

# (No) Limits on International Exchange?

International mobility and students with a disability



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**SIHO**  
STEUNPUNT INCLUSIEF HOGER ONDERWIJS

**LINK**  
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SIHO is the Flemish Support Centre for Inclusive Higher Education. SIHO works under authority of the Minister of Education, Equal Chances, Youth and Brussels and support the Flemish Higher Education in order to achieve inclusion of students with disabilities. For more information please see [www.siho.be](http://www.siho.be) or contact us on [info@siho.be](mailto:info@siho.be).



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report looks at the experience of disabled people participating in international programmes, for example going on Erasmus programmes or undertaking an internship abroad. Through insight into these experiences, it aims to make information on international mobility more widely available, encourage more disabled people to pursue opportunities and to inform those involved in providing exchange experience on how to achieve improved access and inclusion of disabled students. What emerges are the positive experiences and enthusiasm of the participants regarding their international experiences, the challenges they face and the ways that these might be overcome. Currently statistics suggest that disabled students are under-represented in international exchanges. The EU has set a target of 50% of young people undertaking cross-border mobility by 2020 and its Lifelong Learning Programme emphasises the importance of enhancing social inclusion including the participation of disabled people. Only 0.12% of all Erasmus students declared a disability in 2012, representing less than 300 individuals. The importance of international mobility on the life chances of young people is highlighted by the EU programme and therefore disabled people face significant disadvantage if they are unable to participate.

By setting up some qualitative research using a disability studies perspective which follows the social model of disability, the aim was to gain insight into what international mobility means to students with a disability. Nine participants were visited at home or at the place of their international exchange to hear their story. The participants had a range of impairments and were drawn from the Netherlands, Lithuania, Ireland and Belgium. All were involved in higher education and went on international placements in Europe and Suriname.

Listening to their accounts gave them a voice. Their stories were represented in personalised portraits based on the research method of 'portraiture' as outlined by Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997). This enabled the capture of their full personal experiences and identification of emerging themes. The portraits can be viewed on line on <http://www.siho.be/in-beeld/prtretien/mobility-portraits/>

In order to respect the richness and complexity of the stories they have been analysed using the method of 'Key Incidents' (Emerson, 2004). Six key incidents were identified and defined by the researchers:

- Reasons to go abroad: proving yourself and exploring boundaries
- The influence of contextual factors on disability experience
- Rights to participation in international exchanges
- 'My story is not so different'

- 3Support
- A focus on positive experiences and outcomes rather than on their impairment

This provided insight firstly into the reasons why the participants wanted to undertake to study or take up internship, and secondly the way their experiences differed, depending on the nature of their impairment and location. Furthermore, information regarding the support needed and offered whilst abroad was gathered.

The participants put their positive experiences first, and the barriers they had to overcome weren't central to their stories. Going abroad was an enriching experience for all of them. They talked about the happy memories and the benefits of going abroad on a personal and professional level.

There were similarities and differences to the reasons generally given by all students going abroad.

Similarities included:

- Improving employability
- Gaining language skills
- Improving life skills
- Having fun and making new friends
- Awareness of other cultures

There were also other reasons given by the cohort which were related to their impairment:

- Going to a country with a more positive attitude to disability and higher degree of accessibility
- Better climate having a positive effect on health
- Wanting to prove capability and demonstrate motivation
- Taking on the role of 'Ambassador' and being a voice for disabled people to 'make change happen'

Common elements in the disabled students' experiences included the lack of information on how international opportunities might be accessible and the variable experiences of the success of support available. The most successful experiences of support were through social networks – friends and families of the people they connected with abroad. The most difficult were managing professional personal assistance (PA), when no involvement or choice was offered about who was

allocated to provide support. This led to a poor relationship with the PA, which had a negative impact on the experience.

Generally, the participants perceived their international experience as something positive and enriching. Nevertheless, at some points they were faced with barriers as well. It wasn't always easy to find the correct information and assistance and some faced physical obstacles.

This research had the benefit of being an in--depth study based on a small number of individuals with a range of impairments. This suggests an opportunity for more qualitative research with a larger number of participants to explore further and identify gaps between current support available and desirable support to enable more disabled students to participate and gain the benefits of international exchange programmes for European students. The findings can help students and staff who want to develop opportunities for international experiences for disabled people to plan and evaluate their programmes.

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## INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, students are given more encouragement to take part in international mobility programmes. Targets are set and initiatives launched. As a result, many students undertake an international experience. Some study whilst others undertake an internship abroad. But what about students who have disclosed a disability? What are their experiences of international mobility? What does it mean to them and what are the stories they want to share with us?

These questions are generally not the focus of research on international mobility. Moreover, students with a disability are underrepresented in relation to participation in student opportunities abroad. Through this research we wanted to improve the information available on international mobility for disabled students, and to gain insight into their experiences.

By meeting students with a disability and listening to their stories we made their experiences in relation to international mobility the focus of our enquiry. By using the method of portraiture devised by Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot and analysing the stories using the concept of key incident, we gave the participants a voice.



### 1 Disability Studies

This research was undertaken from a Disability Studies perspective. Disability Studies is an emerging interdisciplinary field that originates from the end of the twentieth century (Van Hove, 2009). It represents a field of study that has made it possible to look at disability from another perspective; one that differs from the traditional way of looking at disability (Van Hove, 2009). The traditional, medical way of looking at disability sees disability as “firstly, a ‘problem’ within the individual and secondly, it sees the causes of this problem as stemming from the functional limitations or psychological losses which are assumed to arise from disability” (Oliver, 1996, p. 32), known as the medical model. The social model does not deny the problem of disability but locates it squarely within society. It is not individual limitations, of whatever kind, which are the cause of the problem but society’s failure to provide appropriate services and adequately ensure the needs of disabled people are fully taken into account. (Oliver, 1996, p. 32)

Disability Studies is a reaction against the medical model but it cannot be situated in one single paradigm (Van Hove, 2009). Within Disability Studies, a disability is not seen as something located in the individual, but rather as a social construct influenced by the social and cultural context (Taylor, 2003, as cited in Klotz, 2004). Together with the rise of the social model, and the the development of Disability Studies, there is the suggestion that people with disabilities can be seen as an oppressed group in society (Freire, 1972 as cited in, Mkandawire 1975). Furthermore, “the focus is shifted away from a focus on what people cannot do to what people can do” (Goodley, 1997, p. 373).

### 2 International mobility and disability

Students are being encouraged to explore new horizons and to go abroad. This can be illustrated by some ambitious mid-term targets for 2020 set by the High Level Expert Forum on Mobility<sup>1</sup> :

By 2020, at least 50% of all young people aged 16-29 should be offered the opportunity to engage in some form of cross-border mobility at some point. This overall target can be

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<sup>1</sup> In December 2007 a High Level Expert Forum on Mobility was established. The purpose of this forum was to reflect upon policies regarding mobility. The members of the forum represented nine European countries, reflecting on mobility issues within Europe.

realized if, by 2020, mobility reaches just over 6% of university students every year, as well as 3.5% of trainees in vocational education and training, 0.05% of secondary students and just over 1% of those young people who wish to participate in a mobility-based voluntary action (such as the European Voluntary Service, for example). (“Expert groups say: Make periods of learning abroad a rule, rather than the exception”, 2008)

The European Commission puts the enhancement of social inclusion and reducing social and gender inequalities to the forefront. Mainstreaming has been central ever since the start of the SOCRATES Programme (Bertran, Pijl & Watkins, 2000). The enhancement of participation for persons with a disability is an important element within this principle. Currently, in the Lifelong Learning Programme – the successor of SOCRATES since 2007 – working with underrepresented and disadvantaged groups is being explored through the European inclusion initiative. Within this initiative, 13 European countries are working together to make the Lifelong Learning Programme more accessible (“About Inclusion”, 2011).

Figures from the European Commission regarding international mobility and students with a disability show that “during the academic year 2006/2007 over 140 students with disabilities participated in Erasmus (LLP/NA/ERA/19/02rev). This represents 0.09% of all Erasmus students. Although an increase compared to the previous years has been observed, the number is still exceptionally low.” (“Exchange Ability”, n.d.). 257 students with a disability received an additional grant for taking part in the Erasmus Programme in 2009-2010. This only represents 0.12% of all the students taking part (European Commission, 2012b).

When comparing the figures of 2009-2010 with those of 2006-2007, we can see a small increase. Still, figures show that students with a disability are underrepresented in international mobility, despite the objective of reducing social inequalities and despite the efforts regarding to international mobility in higher education.

Besides the figures, there is a lack of research and knowledge, particularly in Europe, in relation to their international experiences. Overall, the voice of students with a disability is missing.

An overview on information resources regarding international mobility and students with a disability can be found on the LINK website.

### **3 Research Questions**

What does international mobility mean to students with a disability? In the context of their studies, how do disabled students perceive the experience of going abroad? How do persons with a disability experience going abroad in the context of their studies? What can our participants, as experts in their own story, teach us by sharing their international experiences?

### **4 Participants**

Participants for the research were found through the networks of SIHO and the LINK Network. Three participants came from the Netherlands, two from Lithuania, one from Ireland and three from Belgium.

**Leonieke** was one of the first to respond to our request for participants. She calls herself a 'Dutchie living in Belgium'. She studied Social-cultural Work in Antwerp and went on an Erasmus programme to Denmark. At the time of our research she was working as a job coach. Leonieke has epilepsy and says she is not always in control of her own body.

**Joshua** is a 22 year old student at the University College of Antwerp. He studies Special Education and did his internship in Suriname where he had the time of his life. When Joshua sent us an e-mail he was already abroad. Joshua has a visual impairment which means he is not able to see colours, is sensitive to light and has blurred vision.

**Margaux** is a 21 year old girl studying Event Management in Antwerp. She went on an Erasmus programme to Besançon, France. Margaux describes herself as a very sociable person who loves to laugh and organise events. Margaux has dyslexia and dysorthography.

**Anke** is a Belgian girl, who graduated in 2011 as an interior designer. After her studies, she decided to do an internship with a Swedish designer. Anke is a passionate interior designer with a lot of ambition who has already won a prize for one of her designs. Anke has ADHD. She told us that she prefers to focus on her qualities and sees benefits in having ADHD.

**Kevin** is a Dutch boy, who is in his third year of a bachelor's degree in Business and Marketing Management in Amsterdam. He is very ambitious and very focused on his studies. One of us met Kevin in Toulouse, where he was on Erasmus for one semester. Kevin has a chronic health problem. A couple of years ago, he had a kidney transplant. Kevin says he doesn't see this as a limitation, just something he has to take into account.

**Minke** course is European Studies and lives in Amsterdam. Minke came across as a very outgoing and sociable person, but also as someone who is very conscious about herself. She describes herself as open minded and as someone who is always keen to get to know new cultures and new languages. This is the reason why she decided to go to Barcelona on an Erasmus programme for a year. At the time we completed our research, Minke was still in Barcelona and she told us that if she found a job over there, she would like to stay. Minke has rheumatoid arthritis.

**Jessica** is a 21-year old girl from Ireland studying French, Spanish and Irish. Last year she went on an Erasmus programme to Barcelona. In 2012 Jessica became an Erasmus ambassador. She decided to take up this role, because she wanted to create better opportunities for people with disabilities. Jessica talked very positively about her experience abroad, but she also mentioned the fact that she had poor support during her Erasmus placement. Jessica has cerebral palsy which results in a physical disability.

**Vilma** is 21 and comes from Vilnius, Lithuania. She is in her third year of a Social Pedagogy degree. Because she wanted to get to know another educational system and because she wanted to meet new people, learn a different culture and experience the Erasmus life, Vilma decided to go on an Erasmus programme to Denmark. Vilma told us that she felt that Danish people were more open and stared less at her. Vilma has a physical impairment, her left arm and leg are paralyzed. Vilma regrets that so few people with a disability from Lithuania go on Erasmus programmes. She adds that there is a lack of good information.

**Laima** is a Lithuanian girl in her twenties. She studies Economics and Lithuanian Philology in Kaunas, Lithuania. Together with her friend Rita, she went on an Erasmus programme to Rennes for one semester. She's very enthusiastic about her experience abroad and decided to take up French lessons from the moment she returned home. Laima adores reading, writing letters and singing. Laima has muscular dystrophy. Because her disability has taught her to appreciate the little things in life and has increased her patience, she describes her disability as a gift.

## 5 Method: Portraiture

The goal of portraiture is to “combine systematic, empirical description with aesthetic expression, blending art and science, humanistic sensibilities and scientific rigor”. (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 3)

The scientific component of the methodology can be found in the analytical way of pointing out the themes that are present in the stories of the participants.

The artistic component can be seen in the end product: a portrait that reflects the essence of the person being portrayed and his or her story.

Portraiture is characterised by working inductively because the stories of the participants are used as a starting point to connect with theoretical concepts, instead of the other way around. Portraiture puts the stories of the participants at the centre of the process. It is a good methodology to capture the richness, complexity and dimensions of experiences. The relationship between the portraitist and the person being portrayed plays a very crucial role in the making of the portrait.

Portraiture has seven important features:

- The **relationship** between the portraitist and the person being portrayed is a crucial element in portraiture. It is a complex, dynamic, fluid, symmetric and reciprocal relationship between the researcher and the subject (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997).
- Because of the close relationship between the portraitist and the person being portrayed, the **voice** of the researcher and the participant are intertwined. Nevertheless, it is important to not overshadow the voice of the participant and to monitor the researcher’s perspective.
- The **context** is an important resource to understand the experiences, the stories, the actions, the sayings... of participants. The context provides valuable clues for interpreting data. It is important not to view the context as static, but as dynamic. Furthermore, there is a dialectic relationship between the actor and the context.
- **‘Emergent themes’** are central to the story. Mostly, those are the topics or themes that come to the forefront on a regular basis during encounters. At other times, they are things that are only discussed once, but are still taken up because they are so striking to the researcher.

- All the pieces collected throughout the process are combined in what is called, the **aesthetic whole** (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p.3). Important here is that the ‘whole’ is always more than the sum of the parts.
- A portrait can have **different shapes and sizes**. There are no standard criteria on how a portrait is supposed to look like.
- “The portraitist on the other hand is very interested in the **single case**, because he believes that embedded in it, the reader will discover resonant **universal themes**” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 14).

## 6 The portraits

The portraits of the students with a disability can be viewed online on <http://www.siho.be/in-beeld/portretten/mobility-portraits/>. There, you can also find more information about the making of the portraits and the emergent themes.

As the reader, you can choose to look at the analysis on the basis of key incidents which follows (Part 3), before or after looking at the portraits. However, we would recommend the reader to view the portraits first.

## PART 3: GROUNDED ANALYSIS ON THE BASIS OF KEY INCIDENTS

### 7 Key incidents

The use of key incidents as a methodology for analysis is based on the assumption that the analysis of researchers is often based upon revealing or telling incidents or events. (Emerson, 2004) Using key incidents as a method of analysis respects the richness and complexity of the stories of the participants. By using the key incidents, researchers can stay very close to the stories of the participants. The data used in key incidents are data that “provoke movement from description to analysis, from ‘showing how social life takes the shapes that it does’ to ‘making a convincing argument about why social life works as it does’ ” (Katz, 2001, as cited in Emerson, 2004, p. 460).

Key incidents have several important features. First, they need to be “neither highly dramatic nor deeply significant or highly memorable to those studied. The incidents are part of daily concerns or of daily life.” (Emerson, 2004, p. 460) Secondly, the incidents don’t need to provide insights, but they trigger a sense of interest. Thirdly, the meaning of key incidents is not always clear from the start, it invites the researcher to perform inquiry regarding to this incident (Emerson, 2004). Finally, it should be noted that the key incidents here have been defined by the researchers.

### 8 Key incidents in this research

#### 8.1 Key Incident 1: Reasons to go abroad: prove yourself and explore boundaries

*“People often ask me if it was a big step to go on Erasmus because of my epilepsy. I don’t think so, because I had already lived abroad on my own for some years. I kind of knew what to expect. However Denmark was really another country, another language, another system and somehow the country I’m in love with since I went there on an International Youth Camp in 2007. I think I had to go on Erasmus, just to prove I could.*

...

*I started to get the feeling that I could do anything as long as I was motivated. I think going to Denmark was the icing on the cake. I had the idea: If I do this and everything works out well, I can do anything!” And it did, I had a really great time, made great friends and experienced new stuff. I also started going out. Carefully and not for too long, but I did. I started exploring my boundaries and for*

*the first time I went abroad without my parents without ending up in the hospital. That also happened before but then I took better care of myself, for example by getting more sleep.”*

### 8.1.1 Context

The key-incident above was selected by the researchers from Leonieke’s story. Leonieke said she knew what to expect from living on her own in a foreign country since she is a Dutch girl who had studied in Belgium for several years.

When Leonieke explained why she decided to go on an Erasmus programme to Denmark, she said she thought she had to go to prove she could do it. By testing her boundaries, doing things and bringing them to a good end, Leonieke describes her growing confidence in finding a way to cope with her impairment. As researchers, we could see how Leonieke had developed an independent life in which she did what she thought best for her. In relation to her Erasmus experience she stated that she felt excited to go and spread her wings. She said: “Of course, I thought about how I would deal with my epilepsy, but I didn’t want it to hold me back.”

The statement where Leonieke wrote she felt she could do anything as long as she was motivated, originated from her positive experiences in her second year of University College. It was a year with a lot of ECTS credits, she was active in student participation and she was volunteering at the department of her faculty. She explained that, despite it being a very busy and tough year, her impairment didn’t cause any major problems. The latter gave her a lot of confidence, also to go on Erasmus.

Leonieke is happy when she can talk about her Erasmus experience, she is proud of the time she spent in Denmark. It reminds her of the fact that one can do everything with a substantial amount of motivation.

### 8.1.2 Key incident in relation to the stories of other participants

When researchers looked at the key incident in the light of the other participants, it was clear that many of them wanted to go abroad to prove what they were capable of.

Anke wanted to do an extra internship abroad after graduating as an interior designer. She contacted her school to apply for the Leonardo Da Vinci programme<sup>2</sup>, but she didn't feel supported since her school advised her not to go through with it. They said it would be too much trouble for them to arrange all the documents just for one person. Anke was upset about their reaction, but she didn't want to give up. Anke said she didn't want to miss the chance to become a better and more experienced interior designer. In primary school and high school she had a hard time getting positive feedback on her grades and behavior. Now she has already won prizes for her designs. It seemed that she was finally getting the feeling that she is being given the appreciation she deserves.

When we got to know Anke a little better, it seemed that doing an internship abroad might be a way of showing what she is capable of to the people who didn't believe in her when she was younger. At the time of our visit, Anke expressed how proud she was to be in Stockholm and that she was able to have done this on her own.

We recognized the same conviction and determination in Joshua. He decided to do his internship in Suriname, because he had always dreamt of doing voluntary work in a developing country. Although the sun shines more brightly there than in Belgium and the bright light makes it harder for him to see, he still decided to go to Suriname. We identified Joshua as someone who tries to do everything, despite his visual impairment. He told us that he realizes that he makes it harder by trying to do all these things for himself, because they require more effort from him than other people. Going to Suriname could be seen as a way of showing that he doesn't want his impairment to stop him from following his dreams, and as a way of proving to himself and others that he is able to do many things.

We end this part by concluding that the determination and conviction to participate in an international experience could be fed by a certain drive to prove that it can be done. Gaining an international experience could be seen as a personal triumph for some participants and a way to show others what they're capable of.

### *8.1.3 Key incident in relation to theory and literature*

On one hand, working with our participants gave us the information that for some of them it is important to participate in international mobility to prove that they can do it. Also, we found that

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<sup>2</sup> The Leonardo da Vinci Programme funds practical projects in the field of vocational education and training. Initiatives range from those giving individuals work-related training abroad to large-scale co-operation efforts. ([http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-programme/ldv\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-programme/ldv_en.htm))

they felt their motivation was put to the test and that they emphasized the importance of being motivated. Our questions on this are: “Why do they feel that they have to prove something?”, “Why do they get the feeling that they need to be so motivated to go abroad?” On the other hand we could find a lot of other reasons why they wanted to participate that are pretty similar to students without disabilities. Below we try to link the statements above with theoretical concepts and literature.

### *The process of “Othering”*

To answer the question why some of our participants partly feel an urge to participate in international mobility to prove that they can, it is possible to refer to the theoretical concept of ‘Othering’. “Othering is a process that identifies those that are thought to be different from oneself or the mainstream, and can reinforce and reproduce positions of domination and subordination” (Johnson, Botoroff, Browne, Grewal, Hilton & Clarke, 2004, p. 255-271).

Wendell (1996, p. 39) originates the process of Othering in the fact that we created the mainstream as a “the healthy, able-bodied, ‘ideally shaped’, young but adult, white, male”. By adding this information it becomes clear that not only people with disabilities are being ‘Othered’. Jensen (2009) for example investigated the concept in relation to ethnic minorities in Denmark. In his research he claims that ‘Othering’ is not a straightforward process of individuals or groups accepting specific subordinate subject positions. On the contrary, agency is at play, and people far from always accept becoming the other self. “Othering can be embraced, capitalized upon, resisted or disidentified from” (Jensen, 2009, p. 25-26). Although, ethnic minorities were not the target group of our research we think his claims can be applied to people with disabilities as well.

A possible explanation for the fact that some of our participants want to prove something, could be that they (un)consciously feel subordinated and ‘Othered’ in relation to taking part in international mobility. In other words, a possible explanation for feeling the need to prove that they can participate in an international exchange is because they feel that the field of international mobility is being dominated by people without disabilities. By participating in an international experience they want to prove that they can also take part, despite their impairment. Furthermore, it could be seen as a way of struggling against the feeling of being ‘Othered’ and showing how they can also participate in activities that are generally populated by the mainstream.

The information above can be seen as an illustration of the concept of ‘symbolic interactionism’ which points out that the behavior of people interacts with the way they are seen by others (Van

Hove, 28<sup>th</sup> September 2011). Also, new perspectives on labelling theory claim that people with a label don't accept the label as such, but interact actively with it. They take a certain position in relation to their label (Van Hove, 2011, September 28).

The feeling of subordination is not something that would only be an assumption made by our participants. The European Commission (2012b) pointed out that in 2006/2007 only 140 students with a disability participated in Erasmus, that is 0,09% of all Erasmus students. In 2009/2010 0,12% of the Erasmus students had a disability. This demonstrates that persons with a disability are clearly underrepresented within international exchange programmes.

As researchers we found little information on international mobility and people with disabilities in Europe. We found that not many disabled people participated in international programmes. By listening to the stories of our participants we considered that they explained their motivation as being necessary to face the extra obstacles faced by people with an impairment. For example, Laima told how she looked for someone to join her because she didn't think she could go to France without someone who could help her. Also, Joshua pointed out how he had to memorise the new routes in Suriname. With Leonieke her motivation could be explained by the fact that she wanted to prove that she could go on an Erasmus programme and cope with her epilepsy. By putting forward motivation as an important element in the success of an international experience, we deduce that some of our participants have a tendency to put a lot of responsibility on themselves.

By pointing out that our participants felt they needed to prove that they could go international and that they felt they needed a significant amount of motivation to do it, we as researchers want to be cautious not to reinforce the process of 'Othering'. Moreover, we want to question the finding that our participants felt they needed to prove something and that they needed a significant level of motivation to go international and to bring their experience to a successful end.

#### *The similarities in reasons given to go international*

Despite the fact that the element of proving oneself and being motivated was brought up and made explicit by some participants, we also want to highlight the ordinariness of their reasons given for joining international mobility. We illustrate this with some examples: Jessica told us she went to Nîmes to improve her French, Anke mentioned the benefit of having more experience after doing an internship with a Swedish furniture designer; finally, Minke added she wanted to get to know the Spanish culture and meet new people.

When we compared these reasons to go on an Erasmus programme with the reasons that were given by students and employers included in a survey by the British Council (n.d.) we found many similarities between them. The most popular reasons given were the following: standing out in the job market, improving language skills, improving life skills, having fun, being more culturally aware

The similarities in the reasons given by our participants and those given by students and employers in general made us conscious of the fact that our participants were in the first and foremost students, with the same goals and aspirations as other people of their age.

#### 8.1.4 Reflection

By taking up this key incident we wanted to investigate the finding that some of our participants felt that having international experience was a way of overcoming barriers and proving what they are capable of. On the other hand, we want to question that they regard a significant level of motivation is necessary to go abroad and to bring the experience to a successful end. Another thing that we want to propose by including this key incident is the fact that people with disabilities have comparable wishes and goals to other students in terms of international mobility. Therefore, we suggest that disability is only one dimension of a person and that maybe we should pay more attention to the similarities instead of differences.

## 8.2 Key Incident 2: The influence of contextual factors on disability experience

*“At first I wanted to go to Finland, because I had heard that northern countries are more open and adapted to people with a physical disability. Since we could not match the lectures from Finland with those in Kaunas, I couldn’t go there. All that was left was France...*

....

*When I look back I can say that the experience abroad was very positive and successful. There were so many things that surprised me in a good way! From the beginning I noticed that bus drivers are always so helpful. In Lithuania you can’t see the positive spirit in drivers’ faces as often... I noticed the same thing when walking in the street. People were not afraid to look me in the eye and even smile! In Lithuania, people are often surprised (sometimes mixed with fear) when they see a person with disability in the street.*

...

*Talking about the physical adaptation to a new environment I can say that it was easy and convenient. To get to school we needed to take one bus. As all the buses were wheelchair accessible, it wasn't complicated for us to travel through the city and even to the island of Mont St. Michel. It might sound funny or strange, but in France, for the first time, I experienced what it means to travel by train, as we needed to reach Rennes from Beauvais, the city in which our plane landed. It was really comfortable! In Lithuania we have just a few trains that are adapted to people with wheelchairs, so I didn't have many opportunities to use it.*

*The other thing I was surprised by was the pavements. It was easy to get on and off as they weren't very high and when it comes to the street it gets lower. It might sound strange but in Lithuania it is almost impossible to get about in my wheelchair without any help as I meet so many obstacles. In Rennes it was easier for my friend Rita to push my wheelchair so we were able to go everywhere! I guess it's one of the reasons why I liked Rennes so much.*

### 8.2.1 Context

The key incident above is taken from some of Laima's writings in which she wrote about the differences she had experienced between Lithuania and France. Laima especially mentions differences in attitudes and practical differences in relation to her impairment.

Laima mentioned several things made her feel at ease on the Erasmus programme. For example: the accessibility of her school and the help she got in finding suitable accommodation and a good physiotherapist.

Outside the school walls Laima felt good in France as well, partly because the French people approached her in a different way. In Lithuania she sometimes felt that people didn't dare to look at her, because they were afraid. Laima wrote to us that she could partly understand why people in Lithuania were much less friendly.

'I can't blame the people in my country for being cold or more serious... I guess one of the reasons is the fact that we see the sun less times in a year and it isn't so bright. And I guess historical factors should be considered... On the other hand, people are often surprised (sometimes it is mixed with fear) in Lithuania when they see persons with a disability in town. So their careful eye can be explained by an effort to explore.'

Laima explained how she appreciated the fact that people weren't afraid to make contact with her. This is also something she mentioned when she referred to the way little children looked at her.

'But one thing in both countries is the same - little children. When I am using with my wheelchair in the street they are always looking with curious and jealous eyes because of my big wheels. There were few times in Lithuania when they tried to touch my wheels! Well, I really appreciate this way of expressing their interest.'

As we can see above, Laima referred to positive experiences in terms of transport and mobility as well.

Through this key incident we noticed how the environment had an influence on the impact of Laima's disability. For her this aspect was so important that it influenced her choice of country.

#### *8.2.2 Key incident in relation to the stories of other participants*

In this part we give examples of how other participants talked about the influence of practical and attitudinal differences on their experience. Furthermore, we will illustrate some other contextual aspects that can be influential.

When talking to Vilma, she mentioned that she felt that people in Denmark had an open attitude when it comes to people with disabilities. We illustrate this attitude by two of her comments:

"I found people in Denmark more open to people with disabilities, for example Danish people were less likely to stare at me."

"Also in school we had to do an assignment where we were asked to think about how a certain space could be better adapted for children with autism."

Vilma did not only mention differences in attitudes between Lithuania and Denmark, she also said buildings were generally more adapted to people with physical impairments in the latter.

For Minke the differences between her home country and Spain were especially in relation to the climate and culture. She expressed how the warm climate and the low stress lifestyle had a positive impact on her rheumatoid arthritis and her health in general.

‘The warm climate of Spain is very good for me. When it is hot my rheumatoid arthritis is less present and less severe. Barcelona is the perfect place for me to live.’

The examples above show how the countries our participants visited could make certain things easier in relation to their impairment.

With another participant, we found an example of the opposite. Joshua has a visual impairment and more light makes it harder for him to see. Going to Suriname, a country where the sun shines more intensely than he is used to, made his life more difficult.

‘I can’t deny how shocked I was by the sun in Suriname. Because of my disability I receive more light than is necessary, therefore I wasn’t able to do anything without my sunglasses while I was abroad.’

In short, we can say that the countries our participants visited differed in several ways. We could see as well that these differences influenced their choice of country and the impact on their impairment.

### 8.2.3 Key incident in relation to theory and literature

In this section we take a look at the theoretical concepts we found by examining our second key incident. First, we start by explaining and applying the terms ‘impairment’ and ‘disability’ to the information from our key incident. Next, we outline research on how and why countries and cultures differ in coping with disability issues. We end by trying to identify the ways of coping described which have the most positive impact.

#### *‘Impairment’ and ‘disability’*

The first theoretical concept that we connected with the key incident above, refers to one of the main principles within Disability Studies, namely the difference between impairment and disability.

Within Disability Studies the terms ‘impairment’ and ‘disability’ are not synonyms. Rather, they tend to describe impairment as something localized in the individual, while disability refers more to the obstacles and consequences that people with impairment have to face within a certain society. A

disability can be seen as something additional that is imposed on top of impairment (Van Hove, 2009, September 28).

When we apply the definitions of impairment and disability to the information in our key incident we could say that Laima has a physical impairment. Since her impairment is something situated in the individual, it stayed the same, no matter the country she was in. On the other hand we can see how she felt how her experience of disability fluctuated. For example, she found fewer obstacles to participation in society when she was in France rather than in Lithuania. Laima said this because she found it easier to make contact with people in France, because it was easier for her to use public transport and the pavements were easier for her to use her wheelchair. The principle that disability interacts with the context and the impact fluctuates according to the environment, is something that is agreed and claimed within Disability Studies.

Likewise, in the work of Devlieger, Grosvenor, Simon, Van Hove and Vanobbergen (2008) we can see how interdisciplinary work has argued that disability cannot be seen as something isolated, but rather as something that interacts with society and that has an influence on the position someone has in this society.

#### *How do countries differ in addressing disability?*

While looking for information on how countries and cultures differ in addressing disability issues, we agreed with Mayhew, who suggested that “although disability among populations is widespread and many studies on disability exist worldwide, there is a lack of comparability between countries and between studies in the same country” (Mayhew, 2003, p. 3). He also points out that this lack of comparability originates from the fact that disability is defined in different ways.

During our research we also found that it was hard to compare countries with regard to national policies on disability, because a lot depends on the kind of impairment involved. What we did find was that some of our participants had the idea that northern countries are more open and better adapted to physical impairments. The idea that Scandinavian culture is more progressive at adapting to people with disabilities and including them in society also arose.

The statement on northern countries can be illustrated partly by the fact that Sweden was the most frequently mentioned country we identified in scientific articles on culture and disability. The fact that “northern and especially Swedish disability policy is strongly guided by normative principles such

as influence, participation and self-determination” (Ineland, 2004, p. 131-150) can be seen as a possible explanation.

We propose that measuring the degree of universal design (Froyen, Verdonck, De Meester and Heylighen, 2009) could be used to compare countries in their approach to disability issues. Universal design refers to the creation of environments, products and services by striving to seek universal solutions immediately accessible to all. (Van Hove, September 27, 2011).

Illustrating how universal design (Froyen et al., 2009) can improve the quality of life of disabled people can be seen in the experiences of Laima. In France, she could benefit from the lowered pavements and the fact that the kerbs drop at the end of the streets. She explains how those little things had a positive impact on how her experience as a disabled person. She felt she had more opportunities to go outside and to see things. Vilma also referred more than once to the idea of universal design. She told us that she believes that everything in society should be made more accessible to everyone.

#### *Why do countries differ in the way they approach disability?*

Although it is hard to compare the different approaches countries have to disabled people, it is possible to find reasons causing these differences. Mayhew (2003), for example, shows how trends of the past still have an influence on how countries deal with disability today. He illustrates this by referring to the UN Decade of Disabled Persons (1983-1992) that resulted in ‘Standard Rules for the Equalization of Opportunities for persons with Disability’. The degree in which countries of the United Nations implemented these rules can be seen as an expression of the level in which countries see a disability as something medical or as something that has to do with human rights (Mayhew, 2003). The latter promotes social inclusion and accessibility.

‘Countries who accepted and implemented those rules in their national policies have done this partly through the device of ‘mainstreaming’ (e.g. the inclusion of anti-disability discrimination in legislation only indirectly connected with disability) and partly through the development of new institutions and strategies.’ (Mayhew, 2003, p. 16)

Mayhew (2003) also mentions that the switch has resulted in the existence of different initiatives trying to help people with disabilities to find work and to develop their talents and potential.

Another author referring to the influence of historical elements is Symeonidou (2009). His research on the relationship between Greek Cypriot culture and disability illustrated how segregation, medicalisation and charity as cultural inheritance are connected with current non-inclusive practice. (Symeonidou, 2009).

We explored the information on historical influences on how countries approach disability today, partly because this was mentioned by Laima and Vilma, our two Lithuanian participants.

'I can't blame the people in my country for being cold or more serious... I guess historical factors should be considered...' (Laima)

'Twenty years ago you didn't see people with a disability walking in the town. Institutions were built for persons with a disability. There was even a special area in Vilnius for persons with a visual disability. They lived in that area went to school there and also worked in that area. A factory was built for people with a visual disability. Only recently is the attitude changing in Lithuania.' (Vilma)

When looking for scientific literature on other factors that could have an influence on how a society copes with disability, we found a study by Lewin, Lewin and Westin (2008) that compared different municipalities in Sweden. The study identifies six different characteristics that influence the measures taken up by the government in relation to disability, namely:

- earlier presence of residential institutions
- population density
- human capital (age, education, employment, health)
- local culture
- land area
- and stable left-wing government

The last one, it is suggested, can be seen as something that promotes an inclusive society.

*Which approaches can be seen to have the most positive impact?*

While searching for articles on the evaluation of services and measures for people with a disability we found that it is something that is difficult to evaluate (Mayhew, 2003, p. 3). A Swedish study on disability care in Lewin et al. (2008) promotes a need-responsiveness model of welfare support. The model emphasises the importance of listening to the stories of people with a disability to get to know their needs and to try to meet those needs.

Valuing the voice of people with disabilities for knowing what their needs are is also something that was confirmed through our research. By listening to the stories of our participants we saw how they had a clear view about the things they needed or did not need to participate in international mobility. This finding supports the expression: ‘Nothing about us without us’ (Van Hove, September 27, 2011). The statement represents the fact that people with disabilities want to participate in planning related to their needs, since they are the experts in this. Although participation is considered important, Radermacher, Sonn, Keys and Duckett (2010) state that there are still barriers for people with a disability to participate.

#### 8.2.4 Reflection

By linking the key incident with theoretical concepts such as disability, impairment, cultural and historical influences, universal design and participation, we are aware of the fact that we have referred mainly to elements of Disability Studies and the social model. We chose those elements because they match the stories of our participants, demonstrating the important influence of the context on the experience of disabled people. Furthermore, we prefer this way of thinking because it does not put the full responsibility for participating in international mobility on the individual. Rather, it gives insight into the important role society has to play, and that a society with a certain desire for accessibility and participation can make change happen.

### 8.3 Key Incident 3: The right to international exchange

When we asked Vilma why she decided to participate in our research, she answered:

*“Things are not going well over here and when someone is prepared to listen, you need to speak.”*

*“It’s hard in Vilnius to get information. You have to search for a lot of things on your own. Students with disabilities have to do everything on their own. Universities and schools don’t help you at all. You need to go and ask for yourself whether you can get an additional grant, for instance. People with disabilities often don’t know their rights. I know a lot of students with a disability and they don’t go on Erasmus.”*

### 8.3.1 Context

Vilma went on an Erasmus programme to Denmark, but when one of us visited her she was back in Lithuania. During our visit she talked very determinedly about everything that was going wrong in Vilnius.

First of all, Vilma wasn't very happy with her studies in Social Pedagogy. She told us that the programme is not organized properly and that it is not related to the practice in real life. Also, social pedagogy doesn't get much respect in Lithuania. It's a hard job and it's very badly paid.

Furthermore, Vilma felt she didn't get much support in organizing her Erasmus programme and she said that not a lot of students with a disability participate in this programme..

Another thing that frustrated Vilma is the Lithuanian attitude towards persons with a disability. She illustrated this attitude by referring to her birth, when doctors asked her parents if they wanted to put Vilma in an institution so they wouldn't have to worry about her anymore. Vilma added that twenty years ago you didn't see people with a disability in the city. Institutions were built to segregate persons with a disability. As researchers, we found it challenging to hear this story.

Although this happened twenty years ago, Vilma got worked up by the attitudes of elderly people and the fact that the city isn't accessible to everybody. She illustrated this by pointing at the presence of stairs several times. Vilma reported that only recently is the attitude changing in Lithuania. Young people are more open to persons with a disability and don't stare as much anymore.

By hearing her story and getting to know Vilnius and Lithuania we could understand why Vilma was so determined to defend her rights. We told her that she seemed a kind of ambassador. She could recognize herself in that role and referred to her dad who told her she is always fighting for what is right. An ambassador is known as someone who represents a group of persons, a community and who defends the rights of the people. By telling her story she referred to the fact that she wants to make change happen.

Vilma found it important that people with a disability get the chance to go on Erasmus since she believes it is important for persons with a disability to 'connect with other people'. Vilma said that she thinks communication and connection are very important and believes that going on an Erasmus

programme gives a great opportunity to connect. Also, she mentioned that she thinks that persons with a disability sometimes tend to be isolated and don't have a large social network.. Vilma stressed the importance of this social network and her belief that everyone should get equal opportunities to go on Erasmus. Furthermore, she stressed the importance of good and accessible information in relation to international exchange programmes for people with a disability.

### 8.3.2 Key incident in relation to the stories of other participants

The key incident above - that refers to the role Vilma took as ambassador - can be linked to Jessica who was formally elected as an Erasmus Ambassador in 2012. When hearing Jessica's speech to a congress in Dublin, we noticed that Jessica spoke positively about her Erasmus experience in Barcelona. Although, Jessica didn't have a good relationship with her assistant, she wanted to share her positive experiences in order to motivate other persons with a disability to go on Erasmus programmes. Also, during our visit she told that she wanted to use her position as an ambassador to make change happen. For example, Jessica thought it would be better if you could meet your assistant beforehand so you could choose to be assisted by someone with whom you click. We can see how the role of Jessica as an Erasmus Ambassador for Ireland shows similarities with the ambassador role taken on by Vilma. We see two people who are actively defending the rights of persons with a disability and who want to create more and equal opportunities for everyone to go on Erasmus.

### 8.3.3 Key incident in relation to theory and literature

Below we look at which concepts could be linked to the 'ambassador position' and the way Vilma and Jessica both want to defend their rights to get equal opportunities to go on Erasmus, or to have an experience abroad. Critical questions that arose with this key-incident are the following: "Where does this position come from? Why do they feel they need to defend the rights of persons with a disability? Is it possible that, when students are confronted with differences in countries, it creates a willingness to make change happen in their own country?" By referring to theoretical concepts, impressions and examples we try to answer our questions.

#### *'Pedagogy of the Oppressed'(Paolo Freire)*

In answering the first question we refer to Paolo Freire's book 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' At the core of this lies "the task of liberating the oppressed of the world". (Mkandawire, 1975, p. 73)

Moreover, Freire (1972, as cited in Mkandawire, 1975) believes that a culture of silence is present, where social or political orders are not correct and where a lot of things are not going the way they are supposed to, but where everyone keeps silent and quiet, accepting their destiny. Freire (1972, as cited in Mkandawire, 1975) stresses the human capacities to break this culture of silence and to make the oppressed stand up for their rights. Mkandawire (1975, p. 73) states that “the guiding principle of Freire’s work is a deep humanistic faith in man’s potentialities”.

Pedagogy of the oppressed has been used to understand the situation of individuals and/or groups who are experiencing oppression. The work of Paulo Freire still has a big influence on the perspective of Disability Studies, Van Hove (2009, p. 93) . Since society is not fully inclusive of everyone, it can create situations in which people with disabilities don’t have access to the same resources. Therefore it can create a situation of oppression and of being oppressed. According to Freire (1972, as cited in Mkandawire, 1975) the oppressed should participate in the pedagogy of their liberation by being conscious of their situation and by perceiving it as something that can be transformed.

The reason why we wanted to link this key incident to the ‘pedagogy of the oppressed’ is twofold. First, we noticed that Jessica and Vilma feel they didn’t have equal rights to go on Erasmus programmes since they had to face additional challenges. Secondly, we see that both participants want to make change happen and want to create better opportunities. In other words, we can see how Vilma and Jessica are pushing the boundaries to break the culture of silence. As Vilma stated:

‘Things are not going well in Vilnius and when someone is prepared to listen, you need to speak.’

By using their voices, both participants want to make other people aware of their position and conditions in order to raise awareness among a broader public and to create opportunities for change. In our view, Jessica and Vilma contributed to breaking the culture of silence by participating in our research. Jessica makes her voice extra explicit by giving speeches as Erasmus Ambassador.

### *Crusadership*

Another concept that we want to discuss in the light of the third key incident is ‘crusadership’ (Darling, 2003). The concept refers to one of the categories Darling (2003) developed in an article on disability identity.

Disabled people can orientate themselves in different ways towards their impairment. First, they can view their impairment with pride or with stigma. Secondly, they can believe in the social model or the personal/medical model. Thirdly, they can take an active or a passive role. (Darling, 2010, p. 134) The typology of Darling (2003) is based on two primary orientations towards disability. First there is the 'cultural majority' orientation. This includes the "acceptance of and/or access to generally accepted norms about appearance and ability, based on cultural values of attractiveness and achievement" (Darling, 2003, p. 885). Basically, it says that people with a disability want to achieve a state of normalization (Darling, 2010). The second or "the minority or sub cultural orientation' involves acceptance of and/or access to alternative norms about appearance and ability, based on a value of diversity" (Darling, 2003, p. 885). This orientation is linked to culture and disability rights movements (Darling, 2010).

We need to keep in mind that 'acceptance' and 'access' don't necessarily go hand in hand. For example, one can have access to mainstream resources, but might not accept these resources. Some people may choose not to identify themselves with the mainstream but with the minority. On the other hand it is also possible that one does identify oneself with the culture of the majority, but doesn't get access to the mainstream resources. (Darling, 2003)

Based on these two main orientations, Darling (2003) came to seven types of disability orientations: normalization, crusadership, affirmation, situational identification, resignation, apathy and isolated affirmation.

As researchers we illustrate how the type 'crusadership' fits the ambassador position of Vilma and Jessica.

"Crusaders are those who accept the norms of the cultural majority, but who do not have access to a normalized lifestyle" (Darling, 2003, p. 886). They engage in self-advocacy and social movement activities to stimulate social changes (Darling, 2003).

We included this concept because we recognize the attribute of self-advocacy and striving for change in Jessica and Vilma. They have the same desires as everyone else, they want to go abroad and have a memorable international experience. But they were faced with extra 'obstacles'. They felt that persons with a disability don't have full access to the mainstream resources of the Erasmus Programme or that the programme is not adapted to the needs of everyone. Therefore they identified some things that needed to change:

- better information and access to information

- more help from international offices for receiving additional grants
- and more suitable assistance abroad.

As well as similarities, we can see an important difference in relation to Darling's (2003) given example of 'crusadership'. Moreover, the person with a disability in her example, Christopher Reeve, is someone who wanted to have surgery in order to function 'normally' and to have access to all the mainstream resources. (Darling, 2003) By this it can be seen as an example of the medical model that tries to repair deficits. This is not the starting point in the stories of Jessica and Vilma. First of all, Vilma and Jessica are not expressing a dissatisfaction regarding to their impairment, rather, they are viewing it with pride (Darling, 2010). Secondly, they take an activist position (Darling, 2010). They don't promote change in the individual, but promote change in society since they feel the Erasmus Programme should be made more accessible to everyone. Their attitude illustrates the social and cultural model.

Within the social model the roots of disability are seen in the social structure (Devlieger, Rusch & Pfeiffer, 2003). Vilma and Jessica stand for the social model by denouncing the lack of information, lack of support by the international offices and the inadequate support abroad.

The cultural model locates the concept of disability within representations. Devlieger et al. (2003, p. 15) state that "disability in such a model is localized in the ways people could not and cannot conceptualize the phenomenon in all its complexity, i.e., as same and different".

Vilma illustrates the cultural model by referring to the attitude of Lithuanians towards persons with a disability. She expresses how the elderly people emphasise the differences in people with a disability and want to put them in institutions, while younger people are more open and want to give people with a disability access to society. The example shows how representations of persons with a disability exist and how they have an influence on the lives of persons with a disability.

*"The personal becomes political"*

In this last part we would like to illustrate our key incident by referring to Mike Oliver, a leading theorist in Disability Studies and researcher with an impairment who has been striving for change in the constructed and social environment.

Van Hove (2009) described Oliver as a personification of 'the personal becomes political' since Oliver experiences himself and takes in an activist role in promoting the inclusion of disabled people. By experiencing inaccessibility and exclusion himself he protested against the medical perspective of

disability and decided to underpin the demands of the movement of disabled people by devising the social model and to use this to make change happen in the environment (Van Hove, 2009, p. 9). We can see how Oliver doesn't deny his disability identity, but uses his personal experiences to promote social changes and changes in the way society is constructed.

As we illustrated above, Vilma and Jessica both take a very active position as well and want to defend their rights. They both subscribe to the social model, in the way that they believe that society needs to undertake some changes in order to give everyone the same opportunities. Through all these aspects we see a lot of similarities between the key incident of Vilma and Jessica and the example of Michael Oliver. The impression 'the personal becomes the political' fits with them very well.

*What is the influence of international experiences on participants taking up this position?*

Below we discuss our suggestions as to how an Erasmus experience can influence the way students view their own culture.

Erasmus can be seen as a cross-cultural experience. (Brasoveanu, 2010) Many students from different countries with different cultures participate in this international programme. Students are in contact with different perspectives from different people, different education systems, different lifestyles... but also differences in relation to the position of disabled people in society. The last aspect can even influence the choice of country by disabled students (key incident 2).

By referring to Demir and Demir (2009) we can see how the experience of diversity can have an influence on the personal identity and perspectives of students. Moreover, they state that "the Erasmus Programme brings socio-cultural reciprocal influences on the personal development" (Demir & Demir, 2009, p. 96). Therefore, the experience can have an impact on how participants view the world and their own country. On the website of Erasmus ("Reverse cultural shock", 2012) it is suggested that people can experience a cultural shock when heading home. Sometimes students have a hard time adjusting, because they have changed, but everyone else around them didn't. Also they can be confronted with things that aren't going so well.

For illustrating how this affected our participants we refer to Vilma and Jessica's experiences. Vilma chose to go to Denmark, partly because she wanted to experience a different education system. She found the education in Denmark a lot better than in Vilnius, because they linked the theory to the practice, by giving them exercises in real life situations. The attitude towards persons with a disability was different as well. They were more open towards persons with a disability and

stared less. Furthermore, the buildings in Denmark were more accessible. These differences could have influenced Vilma, as once back in Vilnius, she wanted to strive for equal rights for people with a disability. However, we are aware that Vilma told us that her dad used to say that ‘Vilma is always working for people’s rights’, so she was already motivated to work for change.

Furthermore, we noticed that Jessica’s experience abroad made her an expert in her own Erasmus story. By building up this personal expertise she had the chance to become an Erasmus Student Ambassador for Ireland. Because of this her voice was heard and she could promote change.

#### 8.3.4 Reflection

Through this key incident we wanted to show how the position of Vilma and Jessica can be understood in terms of ambassadorship. However, we didn’t want to give the impression that all people with a disability are expected to fight for their rights. More we should question the way society is organized and the process that lead disabled people to strive for access to so called ‘mainstream resources’. We do this by asking the following question: “Why should disabled people strive to get equal opportunities? Do they have to take in an active position in order to get access to mainstream resources?”

Furthermore, by referring to the role of ambassador, we could be suggesting that Vilma and Jessica are being reduced to a ‘certain type’. This was not our intention. We are aware that the position of ‘ambassador’ doesn’t completely match the position of Vilma and Jessica. Finally, we want to express that they are both unique people and although they show a similarity in taking up the role of ambassador, they are also very different.

#### **8.4 Key Incident 4: “My story is not so different...”**

*One of us met Kevin on Erasmus in Toulouse. When Kevin asked us about the purpose of our visit we told him that he could decide what he wanted to show us or where he wanted to go.*

*The first evening one of us went to dinner with Kevin and three of his best friends; afterwards there was a party at his dorm. Kevin seemed to have a lot of fun, he was telling jokes and it seemed as if he had a lot of friends on Erasmus. The second day of our visit, one of us went to see a rugby match with Kevin that was organized by the ESN (Erasmus Student Network) in Toulouse. Kevin told us that*

*they organize a lot of parties, events, trips... and that he regularly takes part in their activities. After the game, we went to a dinner party with some of his French friends. Kevin spoke French fluently and they mainly spoke about school, business, their plans for next year, where to find an internship...*

*During our visit to Kevin we mostly took in an observatory stance. Although, we can say that on the last day of our visit a real one on one conversation arose. Kevin talked about his kidney problems and said he didn't see it as a limitation, but rather as something he has to take into account.*

*Furthermore, he told that he wants to focus on the positive things, on the things that he can do. At the end of the conversation one of us asked how he had experienced our visit. He said that it was a little weird that someone came just for him. He added:*

*"I don't know what you thought about all this; maybe it wasn't so useful for you. Now you spent a couple of days with me, and as you can see, I am a very normal person with a normal life."*

#### 8.4.1 Context

While visiting Kevin he said that he had made a lot of new friends on his Erasmus programme, went to a lot of parties, participated in the activities of ESN and got to know the French culture and language.

Since one of us (the researchers) had been on Erasmus as well, we could see similarities between the experience of Kevin and our own experience. The similarities in the experience were also found when comparing Kevin's story to the experiences of our other participants. It occurred to us that in their stories they mostly refer to the people they met, the parties they went to, the events that took place, the different culture they got to know, the differences in education. The things Kevin experienced and told us about, were in that sense what we would generally expect from someone participating in Erasmus.

The information illustrated above was actually stated by Kevin who described himself as a 'normal person, leading a normal life'. Because of that, he assumed that his story wouldn't be interesting enough. As researchers we were intrigued: 'Why would Kevin think that his story isn't interesting?'

#### 8.4.2 Key incident in relation to the stories of other participants

A link could be found between the key incident and what Leonieke responded to us after we explained the goal of our research:

'I actually don't know if the information that I will give to you is going to be so useful. My Erasmus experience is not very different than from the other people.'

The fact that Leonieke thought that her story wasn't 'interesting' enough for our research, was striking to us. After we got to know her better, and she wrote her story, we were amazed by the quality of her writing. We were touched by the way she was able to take us up in her story. We found her story very interesting, in contrast to what she had warned us about.

Because two of our participants mentioned that their story might not be interesting enough, since their experiences are very similar to the experiences of other students, we decided to explore this further.

#### 8.4.3 Key incident in relation to theory and literature

Below we reflect on what Kevin and Leonieke told us. By referring to articles and theoretical concepts we try to answer questions that arose in relation to this fourth key-incident.

*Why do they think their story isn't interesting enough?*

Why do Kevin and Leonieke think their story isn't interesting enough? Do they assume that research is supposed to be about 'problems' or 'pathologies' or stories which are 'different'? And why is that? Did our research questions give the impression that our research had to be about problems?

In 1997 Lawrence-Lightfoot wrote that social sciences are traditionally interested in pathologies and their remedies. Although this notion was taken 15 years ago, we still experience how research focuses mainly on pathologies, despite the evolution in how disability has been viewed.

The previous statement can explain why our participants might have come to believe that their story is not interesting enough, since they feel their stories are similar to other students who study abroad.

Besides the general assumption on the social sciences and their focus, we also wanted to have a look at Disability Studies and the conceptualisation of 'disability'. We could see that perspectives on 'disability' are in constant evolution in practice as well as in research.

Rioux (1997, p. 103) distinguishes theories which view disability as a result of individual pathology from those which view disability as a result of social pathology. The first perspective locates disability within the individual and contains two approaches: the bio-medical and the functional approach (Rioux, 1997, p. 103). Within the second perspective the disability is located within society. Here we can also distinguish two approaches, namely the environmental and the rights-outcome approach. Rioux (1997) further points out that positivist standards and the value of objectivity is also present within research on disability. This leads to a reductionist view on persons with a disability, which isn't able to grasp the complexity and dynamics of the experiences of disability. "The research community in the field of disability has created a world of 'disability facts', but has been relatively unconscious about the judgements it has made in doing so" (Rioux, 1997, p. 109). It is important to be aware of that when doing research on disability.

We see some relevant statements in the paragraph above. Rioux (1997) also stresses the pathology thinking, in the way that she points out that disability is the result of either individual or social pathology. Further she (Rioux, 1997) also states that this leads to a reductionist view on disability, inspired by the positivist paradigm and the value of objectivity. Therefore it is unable to grasp the complex reality.

When revising the different models and their impact, we found in another article that the medical model is pathological in its effect (Scullion, 2010). Borsay and Shakespeare (2005 & 2006, as cited in Scullion, 2010, p. 699) state the following about the medical model:

As a model or paradigm, it encompasses the notion of medicalization; this is comprised by professional dominance in the lives of disabled people, low priority afforded to them by societies that prioritise acute medical practice and undervalue people with chronic conditions, disabled people being defined by their impairments, thereby excluding them from decisions and research related to them, and an individual focus on seeking causes and solutions to the problems of disability.

The use of the medical model therefore implies negativity. Referring to this perspective, Oliver (1990, July 23, p. 3) used 'personal tragedy theory' as a term to describe disability as a "terrible chance event which occurs at random to unfortunate individuals".

Today we see that the medical model is being questioned more and more and that other models are brought to the forefront. That doesn't mean that the medical model doesn't contain any truth or doesn't have an influence any more. It does mean that it is being questioned and that other models are arising as a worthy counterview.

Devlieger, Rusch and Pfeiffer (2003) stated that we can distinguish four models. They emphasize that all of those models are still present up to now, but in certain settings some of them might be excluded.

First, there is the religious model which localizes the cause of a disability within evil forces. Here persons with a disability are being marginalized or are seen as exceptional. The second or the medical model localizes the cause within the individual and here the quality of life is seen as diminished. The focus of the approach is technical. Third, the social model states that the cause of a disability is part of society. Here, persons with a disability are seen as 'being-in-the-world' and people who believe in this model strive for justice. Last is the cultural model, which localizes a disability in the representations and perceives the quality of life as transformational. Their approach is critical. (Devlieger et al., 2003, p. 15)

The medical model is being criticized more and more, but is still very evident within society and within the general view on disability. In relation to our participants we could ask: "Are Leonieke and Kevin 'children of their time' in a way that they might still be influenced by the medical model?" Unconsciously, this model could have a more powerful effect on their perspectives on persons with a disability than they might realise. As we mentioned above, the medical model implied negativity and a focus on pathologies. One hypothesis is that this might be the reason why Kevin and Leonieke assumed that their story with regard to international mobility was probably not so interesting. Their 'impairment' wasn't central in their story, neither was 'negativity'. On the contrary, studying abroad was a positive experience for both of them.

*What is the view within Disability Studies on sameness and differences?*

Leonieke and Kevin both told that they feel as if their experiences are not very different from those of other people. Therefore they wondered if their story was going to be interesting to us.

Keeping that in mind, we searched for the way that 'sameness and difference' are being viewed within Disability Studies.

Previously there was a focus on sameness. Persons with a disability were 'fixed', 'labelled' and then 'forgotten' (Stiker, 1982 as cited in Devlieger, Rusch & Pfeiffer, 2003, p. 11). Even with emerging paradigms of inclusion and de-institutionalisation, the aim was still to "forget about the differences that disability constitutes (Devlieger et al., 2003, p. 11). The only change was that the disability was first 'exposed' to be forgotten afterwards. In the end the ultimate goal of normalization remained. (Devlieger et al., 2003)

This was followed by a focus on differences, meaning that difference should be celebrated and not forgotten. (Devlieger et al., 2003, p. 11)

Today it is recognised that individuals with a similar impairment meet the challenges it imposes differently because they live/work/socialize in their own environment. In short, the most recent views try to combine sameness and difference in a positive way.

As we can see, in previous perspectives, differences have always been accentuated but for different purposes. Within the modern view the aim was to eventually reach a stage of 'sameness', the post-modern perspective on the other hand, emphasised the differences in order to celebrate them.

In this new stance, Devlieger et al. (2003) want to propose a perspective on disability as 'same and different'. We all have similarities with other people and we all have differences. In order to grasp all the dimensions and complexity of human experiences, we need to focus on both differences and sameness.

#### 8.4.4 Reflection

With this key-incident we tried to reflect on what could have been influential for the fact that Kevin and Leonieke felt as if their story wasn't interesting. Of course, we can't state that the given perspectives and assumptions are in fact the reasons why. We have highlighted a possible angle to reflect on the statement of Leonieke and Kevin, that is why we want to invite the reader to critically evaluate those assumptions.

Furthermore, we wanted to emphasise that we were surprised by the fact that our participants doubted if their story would be interesting enough. We want to stress that we didn't want to say that their story is interesting, *because* of the similarities to the stories you would generally expect to hear from other students who have been studying abroad. What we did want to say is that we don't believe that a story is only interesting when it stresses differences. Also similarities could be interesting. We believe in the perspective of 'same and different' to grasp the reality in its full complexity. By doing so, we follow, the perspective of Devlieger, Pfeiffer and Rusch (2003). We believe that everyone has similarities and differences and we wanted to give an alternative to the traditional view on disability as a category. In giving a place for the similarities in – international - experiences we are aware of the fact that we, as portraitists, focused on the strengths. Although we do not want to give an ideal image of the participant, we want to give an alternative to the preoccupation with pathology in social sciences.

Finally we want to pin-point one more time that we view everyone as unique. The story of every one of our participants was unique and therefore interesting on itself. They showed us their insights, their experiences and perspectives on international mobility and we see them as experts on their own lives and their own story.

## **8.5 Key Incident 5: Support**

One of us was visiting Jessica in Nîmes when she was taking a year off to teach English in French schools. When we talked about her Erasmus experience in Barcelona, she was enthusiastic and she expressed how she wouldn't have wanted to miss it for anything in the world.

Still, there was a negative aspect to her experience abroad. Jessica mentioned that she didn't have a good relationship with her assistant. Jessica felt her assistant didn't like to take her out and she didn't get the chance to see a lot of Barcelona during her Erasmus programme. That's why Jessica returned with her parents afterwards. Jessica was always happy when she could go to classes in Barcelona and didn't look forward to going home at night because then she would be confronted with her assistant.

Because of her negative experiences regarding support while being on Erasmus, Jessica emphasises the importance of having an assistant that you like, someone that likes you back and someone that you trust.

*“As an Erasmus Ambassador I would like to give people with a disability the chance to choose their assistant when they go abroad, and to give them a chance to meet them on beforehand. It is important to get assistance from someone you like.”*

### 8.5.1 Context

The key incident above shows that it is important for Jessica to get assistance from people with whom she clicks. In Barcelona she found she didn't get along with the person who assisted her. Jessica told us that sometimes she got the feeling she was a burden to her assistant.

Jessica is more positive when she talks about the assistance she got in France. She describes her first exchange in Nîmes as a very positive experience because then she saw half of France with her host family and she felt part of the family. While staying with Jessica and the host family of her second exchange in Nîmes, we could experience as well how Jessica could count on them to bring her to one of her schools, the city, or the cinema. Jessica had more positive experiences with assistance received from people she knew, than with professional assistance. A possible explanation for the fact that she had better experiences with non-professional assistants, is that she could decide if she wanted to stay with a certain host family or not. A professional assistant is often allocated to someone.

### 8.5.2 Key incident in relation to the stories of other participants

While going through the stories of our participants it struck us that Jessica was the only one who mentioned professional assistance. In general we noticed that our participants especially referred to the assistance they got from people they knew.

During our visit to Laima she talked about the assistance she gets in her home town and how this is not practiced by professionals. Instead, she relied on fellow students:

‘For pushing my wheelchair to university or for bringing me something from the grocery store, I can always count on the students of my dorm.’

In relation to international mobility, Laima talked about assistance as well. Since she needs someone to push her wheelchair because of her impairment, Laima expressed how she wouldn't have gone on Erasmus alone. She only dared to dream about Erasmus if her friend would accompany her.

In the story of Joshua, the assistance by his friends and fellow students during his experience in Suriname was mentioned as well. Joshua explained how he tried to do a lot by himself, but also how he could count on his fellow students to help him with practical things, such as memorising the route to his internship workplace.

Not only did we find that support abroad from people you like is important, we could see that the role of people at home can be significant as well.

Margaux described how her family was very important to her and how they gave her emotional support while she was abroad. Margaux's family always supported her in doing what she wanted and always believed in her. That is why she wanted to include them in her portrait. She added that she had learned from her family to be ambitious and not to say no to a challenge.

With other participants, we could see the importance of families in relation to international mobility as well. Sometimes they wanted to prove to their family that they could go abroad, despite the worries of mum or dad. At other times, they needed some distance from their family and wanted to figure out who they were.

When we look back at the story of Jessica, we immediately think about her family as well. When one of us met Jessica for the first time in Dublin, Jessica had to give a speech as Erasmus ambassador. Her parents were right there next to her, to give moral support. At a conference in Brussels her parents travelled with her to give assistance as well. Jessica described that her parents have always given her all the support she ever wanted, even when she decided to go abroad.

### 8.5.3 Key incident in relation to theory and literature

Because the key incident above is about support, care and assistance we will start this part by giving an explanation of the term 'support'. Furthermore, we will specifically zoom in on the two concepts that were included in the title of our key incident: social network and social safety net. Next, we will link the key incident with the concepts 'companionship' and 'belonging'.

### *'Support' as described in Disability Studies*

To describe 'support' within our theoretical framework we refer to Van Gennep (1997, as cited in Van Hove, 2009) and his paradigm.

Van Gennep (1997, as cited in Van Hove, 2009, p. 117) describes support as "giving access to knowledge, resources and relations that are important to the person concerned, to live, work and recreate in society".

When we apply Van Gennep's (1997, as cited in Van Hove, 2009) definition of support to the stories on international mobility of our participants we can recognise the different aspects. For example, Vilma referred to the fact that she didn't get much support in terms of the organisation of her Erasmus programme and additional grants. Joshua referred to the fact that his sunglasses were a major help in being able to function in Suriname, while Laima emphasised the importance of the help she got from her fellow Lithuanian students while being on Erasmus.

Furthermore, Van Gennep (1997, as cited in Van Hove, 2009) states that support has three main characteristics. A first element is that someone doesn't have to meet certain conditions to get access to support. Secondly, he emphasises the fact that not every person needs the same amount of support and that support should match the needs of the person. Thirdly, he says that support can be given by the social network and the social safety net.

The second characteristic of support can be illustrated by our experiences during the visits. As researchers, we could see how our participants were not afraid to ask for help, while at other times they insisted to do things independently. An illustration of the presence of the third characteristic in the stories of our participants is being explained below.

#### *Social network and social safety net*

Since we noticed that our participants made more use of people in their neighborhood than of professionals, we can say that they relied more on their social network than on the social safety net for going abroad. "The social network consists of parents, family members, friends, neighbours, fellow students at school, colleagues at work and volunteers" (Van Gennep, 1997, as cited in Van Hove, 2009, p.117). The social safety net, on the other hand, consists of regular care services and special care services (Van Gennep, 1997, as cited in Van Hove, 2009).

Although our participants showed their independence by going abroad, we noticed that the support of a social network was important to them while the social safety net was rather absent. Since Van Gennep (1997, as cited in Van Hove, 2009) mentioned that support given by the social network should get the priority over support by the social safety net, we see the stories of our participants as an illustration of Van Gennep's statement.

### *Companionship and belonging*

Through our key incident we could identify that Jessica and our other participants preferred to ask support from people with whom they have a good, emotional connection, such as friends and family.

A first concept that can be linked to describe the kind of relationship that our participants experience with the people of their social network who assist them is 'companionship'. (Rook, 1987)

This term is used in Disability Studies to underline the importance of an emotional bond in helping relationships. This is exactly what we identified in the stories of our participants. They prefer to be supported by people who are close to them, who know them and with whom they can also do things which they enjoy. It can be illustrated by the fact that Jessica points out that she still has contact with the family of her first international experience in Nîmes, because she really felt part of the family.

We can partly explain why the social network is being appealed to and why it is positively evaluated by referring to Rook (1987) who stated that the degree of companionship plays a significant and varied role in the emotional well-being of people in general. Therefore we can conclude that relying on people who are close to you is something typically human.

Another concept that can be connected with the fact that our participants have more experience with assistance from their social network is the need for belonging. Maslow (1953) stated this need as the most important after having fulfilled the physiological needs of eating and sleeping. Brendto and Brokenleg (2001) point out that belonging is about the feeling of connection and appreciation. When you have a feeling of belonging, you feel supported and protected by significant others. Furthermore, they refer to belonging as a primary need.

When keeping this concept in mind we could say that - as other people - our participants have the urge to feel part of their surroundings, as a consequence they rely on people who are close to them.

## Reflection

By taking up this key incident we are aware of the fact that we highlighted particularly a certain kind of support, namely the support given by the social network. Although, it was striking how the proportion of assistance by the social network differed from the assistance our participants got from the social safety net, we don't want to generalise this statement to other stories of disabled students. Our sample was too small to make these kind of generalisations.

Furthermore, we want to point out that it wasn't our aim to criticize support given by the social safety net. Rather, we wanted to highlight that our participants seemed to give preference to assistance from people who are close to them or from people they like.

### 8.6 Key Incident 6: Focus on positive experiences

*When we talked to Joshua on Skype, he especially mentioned the positive elements in Suriname: the good weather, the people he met over there, his internship, what he was doing there... He talked about his visual impairment as well, but throughout all our conversations, we never completely realised what impact it had on his life.*

*This changed when one of us accompanied him on a visit to the ophthalmologist when he was back home. During this visit Joshua told the doctor that, by going on an internship abroad, he had been more challenged by the barriers he has to face every day. For example: he mentioned the hard time he had memorizing the routes in Suriname and that it took him a long time to find what he needed in the grocery store. Also, the strength of the sun in Suriname made it harder for him to see.*

*This is reflected in a statement Joshua made in one of his writings:*

*“Joshua does everything by himself, he can handle it.*

*Do other people see me like this?*

*No...*

*That's how I see myself.”*

#### 8.6.1 Context

This key incident demonstrates two things. First it shows that the barriers Joshua had to face are not the things that he mentioned right away. Also when giving a speech about his experience abroad to students who were interested in going next year, he wanted to emphasize the positive things. The statements above can be completed with one of Joshua's writings that expressed how he was struggling with the fact that maybe he had renounced himself during the past years by doing everything other people do and by that making his impairment almost 'invisible'. When Joshua expressed this feeling to his ophthalmologist the doctor affirmed that he is not always willing to receive help.

Secondly, it shows why Joshua went abroad, even if that meant that he had to overcome some additional challenges, like memorising new routes.

In general, the key incident shows that Joshua doesn't put his impairment to the forefront and focuses on his positive experiences.

#### *8.6.2 Key incident in relation to the stories of other participants*

In this part we illustrate that many of our participants shared a story in which their impairment wasn't central or in which they didn't want their impairment to be central. When talking about their international experience, they talked about the new friends they met, the parties, the different culture, their own personal growth. Unless we asked them participants didn't talk about their impairment. Also it seems that they put their positive experiences to the forefront instead of the barriers that they needed to overcome.

Kevin for instance, didn't talk a lot about his kidney problems either when one of us visited him. Instead he showed us how ambitious he was and he expressed that he wanted to have a good career. He added that he doesn't want his kidney problems to get in the way of anything and that he wants to focus on the things that he can do and not on the things that he can't do. Another statement that he made was:

I don't see my kidney problem as a limitation. It's rather something that I have to take into account.

After spending a few days with Kevin, it gradually became clear that Kevin did face some barriers in order to get to Toulouse. For example, he couldn't buy his medicines and go to the hospital for a check-up in Toulouse because the insurances didn't cover medical expenses abroad. Furthermore,

Kevin needed to catheterise a couple of times a day so he wouldn't get infections. By result, Kevin needed to bring several bags full of medicines and material to catheterise when going to France.

Despite the barriers in relation to his kidney problem, Kevin talked enthusiastically about all the fun he had, the cool trips he did, the nice friends he made. The barriers didn't seem to be the first things that came to his mind when thinking about Erasmus.

Secondly, Jessica also prefers to talk about the positive experiences of her stay abroad.

When I asked Jessica what she would say about her international experience at a conference in Brussels about Erasmus, she said she would talk about how great it was for her. How she wouldn't have wanted to miss it for anything in the world and how much she learned from it.

When I asked Jessica why she wouldn't talk about the bad relationship with her assistant, she said she wanted to give a positive vibe to her speech. She wants to convince people with a disability to go on Erasmus, because no matter what the barriers are, it is an unforgettable experience that she would recommend to everyone.

During her speech in Dublin as ambassador-to-be, one of us noticed as well how Jessica talked particularly about the positive experiences of her Erasmus.

Thirdly, we noticed that Minke didn't put her impairment to the forefront either. Minke talked a lot about Spain, her classes, the things she had experienced already, food, travelling and about life and its meaning. Also, Minke talked about her family, her parents and her sister. She didn't put her rheumatoid arthritis at the centre of her story. Only when we specifically asked about barriers in relation to her impairment did she talk about it.

Fourthly, when speaking to Margaux and discussing her portrait, she pointed out that she didn't want her dyslexia and dysorthography at the centre of her portrait. Margaux stressed that she wanted the focus to be on her family, her interests and her international experiences. Central to her Erasmus experience was the fun she had and the new friends she met.

### 8.6.3 Key incident in relation to theory and literature

Below we reflect upon the information above by referring to theoretical concepts and literature. Questions posed in relation to this key incident are: “Why do the stories of participants not have disability as a central theme? Why do our participants stress the positive experiences instead of emphasising the barriers?” First we mention anomie theory and the concept ‘desire’ (Darling, 2003; De Schauwer, 2011), then look at disability identity and its relationship with international mobility.

### *Anomie theory and desire*

Anomie theory is based on the assumption that most people strive for and desire the same goals. For disabled people this implies that they want a lifestyle that is similar to those a lot of people have. (Darling, 2003, p. 882) When applying this perspective to the stories of our participants, this would refer to the fact that disabled students want to go on an international experience, just like other students.

Desire can be seen as “productive forces, creating other subjectifications, other knowledges and other futures” (Diedrich, 2005, as cited in De Schauwer, 2011, p. 242). It drives us to develop new potentialities, new possibilities and to push against existing boundaries. As O’Shea (2002, as cited in De Schauwer, 2011, p. 242) says: “We are able to be more than how society would represent and constrain us”.

By saying that some disabled people have to face more barriers than others in pursuing their goal, Darling (2003) notes that for some people it is easier to get the lifestyle that most people have. Despite these barriers our participants did decide to study abroad and stepped outside of the lines that had been drawn for them. They gave more importance to the desire to go abroad than to the barriers they had to face and when talking about their international experiences they didn’t put their disability central, but the positive experiences.

### *Disability identity and the influence of international experiences*

As we mentioned in key incident three, Darling (2003) developed a typology of disability orientations which led to the description of seven types. At the core of this typology is the identity of people with a disability. Moreover, the types suggest how disabled people might identify themselves.

While the type 'crusadership' was the focus in key incident three, we will now focus on the normalization type. Immediately we want to emphasise that 'disability identity' should be seen as only one part of the multiple identities individuals have (Watson, 2002).

Within the orientation of normalization, persons with a disability accept the norms of the larger society. They don't identify themselves with the disability subculture. These persons have access to the mainstream resources and achieve a lifestyle which is similar to that of most other people. (Darling, 2003) They want to overcome their disability (Darling, 2010). They mostly get in contact with people without disabilities. Furthermore, we see that some people with a disability neither deny their disability, nor view it with pride. "Their disability is just not the most salient part of their identity, they perceive themselves as normal" (Darling, 2003, p. 286).

Darling (2003) concludes by saying that this orientation is probably the most common within our Western society. Watson (2002, p. 514) supports this by stating that the majority of the disabled participants in his study didn't think of their impairment as relevant in their identification of the 'self'.

Important is that we are able to "choose our identity, and can ignore or reject identities fostered on us as a result of ascribed characteristics" (Giddens, 1991, as cited in Watson, 2002, p. 511).

In relation to our participants we could clearly see how they didn't mention their disability as the most important part of their identity. Since they didn't put their disability in the forefront within their identities and daily encounters, it seemed logical that their disability wasn't central in the story they shared with us.

An important nuance between the narratives of our participants was that Joshua explicitly seemed to reject the disability identity. He tried to 'hide' it and tried to adjust himself as much as he could. By this he represented more the medical model. (Darling, 2010) Other participants simply didn't see their disability as the most salient part of their identity (Darling, 2003). Here we could think of Kevin for example. To us it seemed as if he didn't explicitly reject his disability, but rather he didn't see it as a central part of his identity.

Furthermore, it is important to mention that identity is not fixed. It changes over time, through encounters, experiences, interactions... (Watson, 2002) A lot of different factors influence the way we view ourselves. Watson (2002, p. 511) specifically mentioned space, time and relations as

important elements in the continuous process of redefining ourselves through multiple identities. Within the story of Joshua, we perceived an identity change.

Finally, we could see that an international experience could lead to an identity change. Joshua told us that he always created this image about himself as if he could do anything. He always wanted to do everything himself and it seemed to us as if he rejected the disability identity. But during his internship and after coming home, it seemed to us as if Joshua was in a period of identity change.

Joshua clearly said that, by going abroad to Suriname, he was confronted with the things that he couldn't do. For example: it struck him that he needed a lot more time in the grocery store than his fellow students to find the stuff he needed, memorizing the routes was difficult and being exposed to the sun so much wasn't good for him. Joshua thought his vision had worsened because of all the sun, luckily it hadn't.

Furthermore, Joshua told us that he feels that his friends have forgotten that he has a visual impairment, because he always acts as if he can do anything. But when he was in Suriname, he didn't know anyone, so he was able to explain very well what the impact of his visual impairment was in order for other people to take it into account. Joshua told us that he would want his friends to understand as well what it is like to have a visual impairment.

As we can see here, Joshua was in a 'struggle' with his own identity, going from the guy that knows how to do everything, to realising his own limits. As Joshua described it himself, this identity change, was a consequence of going abroad, on an internship, of going to a new environment and interacting with new people. This clearly demonstrates how international mobility can influence the way people view their disability.

#### 8.6.4 Reflection

In this reflection we would like to point out that we didn't want to make a value judgment with regard to the identities of persons with a disability. We simply wanted to show one perspective in giving a possible explanation for the fact that our participants didn't put their disability central in their stories.

Although the focus on positive experiences rather than on barriers is related to the presence of disability in the narratives, we are aware of the fact that there might be different reasons why our

participants focus on the positive experiences. In relation to this we could suggest that the positive experiences outweigh the negative experiences and the barriers. Maybe our participants simply do not think about the barriers they faced, because the fun stuff they experienced had a bigger impact.

As we stated before, we wanted to give you one perspective on the key incident, but we would like to invite you to reflect critically about our insights and hypotheses.



## PART 4: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

What does international mobility mean to students with a disability? How do persons with a disability experience going abroad in the context of their studies? What did our participants, as experts in their own story, teach us by sharing their international experiences?

### 9 Going abroad as an enriching experience

The participants put their **positive experiences** in going abroad to the forefront. The barriers they had to overcome weren't central and didn't stop them from going abroad. They had the desire to go on an international exchange. It drove them to develop new possibilities and create a new future (Diedrich, 2005, as cited in De Schauwer, 2011, p. 242). It also led them to push against existing boundaries. As O'Shea says: "we are able to be more than how society would represent and constrain us" (2002, as cited in De Schauwer, 2011, p. 242). As researchers, we believe that our participants were very determined to go abroad. The barriers wouldn't have kept them from following their dreams. They wanted to create their own futures, without being limited by boundaries - imposed by society.

All our participants talked enthusiastically about their international exchange. They preferred to talk about the possibilities they had instead of focusing on the challenges. A reason for this could be that the positive experiences were simply overshadowing the difficulties they encountered. Our participants talked about the nice memories and the **benefits** of going abroad on a personal and professional level. On the personal level, they mentioned effects like becoming more independent, being more open minded, being more sociable, meeting new friends and being more confident. On the professional level, they referred to the experience of getting to know a different educational system and to international exchange as a great asset when looking for a job. Both Otero (2008) and, Keogh and Russel-Roberts (2009) argued that students in general highly value their participation in an exchange programme during their studies. Students experience a personal and professional growth by studying abroad and feel like their expectations of the benefits of such a programme, like Erasmus, have been met. (Otero, 2008; Keogh & Russel-Roberts, 2009; Sigalas, 2010)

Furthermore, we could link the focus on positive experiences to the fact that most of our participants didn't put their impairment centrally in their story on international mobility. One reason for this could be that some didn't identify themselves as disabled. They have access to mainstream resources

- such as international exchange programmes - and identify themselves with the culture of the larger society. Darling (2003) refers to this **disability orientation** as 'normalization'.

Another reason could be that they didn't see their impairment as the most salient part of their identity. They didn't consciously reject the disability identity, but nor did they embrace it. They saw themselves as 'normal'. (Darling, 2003) By this, we come to another important conclusion: most of our participants said they see themselves as 'normal' people who lead 'normal' lives.

They felt as if their experiences were similar to what you would generally expect from someone going abroad during his/her studies. Because of this some of our participants weren't sure if their story was interesting enough for our research. We considered every story as interesting and unique. Neither did we want to put a focus on differences, nor on sameness. Rather, we wanted to emphasize the similarities 'and' the differences in order to encompass a story in its full complexity. Through this we subscribed the focus of Devlieger, Rush & Pfeiffer (2003) on **same 'and' different**.

Although the disability of the participants wasn't perceived as central, we noticed an interesting finding regarding the experience of their disability when being abroad. We remarked that differences between countries can have positive or negative influences on the impact of an impairment. These differences can include different attitudes towards persons with a disability, a different climate, a different degree of accessibility. Students with a disability can thus be confronted with more or different barriers. One of our participants saw this as the reason why he had been through an identity change in relation to his disability. This findings underpins the **social model**, which locates disability within society. (Oliver, 1996)

## **10 Similarities in motivation to go international?**

Why did our participants decide to go on an international experience? In their answers we found **similarities** with the reasons that you would generally expect from people going abroad. They included: standing out in the job market, improving language skills, improving life skills, having fun, being more cultural aware, making new friends... Those reasons were mentioned as well in the ten most important reasons to go on Erasmus, given by the British Council ("Why go? Erasmus benefits", n.d.). King (2010, p. 1356) adds that students want to go abroad in order to gain social and cultural assets.

Interesting is how King (2010) includes a socio-economic dimension as influential in the decision to go abroad. When students belong to a family with a higher socio-economic status, they are more

likely to have an international experience during their studies. When we turn this reasoning around, we could conclude that students with a lower socio-economic background are less likely to go abroad and are thus being **disadvantaged**. The figures on participation of students with a disability in international exchange show that they are being underrepresented as well (European Commission, 2012b). Linking this to the statement of King (2010), it could mean that students with a disability and a low socio-economic background are even more disadvantaged. Alongside to this factor, González, Mesanza and Mariel (2010) say that the level of education in a country determines the degree in which international exchanges are being promoted. When a country has a low level of education, students are being less stimulated to go abroad.

Furthermore, we found literature on the **choice of country** for going abroad. King (2010) referred to the influence of quality, cost of education and colonial links among others. González, Mesanza and Mariel (2010) equally point out that cost of living in the country of destination and the distance from home are relevant factors. Our participants referred to the quality of education as influential. However, the decision on which country to go wasn't dealt with explicitly in our research.

## **11 Differences in motivation to go international?**

Although we found a lot of similarities in the reasons to go with what you would generally expect from students wanting to go abroad, we found differences as well.

First, some of our participants took into account a number of factors in relation to their **disability**. Some mentioned that they chose to go to a country with a more positive attitude towards persons with a disability and with a higher degree of accessibility. Here they referred to northern countries. Nevertheless, one participant told to be pleasantly surprised by the South of France.

Secondly, one participant chose to go to Spain because of the **positive effect** of the warm climate and low stress on her chronic illness.

Thirdly, some of our participants highlighted the fact that they wanted to **prove** that they could go and that they felt as if they needed a significant amount of motivation to do it. This assumption was something that we focussed on: Why do our participants feel they need to be extra motivated and need to prove that they can go abroad?

Is this feeling different from that of other students participating in an international exchange programme? Or is it possible that this aspect hasn't been highlighted within research on international mobility in general? Do other students have the same doubts regarding to: "Would I dare to go? Will I be able to handle it?" Maybe, there hasn't been enough attention for these feelings of uncertainty in past research.

## 12 What about equal rights?

Persons with a disability can be seen as an **oppressed group** within society (Johnson et al., 2004; Freire, 1972, as cited in Mkandawire, 1975). They are still underrepresented and disadvantaged in going abroad. For example: they represented only 0.12% of the total Erasmus population in 2009-2010 (European Commission, 2012b). Students with a disability are being 'Othered' and are being seen as different from the mainstream. Despite the efforts of the Lifelong Learning Programme and the Inclusion initiative to make international programmes more accessible, persons with a disability are still underrepresented.

This hasn't only been identified by us, but by some of our participants as well. Two of our participants explicitly strive for equal rights by taking in the role of ambassador. We described them as 'crusaders' (Darling, 2003). They accept the mainstream resources, but feel as if not everyone has full access to them. Therefore they want to create the conditions for social change. These participants saw this research as an opportunity to put their voice to the forefront and by that they are taking action to **make change happen** (Freire, 1972, as cited in Mkandawire, 1975).

More specifically they referred to the **lack of accessibility of information** on international mobility and people with a disability. We tried to make the information resources on this topic more available, by adding some of them on the LINK webpage. Alfaro et al. (2009) drew attention as well to the poor information resources regarding to international mobility in general. Furthermore, some participants referred to the lack of support in going abroad. They feel as if they have to take care of everything on their own, for instance when applying for additional grants.

These findings could be seen as contradictory to the earlier statement that most of our participants didn't put their impairment centrally in their story on international mobility. We found that, in general, the participants perceived their international experience as something positive and enriching. Nevertheless, at some point they have been faced with barriers as well. Some participants

referred to barriers during their stay abroad, e.g. poor assistance, physical obstacles... Whilst, most of the participants referred to barriers when preparing their international exchange, e.g. lack of information, organizational problems... This contradiction shows how the **orientation towards disability** is something that fluctuates over time and space. (Darling, 2003 & 2010; Watson, 2002)

### **13 Support during international exchange**

Some of our participants mentioned the importance of good support once they were abroad. The majority relied on their social network instead of professional assistance. They preferred to be supported by friends or people they have a good connection with, instead of someone unknown. A bad relationship with a professional assistant is experienced as having a negative impact on their international exchange.

Based on the article "From Policy to Practice in Higher Education: The experiences of disabled students in Norway" from Synnove Brandt (2011) we had a look at the experiences of students with a disability in higher education in general. Tinklin and Hall (1999, as cited in Brandt, 2011, p. 211) state that sometimes "the support that is given is described as providing disabled students with assistance to get around the obstacles instead of removing them". It questions the way support is given to students with a disability. During our research we found that our participants mentioned different kinds of support which could help them in going abroad. These ways of support were all individual, like financial support, extra time during exams, personal assistance... Overall, our participants mentioned the benefits from receiving support. Furthermore, several of our participants described the process in order to get the adjustments they needed. They said that it wasn't always easy to find the correct information and that there was a lack of accessible information resources. None of the participants mentioned structural changes in Erasmus or other exchange programmes in order to make it more accessible for students with a disability.

### **14 Future research**

First, it would be interesting to undertake research on suitable support for disabled people and the gap between the current support situation and the desirable situation according to students. Here qualitative research with a larger number of participants would be interesting.

Secondly, qualitative research into the reasons why disabled students decide not to go abroad could be an interesting topic. By this, different barriers could become visible and a contribution to the reduction of the gap between the actual and desirable number of students with a disability participating in international exchange could be made.

A third research topic might be the influence of the disability culture on the international experiences of students who are labelled with a disability. More specifically, a comparison could be made between different countries.

Finally, we could recommend research regarding some of our emergent themes, such as differences and similarities in reasons to go abroad between disabled students and students without a disability, and that disability orientation is a changing, not a fixed state during international exchanges.

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