

Passive Discrimination:

Access to Higher Education for People with Physical Disabilities in Russian Universities

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Tags

Education Policy; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; International Enrollment Management; Student Learning and Development; Student Services; University/Higher Education

Setting

Natasha is a person with a physical disability living in Russia. Because the overall accessibility infrastructure in Russia remains undeveloped, she needs physical assistance from her family to go to the store or other places. She wants to study at the leading university (City State University) in her home region and learn foreign languages. Russia has a law requiring all public institutions to be accessible but does not intervene in individual cases of accessibility implementation. Some universities have ensured physical access to some buildings. Many other universities have not. This creates obstacles for students with disabilities who seek to study at universities.

Case

Natasha is an 18-year-old girl using a wheelchair. She completed her secondary education at home due to the inaccessibility of Russian schools, and her teachers came to her house to teach ten hours of classes per week. Natasha wants to go to the university to study foreign languages and develop her independence, worldview, and cultural competence to succeed in her career. She spent around four years contacting hundreds of universities asking about their wheelchair accessibility because it is the main barrier to her being able to study.

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Afterwards, she focused her attention on a local university, City State University. She prepares to take the English and History exams required to enter the international relations major at City State University and goes to visiting days at the university. Though it is not her first choice of major, it would allow her to study two languages. She tells herself, “At least they have some sort of ramp to get inside their building.”

One month before the application process opens, she hears from the teacher of her English courses that the faculty of international relations will be moving from the building with the ramp to a historical heritage building without any ramp. Additionally, the law in Russia prohibits the construction of elevators or ramps in historical heritage buildings. Natasha makes an appointment with the Vice President of City State University. She cannot go to the meeting herself because it is on the second floor of another historical building. Instead, her mom goes to the meeting as her representative.

After hearing the concern of Natasha and her family about the location of the faculty of international relations at City State University, the Vice President urges Natasha to apply for the faculty of history located in the first building with a ramp. However, it would require Natasha to take completely different exams and change her life and career plans. The Vice President even offers to “help with entrance exam fraud” using her networks and power in the education field because Natasha would not be able to pass new exams for which she has not been preparing for. The Vice President also explains, “Natasha should study history because she can work in the archive after graduation” and “there is no future for those learning just languages.” With disappointment and anger, Natasha’s mom asks the Vice President why she did not study engineering then and does not work, for example, at the factory. She is upset and brings this news to Natasha, who has spent many years trying to find even one institution in her region with a ramp to the faculty of foreign languages or international relations.

One month later, Natasha learns from her classmate about the National Research University (NRU) in a neighboring region with better accessibility at the faculty of foreign languages. This option would require Natasha and her family to leave everything back home and move to a new region to help Natasha move around. The person who picks up the phone when Natasha calls is surprised that someone is ready to move to a smaller city only because of the elevator. Natasha leaves everything back home and moves with her family to study at NRU.

In a couple of months, a representative of City State University calls Natasha and asks her to complete a survey about why she did not apply and enroll in their institution. The representative also informs Natasha that City State University authorities decided not to change the location of the international relations faculty, realizing that the historic building is in disrepair, and that it is dangerous for people to be there. This was decided after all the admission and enrollment deadlines had passed.

Natasha spent four years at the National Research University learning foreign languages, cultures, and teaching (her desired field of study). When Natasha graduated with honors, she left for the USA through an exchange program to explore accessibility, independence, and the world without family support. However, two years after her graduation, even after having one other student in a wheelchair studying at the same faculty, National Research University authorities changed the location of the faculty of foreign languages to an old, inaccessible building. After Natasha’s exchange experiences in the U.S., she chose to apply for graduate

school in the United States because she could study independently and be engaged in the full student experience at a U.S. host institution.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What forms of discrimination did Natasha face?
- What are ways to address the issue of corruption (and fraud) existing in the educational system of Russia?
- How can an institution with limited funding improve its accessibility?
- How does the issue of physical access at the universities influence the educational and career development of students with physical disabilities?
- How can international higher education foster the holistic growth and independence of people with physical disabilities?