

Disabled services in Turkish university libraries: Istanbul University Central Library: The project of “Information Center for (dis)abilities”

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Abstract. Following the establishment of Grand National Assembly of Turkey (23 April 1920) and the declaration of Turkish Republic (29 October 1923), the library, known as Darülfünun, began to be called Istanbul University Central Library with University Reform which took place in 1933. The collection of the Central Library of Istanbul University contains manuscripts dated as old as the 15th century in both Turkish and foreign languages. Once included within the scope of the Printed Texts and Picture Collection Law in 1934, it began gathering all the printed works published within the borders of Turkish Republic. And also with the Higher Education law no 2547 enacted in 1982, Central Library began operating under the name of Istanbul University, Office of Library and Documentation along with other libraries of faculty, department, institute and research centers. The library has still been offering services for users with its about 2 million documents.

By founding Information Center for (Dis)abilities on the understanding of a “university and a library accessible for all users” and on the basis of creating “capable disabled users”, Istanbul University Central Library has shown once more its modern approach to this issue. The Project has been carried out in collaboration with Istanbul University Office of Library and Documentation, Istanbul University Office of Health, Culture and Sports and Istanbul University Research and Implementation Center for Disabled People. In the Center, there are ten desktop computers with screen readers and with screen magnifier softwares for the people with low vision, a Braille printer for visually impaired students and researchers to convert written materials on digital environment to Braille, six Braille monitors, two reading cabinets to convert printed books to audio books, two Braille printers for visually impaired students studying basic sciences and social sciences to print images and graphics. Three book reading machines that allow to capture printed documents and to playback them with a synthesized computer voice, three digital mouse for those who can't use their body functions properly. Information center for

Received: 10.4.2012 Accepted: 20.7.2012

ISSN 2241-1925

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(dis)abilities has filled a significant gap together with the one operating in Boğaziçi University.

Keywords: Library and information science, Disabled people, Library of disabled people



1. Introduction

In Turkey, all universities and government foundations are in a state of flux by law which is dated 1st of July 2005. There are 5378 institutions that provide service for disabled people within the scope of compliance with European Union law.¹ As of today, there have been a lot of university libraries and public libraries which are providing effective services for disabled users. Middle East Technical University Library, Bogazici University Library, Atatürk Library, Marmara University and Istanbul Public Library, National Library, Izmir Atatürk Public Library, Altınokta Visually Disabled People Library, Rıfat İlgaz Library, Beyazıt Public Library and Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality Visual Disabled Library are some examples.

The first academic library for disabled people was the Middle East Technical University Library. Bilkent University Library and Bogazici University library followed the lead. Thereafter, East Mediterranean University founded a new department only for all disabled people in 2012.

2. Istanbul University Disabled Information Center Project

A disabled university increases awareness of community, a society which can include differentness is a civilized society.² With the compliance with European Union law, there have been many changes in different fields in Turkey. In this compliance process, a new article of law was prepared. According to this article,

¹ 9463, The Turkish Republic Law and Decree Laws Related With the Disabilities, Law Number:5378, Accepted on: 1 st July 2005, Publication number:25868, Code of Law: Arrangement: 5 voles:44 pages.

² Subaşıoğlu, Fatoş. (2008). “Üniversitelerin Bilgi ve Belge Yönetimi Bölümleri'nin Engellilik Farkındalığı Üzerine Bir Araştırma=A Reserach on”Disability Awareness” in Information and Records management Department of Univesities” Bilgi Dünyası. 9(2): p.410

all government foundations were given time to complete the arrangements in seven years. In the meantime, all government foundations had to arrange their services for disabled library users.

According to this article of law, similar to the other foundations, several universities have followed up and made the appropriate arrangements. Istanbul University has started to make some arrangements like the others. There are 172 universities in Turkey.³ (But only three of the 172 universities have “service for disabled library users”). There is library and research service only in the Istanbul University, Middle East Technical University, Marmara University and Akdeniz University Libraries. This shows that there is need for much progress regarding this issue.

On June 20, 2006, the Istanbul University founded the Istanbul University Health Culture and Sports Disabled Students Head of Department. This department’s aim is to share the progress being made about the Istanbul University’ disabled students’ life experiences to the university management. Firstly, Istanbul University Health Culture and Sports Disabled Students Head of Department has prepared a regulation to take required precautions and make arrangements in this direction.⁴

This department’s management consisted of seven Istanbul University members: Dean of Culture and Sports, Health Services Director (Medico-Social Center Head Doctor), Istanbul University Disabled Research and Practice Center Director, Associate Director and Rector. The Istanbul University Disabled Research and Practice Center Director is also the Istanbul University Disabled Students Department Director.⁵

The following are the unit’s assignments:

- a) Making arrangements for Istanbul University’s disabled students and fulfilling their needs, determining the obstacles which may appear, and offering solutions to address the obstacles.
- b) Making decisions about organizing the disabled students’ educational environments so that they can continue to live effectively in their academic, physical, and social settings by supplying the equipments for them, preparing special course materials, and developing proper education, research and accomodation environments.
- c) Supplying resource for higher education level students and academicians, preparing informative policy documents about disabled people and their difficulties, the limitations of being diasbled, increasing knowledge level on this issue, offering consultancy service to the concerned, and arranging training for those users.

³ <http://www.yok.gov.tr/content/view/527/222/>

⁴ Working Conditions for Istanbul University Students With Disabilities Department. Item1

⁵ Working Conditions for Istanbul University Students With Disabilities Department. Item2

- d) Setting up programs and projects on these issues.
- e) Organizing seminars, conferences, etc.
- f) Developing a website which has the university disabled student units' informative documents, resources, and contact details of concerning units.
- g) Controlling the strategies determined and the decisions made by unit members.
- h) Making searches to provide free equipments for disabled students that have financial problems.
- i) Making decisions about courses and training programs to be in the undergraduate academic programs for disabled students.
- j) Providing for all students for fair and proper examination and evaluation experiences, equal opportunities for them, taking precautions for the difficulties of disabled students in exams such as providing materials, escorts, etc.
- k) Preparing and distributing guide books to the disabled students about employment opportunities and professions.
- l) Before University Examination, preparing reports to inform the Head of Student Selection and Placement Center about which universities are available for disabled students.

Istanbul University is a city university which has thousands of students and academicians and is spread across Istanbul which has a 14 million population. The University has 9 campuses, 20 faculties, 7 vocational schools of higher education, 3 schools of higher education, and 16 research institutes. Most of the university buildings are very old and architecturally valued. For this reason there occurs some problems in restoration and renovation.

Istanbul University has 89 disabled students and 31 of them are visually disabled/legally blind. The number is very few. Probably an important factor is a lack of available circumstances for disabled in Turkey. Istanbul University disabled library services are given to this disadvantageous group of people who try to overcome their difficulties. We hope that these works will encourage more disabled for university education in the future. Istanbul University has given this kind of service to not only its students but also to all the disabled people in Turkey.



The following is the library physical interior design decoration process: Special Materials and circumstances for disabled users are provided such as voice censored library entrance gate; Disabled unit is on the first floor for easy accessibility; special toilets, special walking areas, sloping roads, special chairs, etc. are also provided. This center has been called Un-disabled Information Center to be able to clear the disabled people's way.

Library's technical equipment include; 10 computers, Braille Printers, Reading Machines, Graphic Print Machine, Braille monitors, computers with zooming program for the partially sighted, screen readers, Braille graphic and Picture printers, digital mouse, wrist mouse, foot controlled no hands Mouse and a studio for producing audio books.

In this information center of Disabled students, there are 1.650 e-books, 100 digital audio course notes and in the near future 20,000 academic thesis will be added to these resources. These resources are increasing every day. Correspondingly to the increased resources, the numbers of users are also increasing. Since the last few months, six visually disabled and one physically disabled person have used this center. Disabled users also can use the library in their home or offices by remote access. Students can take audio books which they want and also can scan their course books on e-book and mp3 format.

The first mission of this center is to provide for a computer laboratory for disabled students and the second aspect involves providing for course materials for disabled students similar to the other students. A third mission is also the coordination between other libraries to produce audio books and other relevant materials.

Public libraries which are close to the Istanbul University have audio literature books. So university students cannot find their course books in these public libraries. Istanbul University Information Center has been converting the course

books to audio books for disabled users and aims that these audio books can get used by them.

3. Conclusion

The Istanbul University Central Library Disabled Unit that has 1.500 printed books, a librarian, a clerk, and two part-time assistant students. It has provided service to the disabled users in Istanbul University and in Turkey since January 18, 2012. The Istanbul University Central Library is the only one with the latest technology and professional library staffs for disabled users.

Due to the opportunities and resources available at this center, the number of its users are increasing intensely day by day. Promoting available resources has been effective to disabled users in the university and outside. Material available and new works in the Disabled Unit in the Istanbul University are also increasing. With the aim of drawing academicians' attention to disabled students and to the center, reading activity for disabled students will be arranged soon in the reading cabinets.

The Istanbul University is the first and still the biggest university, and has been supporting these efforts to fulfill its mission and be a good example for other universities in Turkey.

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