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Per Linguas Mundi ad Laborem - job opportunities through foreign languages

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It would seem that with well trained listening skills, good memory and concentration, blind people would make ideal language learners and could dominate the profession of translators and conference interpreters. And yet, the knowledge of foreign languages among people with a severe visual impairment is generally very poor.

Investigation into this situation has shown that the causes of inadequate language training of people with a disability of sight are to be sought in the lack of adaptations of accessible course books and in absence of qualified teachers of English with specialist training in visual impairment.

Admission of East European countries into EU has triggered interest in foreign language learning and teaching. This has created a new opportunity for people with a visual impairment. The presentation introduces a programme developed and implemented in Poland under the umbrella of EQUAL European partnership. The project called "Per Linguas Mundi ad Laborem" (Through languages of the world to employment) aims at giving fully qualified teachers of English specialist qualifications in the area of visual impairment, and at organizing an English language course fully accessible to learners who are either totally blind or severely visually impaired.

The postgraduate course for teachers follows to a large extent the "English for the Blind" programme implemented earlier at the Catholic University of Lublin, the first university to offer specialist training in visual impairment to students of English as part of the ELT methodology course. The programme involves the following components: .

1. Developing materials for teaching (and learning) English, accessible to totally blind learners at all levels, as well as materials for explaining difficult concepts based on visual experience.
2. Training sighted students and teachers of English in the area of visual impairment and other special educational needs.
3. Gaining practical knowledge and experience through engaging in teaching totally blind children on a regular basis (volunteer work – part of obligatory teacher training)
4. Setting up a resource center with specialist technology to give blind university students a chance to take full advantage of the teaching programme.

The "Per Linguas Mundi ad Laborem" project also has several components of which two editions of post graduate courses for teachers of English and English language courses for adults with a visual impairment are the most important ones. The post-graduate course covers 340 hours of training – lectures, workshops and seminars, during which the trainees get acquainted with different types and pedagogical implications of visual impairment as well as educational implications of total

blindness. A large proportion of the course is devoted to gaining experience in designing and producing adaptations of course books and other language teaching/learning resources.

Three university centres and the Polish Association of the Blind are involved in the project, with the following distribution of tasks and duties:

1. The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin
 - trains 10 teachers of English in the area of visual impairment
 - organizes an English language course for twenty visually impaired adults. The language course will be run by training attending the post-graduate course.
 - sets up a computer centre for students with a visual impairment
 - sets up a tactile graphics production centre, initially serving the project and planning to become a national centre for tactile diagrams
 - performs a pilot study on the effectiveness of adaptations of multimedia interactive English language courses. The tools to be used involve Intelikeys, and VirTouch interactive mouse with Braille-like cells allowing a totally person to control the invisible cursor.
 - Responsible for evaluation of the so called “soft” results of the project
2. Warsaw University
 - responsible for making adaptations of the course books (texts in Braille, electronic and DAISY formats)
 - responsible for producing a language teaching methodology resource pack for teachers of English working with students with a visual impairment
 - responsible for organizing a course for ten teachers of English who will work with VI students
 - responsible for organizing a language course for forty adults with a visual impairment
 - responsible for evaluation and certification
3. Warsaw Academy of Special Needs
 - responsible for initial evaluation of needs in the area of teaching English to people with a visual impairment
 - responsible for adaptations of ELT materials for partially sighted learners
4. Polish Association of the Blind
 - responsible for selecting participants of language courses
 - responsible for contacts with potential employers interested in employing people with a visual impairment
 - responsible for setting up a computer language centre for people with a visual impairment

The whole “Per Linguas Mundi ad Laborem” project is administered by PFRON – State Fund for Rehabilitation of People with Disabilities, which is the most experienced organization in managing European funding aiming at removing social barriers. The project, which started in June 2005, will end in December of the year 2007.

Judging by the effects of the English for the Blind programme implemented at the John Paul II University – successful employment of visually impaired graduates of the English Department (both totally blind and partially sighted), the “Per Linguas ad Laborem” project stands a good chance of success. With teachers having qualifications in both English and in visual impairment, and with practical skills which visually impaired students are gaining through the project – good knowledge of English, effective use of assistive technology, raised confidence and self-esteem, ability to present their strengths to potential employers, and finally, with the success of the ongoing campaign in Poland encouraging employment of people with disabilities, The “Per Linguas Mundi ad Laborem” project stands a good chance of becoming one of the most successful European projects implemented in Poland in recent years. It is also hoped that the project and the presentation of practical solutions connected with organizing language courses for people with a visual impairment will inspire other teachers and organizations throughout the world to engage in similar projects.

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