

**PLAN FOR IMPROVING THE SUPPORT SYSTEM ENSURING THE  
EQUALITY OF STUDENTS FROM UNDERREPRESENTED GROUPS AT  
THE UNIVERSITY OF NOVI SAD**

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## I. Introduction

The University of Novi Sad has demonstrated, through a series of prior activities, its commitment to the systemic development of the institutional framework and the improvement of study conditions as well as ensuring the equality of students belonging to different categories.

The roles of the parties involved in the process of improving study conditions and ensuring equality are displayed in detail herein. The activity plan and the corresponding definition of roles, as described in the present document, has not been implemented so far in the Republic of Serbia, and therefore, its future implementation could be considered as an example of good practice.

The past experience in working with students and cooperating with partner institutions and organizations served as a starting point for drawing up the proposed document, as well as the analyses of the exterior architectural accessibility of the campus (in July 2017) and of the level of support provided to students with disabilities at the faculties of the University of Novi Sad (in January 2018).

## II. Target groups for realization of activities aimed at improving equality at the University of Novi Sad

The activities aimed at improving study conditions in order to ensure equality at the University of Novi Sad are primarily directed towards the following:

### 1. Students from underrepresented groups such as:

- Students with disabilities;
- Students with chronic diseases;
- Students belonging to national minorities – national communities;
- Student parents;
- Students belonging to the Serbian national minority/community abroad;
- Candidates without a secondary school leaving certificate;
- Students facing discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender or sex;
- Students with a poor socio-economic background;
- Students who have difficulty adjusting to a new environment or are academically challenged;
- Students coming from rural areas and undeveloped municipalities;

- Secondary school leavers, potential candidates for enrolment at the university coming from social groups which are underrepresented in the higher education system;
- 2. Faculties of the University of Novi Sad;
- 3. Partner institutions and organizations.

### III. Most significant activities undertaken so far in improving equality at the University of Novi Sad

The overview of the most significant activities undertaken over the past period in improving equality is as follows:

- In April 2015 – the Rulebook on Providing Support to the Students of the University of Novi Sad from Vulnerable Groups was adopted;
- In May 2015 – the Committee for Verifying Medical Documentation for Enrolment of Students with Disabilities was appointed;
- In October 2016 – a Facebook group called *Support to UNS Students with Disabilities* (Podrška SSI UNS) was created;
- In October 2016 – an initiative for introducing affirmative measures in Master's degree programmes was launched;
- In December 2016 – affirmative measures in Master's degree programmes were introduced;
- In July 2017 – the exterior architectural accessibility of the campus was analyzed;
- In January 2018 - the level of support provided to students with disabilities at the faculties of the University of Novi Sad was analyzed;
- In February 2018 – officers in charge of support to students with disabilities were appointed at the faculties of the University of Novi Sad;
- In March 2018 – Vice-Deans for Education were invited to refer to the Information and Public Relations Centre of the University of Novi Sad for all questions of interest to students with disabilities;
- In July 2018 – an initiative for establishing the Romani library within the Central Library of the University of Novi Sad was launched;
- In July 2018 – the publications used for establishing the Romani library were digitalized;

- In July 2018 – the publications on disability were digitalized;
- In October 2018 – assistive technologies were catalogued and a list was compiled containing their respective location at the University of Novi Sad;
- In January 2018 – a new informative text on support provided to students with disabilities was published on the website of the University of Novi Sad;
- In July 2018 – an initiative for introducing professional personal assistance for students with disabilities was launched;
- In October 2018 – the *Guide for Students with Disabilities* was published;
- In October 2018 – an alias account [podrska.ssi@uns.ac.rs](mailto:podrska.ssi@uns.ac.rs) was opened for offering support to students with disabilities;
- In March 2019 – a drive was organized for giving away free vouchers for sports and cultural programmes offered in Novi Sad;
- In May 2019 – the Committee for Verifying Medical Documentation for Enrolment of Students with Disabilities was appointed;
- In June 2019 – Vice-Deans for Education were invited to refer to the Information and Public Relations Centre of the University of Novi Sad for all questions of interest to students with disabilities;
- In April 2020 – an initiative was launched for creating a unique database on students with disabilities;
- In June 2020 – the Committee for Verifying Medical Documentation for Enrolment of Students with Disabilities was appointed;
- In June 2020 – further activities were undertaken regarding the regulation of the process of improving study conditions for ensuring the equality of students from underrepresented groups at the University of Novi Sad.

IV. Proposal for the future activity flow in further improving study conditions in order to ensure equality at the University of Novi Sad

#### STAGE I

1. Holding a round table on *Higher Education and Equality*

2. Adopting a strategy for improving equality
3. Adopting an action plan for implementing the strategy

## STAGE II

4. Changes and amendments to the Rulebook on Providing Support to Students from Vulnerable Groups
5. Establishing a committee or another working body for improving study conditions in order to ensure equality at the University of Novi Sad
6. Appointing a mentor for supporting students from underrepresented groups
7. Further developing the mechanism for verifying medical documentation of students with disabilities and chronic diseases who are interested in studies supported by affirmative measures
8. Further developing the mechanism for assessing whether students belong to any vulnerable group
9. Drawing up the rules of procedure of the committee for verifying medical documentation of students with disabilities and chronic diseases who are interested in studies supported by affirmative measures (if the committee continues with its work)

## STAGE III

10. Signing agreements on cooperation with partner institutions and organizations
11. Specific activities envisaged by the programme/project.

## V. Role of the University of Novi Sad

As part of its activities, the University of Novi Sad pays full attention to providing equal study conditions for all students, improving these conditions and developing support for students from underrepresented groups (hereinafter referred to as students).

Students have at their disposal different support services, assistive technologies and a customized working environment. In order to ensure the continuous improvement of study conditions, the

University of Novi Sad works intensively on the networking of all parties involved in the student support service system, introducing new support services as well as improving the existing ones.

The key role of the University of Novi Sad is reflected in coordination of the process of improving study conditions and equality at the University of Novi Sad. In this process, the University of Novi Sad could rely on the work of:

- The future Committee or another working body for improving study conditions in order to ensure equality at the University of Novi Sad, whose appointment is hereby proposed;
- The Information and Public Relations Centre (University Info-Centre) which includes the Student Counselling and Career Centre with currently one employee who is actively engaged in providing support to students with disabilities;
- The mentor for students from underrepresented groups, whose appointment is hereby proposed;

All activities undertaken within the student support system, which are coordinated by the University of Novi Sad, can be considered as institutional activities. These activities need to be implemented regardless of the existence of projects or lack thereof and they have a direct influence on study conditions.

The institutional activities can be:

- Continual – encompassing activities which are undertaken over the course of an entire year and
- Periodic activities – activities which are undertaken during student enrolment or any other study cycle.

All activities are undertaken with full participation of a mentor for students from underrepresented groups.

The continual activities comprise:

- Support in the process of exercising rights related to higher education;
- Support and mediation in using various student support services;
- Networking the parties involved, i.e. support service providers, and coordinating the support system;
- Coordinating the usage and provision of information on assistive technology;
- Providing information on conditions and opportunities for using support services;

- Providing support and information to faculties on standards and possibilities for adapting and improving study conditions;
- Providing information to faculties on the manner of adapting the procedure for taking preliminary exams and exams as well as adapting the entrance exams at faculties;
- Providing information on calls for applications, scholarships, internships and other calls which could be interesting to students;
- Providing support to students during their application for mobility programmes;
- Providing support in the work capability assessment process, acquiring the certificate on the degree of disability as well as any other documents required for studies and employment of students;
- Providing information on terms of accommodation.

The periodic activities cover support to students from underrepresented groups in the following:

- Informing them during enrolment at faculties of the University of Novi Sad;
- In the process of exercising their right to affirmative measures;
- During their application for state scholarships;
- In the process of making use of any support service.

## VI. Proposal for new activities

The proposal for activities in the forthcoming period whose realization would further contribute to improving study conditions is as follows:

- Adapting and presenting the Central University Library as a support service for students with disabilities (currently all technical requirements are met);
- Promoting and acknowledging the Student Counselling and Career Centre within the Information and Public Relations Centre as a place where all relevant pieces of information can be obtained for students with disabilities;
- Performing research on the number and category of students with disabilities at all faculties of the University of Novi Sad (participation in research is voluntary);
- Analyzing the architectural accessibility of the central University campus;

- Analyzing the interior and exterior architectural accessibility and accessibility of assistive technologies at each faculty of the University;
- Analyzing the existence and utilization of assistive technology purchased in the previous period;
- Drawing up a document containing suggestions and ideas for changes to the formal instructions for enrolment of students with disabilities;
- Developing communication channels (Facebook, Twitter, e-mail, phone) for student support.

## VII. Proposal for long-term strategic activities

The long-term strategic activities would entail the following:

- Continuous work on the regulation of the support system for students with disabilities at the University of Novi Sad;
- Developing the support network (local network – within the University, national – at the level of all universities in Serbia, regional – at the level of universities in the region);
- Standardization of the support system in line with the standards and principles of the European Union.

Having in mind the complexity of this topic and its significance for students, further work on improving study conditions requires a multi-sectoral cooperation among all the parties involved – student support service providers.

The role of the University of Novi Sad would be fulfilled in terms of continuous work on coordinating the existing support services and introducing new ones with the aim of a long-term improvement of study conditions to ensure the equality of all students at the University of Novi Sad.

## VIII. Role of the committee or another working body for improving study conditions in order to ensure equality at the University of Novi Sad

It is hereby proposed to establish a committee or any other type of working body for improving study conditions in order to ensure equality at the University of Novi Sad striving for its further regulation at the University. The activities of the newly established body would be directed



towards improving the support services for students from underrepresented groups during and after their studies.

This body would be multidisciplinary, gathering members together who would represent diverse types of expertise relevant for the equality issues at the University of Novi Sad, especially in terms of studies and teaching, architectural accessibility, psychological and social support, information and assistive technologies as well as in other relevant areas.

The committee would operate as a permanent auxiliary body of the Senate of the University of Novi Sad and it would discuss the issues of interest for the representatives of students from underrepresented groups. It is hereby proposed that the committee should perform the following activities within its purview:

- Analyze the study conditions and the degree of equality of students from underrepresented groups;
- Propose to the Senate the method and the procedure for improving the study conditions and equality of students from underrepresented groups;
- Define the strategy and policy for monitoring, facilitating and improving study conditions and equality at the University;
- Ascertain the programme and the activity plan for improving study conditions and equality at the University and appoint teams for implementation of such activities;
- Verify medical documentation of students with disabilities and chronic diseases who are interested in studies supported by affirmative measures;
- Assess to which vulnerable group students belong;
- Reach a decision on establishing teams for undertaking individual activities of the Committee;
- Make sure that projects on improving study conditions and equality are implemented at the University and its faculties;
- Propose to faculties the method and the procedure for improving the study conditions and equality of students from underrepresented groups;
- Report to the Senate of the University, at least once a year, on the current state regarding the facilitation and improvement of study conditions and equality at the University;
- Perform other activities in the respective area.

## IX. Role of the Information and Public Relations Centre (University Info-Centre)

As a result of many years of work in the respective field, the University of Novi Sad founded the Information and Public Relations Centre (Info-Centre) in May 2017. This Centre also includes the Student Counselling and Career Centre which actively provides all the necessary pieces of information and support to students.

The Student Counselling and Career Centre plays a significant role within the Information and Public Relations Centre since it integrates the considerable support for current and future students (which was up to this point primarily focused on students with disabilities) under a single name and in the unique architecturally accessible surroundings, from enrolment at the university to employment. In this process, mentorship is extremely important since a mentor is a direct intermediary between students, the labour market, support services and relevant institutions and organizations which can add to the development of the study-to-work transition.

## X. Role of a mentor for students from underrepresented groups

The role of a mentor encompasses various activities, starting from preparations for enrolment at the university, providing information on all types of services and support services relevant for studies to actively offering career guidance and counselling for the purpose of organizing internship and traineeship, and finally, helping all graduates from vulnerable groups access the labour market.

The role of a mentor is manifold and it covers the following activities:

- Ensuring that pieces of information on career guidance and counselling services for students are available and transparent;
- Establishing and maintaining communication with all relevant parties important for career guidance and counselling of students;
- Collecting and providing information on the support system and help provided to students in their everyday activities and achieving independence;
- Training students and graduates from vulnerable groups to adequately assess and plan their personal and professional development;

- Informing students and graduates on career guidance and counselling services, with an emphasis on preparations for internship/traineeship and employment;
- Publishing, updating and monitoring information on the web portal regarding internship/traineeship and employment of students;
- Establishing and maintaining communication with employers from the database of the Centre who employ students or plan to employ them;
- Administering the process of assessing students' disability/chronic diseases and/or whether they belong to any vulnerable group;
- Monitoring any changes in the respective legislation.

#### XI. Role of partner institutions and organizations

Resulting from an excellent cooperation between the University of Novi Sad and partner institutions and organizations, students have at their disposal numerous support services. The University of Novi Sad coordinates the support system, whereas partner institutions and organizations are in charge of organizing and implementing support services as part of their activities.

The partner institutions and organizations with which the University of Novi Sad has cooperated informally so far include:

1. Association of Students with Disabilities in Novi Sad:
  - Organizing cultural, sports and entertainment events for students with disabilities;
  - Providing support for obtaining student scholarships and loans;
  - Improving the social life of students with disabilities;
2. Living Upright Centre:
  - Personal assistance;
  - Experiential counselling;
3. Student Support Centre at the Faculty of Philosophy:
  - Psychological counselling;
  - Peer counselling;

4. Students' Centre in Novi Sad:
  - Student restaurants;
  - Accommodation in student dormitories;
5. Students' Centre in Subotica:
  - Student restaurants;
  - Accommodation in student dormitories;
6. Pension and Disability Insurance Fund of the Republic of Serbia:
  - Until 2013, the Fund verified medical documentation for enrolment of students with disabilities supported by affirmative measures;
7. Autonomous Province of Vojvodina – the Provincial Secretariat for Higher Education and Scientific Research:
  - Financial support for implementing project activities;
  - Support for implementing strategies for improving equality.

In order for the support system to be improved, adequately regulated and coordinated by the University of Novi Sad, it is necessary to sign agreements on cooperation with partner institutions and organizations, primarily with student non-governmental organizations which gather a high number of representatives of students in need of support. The signing of agreements on cooperation is especially significant in terms of defining the purview and responsibilities in the provision of support to students.

## XII. Student support system at other universities in the Republic of Serbia

The other universities in the Republic of Serbia which can be presented as examples of good practice include: the University of Belgrade, the University of Kragujevac and the University of Niš.

The aforementioned universities have separate centres/services for supporting students with disabilities. The student support at other universities is primarily focused on students with disabilities, whereas all other students from underrepresented groups exercise their rights in higher education through the support offered by non-governmental organizations, such as organizations for students of the Roma national minority, and others.

More detailed information on the support for students with disabilities at other state universities is available on the websites of the respective universities:

- University of Belgrade: <http://www.bg.ac.rs/sr/clanice/centri/csh/CSH.php>

University of Kragujevac, within the Career Development Centre:

<http://www.razvojkarijere.kg.ac.rs/>

- University of Niš: <https://www.ni.ac.rs/univerzitet/centri-univerziteta/centar-za-podrsku-studentima>