



A morning in the life of a disabled university student

by Katie Quartano and Paul Shaw

"To get to the University I have to start making plans well in advance about transportation. As I am in a wheelchair I can't take the regular bus, and I would have more chance of booking a place on a space shuttle than on the municipal special needs bus, so a taxi is my only solution. But as I am always sitting, I am low down, so taxi drivers don't easily spot me if I try to flag one down in the street, and the nearest taxi rank is quite far from my home. Negotiating the streets, where cars are so often parked on the ramps and motorbikes on the pavement, leaves me exhausted, frustrated and stressed before I get there. So I have to book a taxi in advance, which costs me extra - no student or disabled discount here. The drivers are usually so kind and patient as I explain once again how to collapse my wheelchair and reassemble it on arrival. I just pray they don't damage it as it gets shoved into the boot, as without it I am helpless. Always have to make sure that I have money with me as I've given up on ATMs as I can never see the screens. They are too high and I end up pressing the wrong buttons and having my card taken.

The real nightmare begins when we reach the university. The taxi driver drops me off at the beginning of the disabled ramp, not realising that it is quite impossible for me to get up on my own as it is too steep. Would it be so difficult for there to be a button and speaker system at some accessible point which would allow disabled people to announce they have arrived and which would alert someone to come out and help? I've seen this in other countries. Here no such luck. Just hope that the caretaker is on this side of the building as I am already late - thankfully he does see me and helps with my books too, as it is difficult to carry much stuff when I need both arms to push my wheels.

The doors are a bit of a problem for both of us. Would it be so difficult to install a disabled button outside the main entry doors so they would open automatically allowing me to just wheel through? Luckily I'm on the ground floor - I couldn't deal with the lifts today and will save my knuckles being grazed as the lift is so narrow I can hardly squeeze myself in.. I arrive ten minutes late for the lecture in the main hall. Unfortunately, there is no way of getting down to the front to be with the other students, so I have to sit all on my own right at the back. For her own reasons this particular lecturer won't allow me to record her lecture, but my disability means I can't take notes quickly, so half of it will be missed.

All of this for 50 minutes and then it's back to try and find a taxi. I need to get home quickly anyway, as there are no toilets I can use in this building. But I still go to university because I have the right to an education, don't you think so? "

Maybe you are surprised or shocked by what you have just read, but if you haven't spent time with a disabled person it's really hard to imagine the difficulties.

That's partly why the Disabled Access Friendly campaign was launched - to make all of us more aware of, and more sensitive to, the needs of the disabled. What better place to start than at Foreign Language

Schools, where language acquisition can be used as a tool to open young people's eyes to the world? As Dr. Luke Prodromou has so aptly said,

"The best schools have always done more than just prepare students for tests. They raise awareness of the world in which we live and try to make it a better place."

Disabled Access Friendly aims to enable and empower the disabled. By supporting this campaign school owners can raise the social profile of their school in the community. By downloading from the campaign's website (under construction) free worksheets that sensitize students to issues concerning the disabled (exam related and others) and working with their students on these issues, teachers will be able to contribute to making a real difference for tomorrow. A project on an important social issue like access for the disabled could be a real showpiece for any school, and the Disabled Access Campaign will be right behind you with material and tools available online.

The Disabled Access Friendly team is very grateful to have already received worksheets, specially produced on a voluntary basis, from Malcolm Mann, Rachel Finnie and Dr. Luke Prodromou. Contributions of worksheets (complete or in draft form) from any other authors or teachers could be your first show of support for this campaign. We also invite school owners, teachers, parents and students to share with us their experiences of integrating disabled people into society and particularly into the classroom.