential of all staff and students, across boundaries of race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, age or religion and belief. The ECU does so through such mechanisms as dissemination of evidence and distribution of toolkits on how to implement effective practices in governance and management, estates, research and teaching, and staff and student services. Such tools are part of universal design in education, which builds on principles to increase access to universities and guarantee learning opportunities for all participants.

Ramp (LSE)

On a much older and traditional campus, Germany's Georgia Augusta University of Göttingen, where I have taught disability studies, many of the newer developments found at LSE have been hampered by lack of awareness, legal stipulations, and financial provisions as well as tenacious educational segregation that seriously limits disabled youth's eligibility to attend universities (Powell, Felkendorff & Hollenweger, 2008; Powell, 2011). For those disabled students who do make it to campus against the odds, barriers hamper their success. In a seminar on 'Social Inequality and Disability', students developed a project to evaluate, measure, and catalogue the accessibility of their campus. Using checklists provided by the local self-help organisation of disabled people, which had already measured the accessibility of the old town centre during the Expo2000, the World Exposition in nearby Hanover, the students tested key campus buildings and events to provide an accurate

Automatic Doors (LSE)

and up-to-date picture of barriers – and to encourage their removal. This provided lessons on types of barriers and the multidimensional construction of accessibility and of disability.

Such insights and empirical findings have been collected and reflected in disability studies, a burgeoning multidisciplinary field with its own journals, conferences, and courses of study. This field of study must be considered both an indicator of shifting paradigms of dis/ability as well as a facilitator of such change within the university. For example, the *Society for Disability Studies and the Nordic Network of Disability Research* organize conferences on both sides of the Atlantic.[2] Leading academic journals in the field, published for a quarter-century, include *Disability Studies Quarterly and Disability & Society*, and seminal publications have reviewed accomplished scholarship (e.g., Albrecht, Seelman & Bury, 2001).[3] The availability of disability studies in the official curriculum facilitates educational design for all.

Even where courses of study exist, disability studies courses are regularly offered, and disability services offices have gathered years of experience, such as at Syracuse University in New York, cooperation among administration, faculty, staff, and students is needed to take accommodations and services 'beyond compliance' and to build 'pedagogical curb cuts' (Ben-Moshe et al., 2005). Applying universal design principles to teaching and learning, scholars at the University of Washington have adapted the original principles developed at the Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University, conceptualizing 'Universal Design of Instruction' (Burgstahler, 2005; see also Bowe, 2000; Burgstahler & Cory, 2008). Colleagues at Canada's University of Guelph have developed the similar "Universal Instructional Design" concept.[4] Such principles reorient the original tenets of universal design (mentioned above) to the specific interactive situations of teaching and learning: (1) accessible and fair (equitable); (2) flexibility in use, participation and presentation; (3) straightforward and consistent; (4) information is explicitly presented and readily perceived; (5) supportive learning environment; (6) minimize or eliminate unnecessary physical effort or requirements; and (7) learning space accommodates both students and methods.

Coming full circle, these principles emphasise that on multiple levels and in a range of contexts, universal design fosters progress in universities. Given the rise of education for all and inclusive education, the numbers of university students who consider themselves to be disabled or are in need of individualized support to succeed in their studies has also grown rapidly (Powell, 2011). Thus, universities must address the issues discussed here – for current students.

As generators of knowledge and as centres of community life in towns and cities across Europe, universities have an extraordinary chance – and responsibility – to enhance access to the learning opportunities they offer. As they do so, they show their communities how possible it is to remove barriers and the advantages that accrue to all. In embracing the paradigm shift from medical to social models of disability, in giving voice to diverse participants, and in providing models for the implementation of universal design principles, the university can engage and change public awareness and attitudes. Advancing the educational and social inclusion of disabled persons and those with disadvantages in higher education provides benefits far beyond the university campus.

Disability & Well-being Office (LSE)
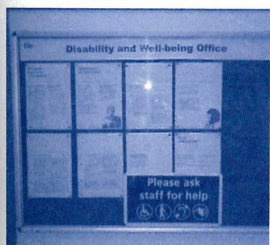
Disability Information Board (LSE)

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1. See www.ecu.ac.uk/heifunctions, accessed 3 December 2010.
2. See www.disstudies.org and www.nndr.no, accessed 3 December 2010.
3. See www.dsq-sds.org and www.tandf.co.uk/journals/carfax/09687599.html, accessed 3 December 2010.
4. See www.tss.uoguelph.ca/uid, accessed 3 December 2010.

Conference organisers
The conference *Curating the European University: Exposition
and Public Debate* is organised by the Laboratory of Education
and Society (K.U.Leuven, Belgium) in collaboration with Labo-
ratory for Educational Theory (University of Stirling, Scotland,
UK) and Convenant K.U.Leuven – Radboud University Nijmegen,
and with the support of K.U.Leuven, Leuven University Press
and Studia Paedagogica.

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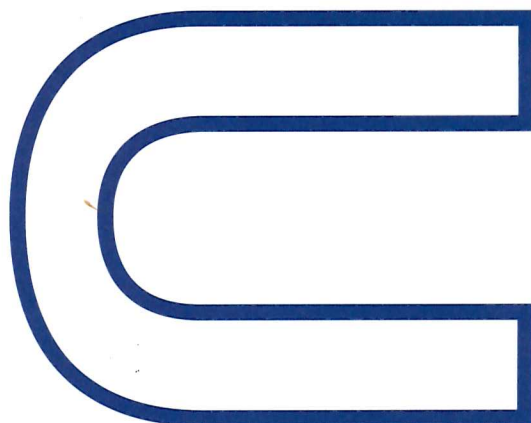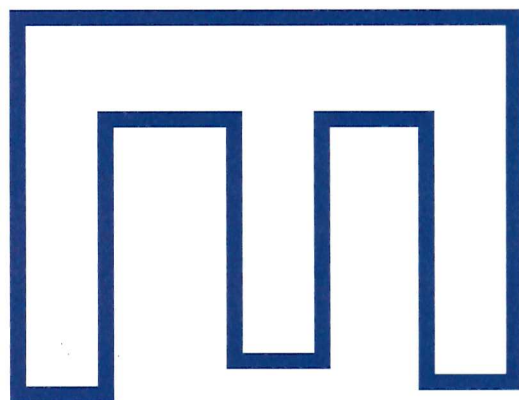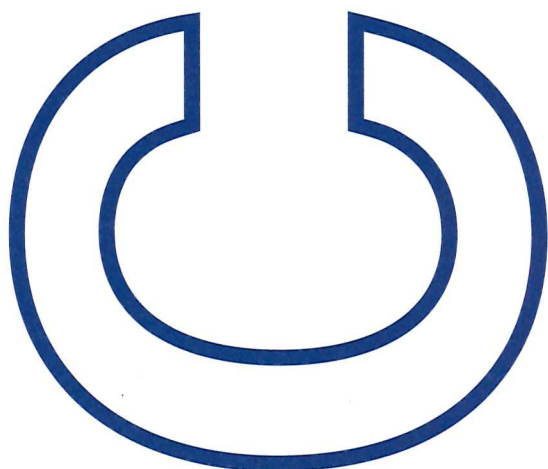Poland), Pavel Zgaga (University of Ljubjlana, Slovenia)

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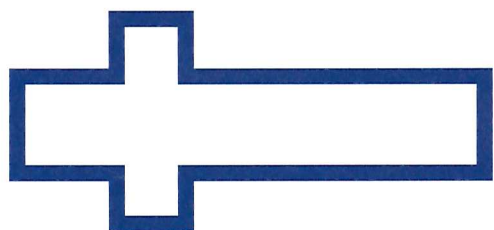
Exposition and Public Debate

Maarten Simons
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(eds)

Curating the European University: Exposition and Public Debate

The university is an institution invented during the Middle Ages. As *universitas magistrorum et scholarium* the university was a specific community or association of scholars and students gathered around books and preoccupied with study and the search for truth. But what is the role of the university today?

The meaning of teaching, study and research has changed with books being replaced by screens, with online learning environments replacing lecture halls and students becoming learners. In the light of a growing emphasis on innovation and development, competitiveness between institutions and the privatisation of knowledge, the role of communities of scholars and students is clearly changing. Some argue that the university enters a new phase, while others claim that we actually face the end of the age of the university.

In order to address these issues, a conference was organized around an exposition of projects that present new ways of publishing, an alternative organization of a department, initiatives related to open access and open source, university architecture and accessibility… Taking as a point of departure their exhibited project, each of the contributors to Curating the European University reflects on the current challenges the university is facing today with a specific focus on its public role. The book, being at the same time a catalogue, includes textual and graphic descriptions of different projects, and offers a unique contribution to the public debate on the role of the university.

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