

**Guidelines for
accessible teaching
and research
at universities**

Zürcher Hochschule
für Angewandte Wissenschaften



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Zürich^{UZH}

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2nd edition 2022

Sponsored by

swissuniversities

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www.sdr.uzh.ch





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Introduction

1



1.1 Situation

People with disabilities and permanent impairments greatly depend on the solidarity and support of their fellow human beings. Including them in the areas of work and education is an essential part of this support, and is at the same time a prerequisite for equal participation in society.

People with disabilities are specifically protected by the state in this regard. In signing the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (SR 0.109, effective in Switzerland since May 15, 2014), Switzerland has committed to dismantling barriers for disabled persons, to protect them against discrimination and to give them the opportunity to be included and equal in society. This is also set down in Article 8, Paragraphs 2 and 4 of the Federal Constitution as well as in the Disability Discrimination Act. Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (Art. 1 (2) UN-CRPD 2006).

The guidelines below were created within the framework of the project “Accessible teaching and researching at Swiss universities!” funded by swissuniversities. They are based on a scientific study which included

interviews and expert testimony about the situation of those affected. The study showed that researchers and teachers who live with a physical or mental impairment or a chronic disorder (hereinafter referred to as R+T) encounter various barriers in their everyday lives at universities, which can be classified as follows:



Area	Dimensions
Communication level	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Requirement and/or personal need to reveal one's impairment(s)● Communication difficulties in professional social interactions● Lack of a qualified and accessible specialist unit
Acceptance, tolerance and consideration	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Social marginalisation● Lack of flexibility in the workplace● Lacking willingness and ability to empathise● Lack of individual solutions
Additional temporal and financial effort	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● No availability of required assistance services● Needing to expand additional effort to overcome barriers● Needing to expand additional effort for travel, participation in conferences, sabbaticals, continued education etc.● Slow and inflexible support from social security, which is perceived as degrading● Difficulties in financing additional needs● Being dependent on assistance● Inhibitions preventing active requests for assistance
Discrimination, stigmatisation and lack of trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Feeling overwhelmed due to career expectations being too high● Overt discrimination, including harassment● Lacking trust in matters relating to career planning and implementation● Precarious employment conditions in teaching and research departments● (Age) discrimination after long career breaks due to the impairment● Coping with the personal impact of stigmatisation



Area	Dimensions
Buildings and infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Inadequate working conditions in the personal workspace● Spatial barriers on the way to work and in accessing the buildings● Insufficient information for orientation within buildings● Lack of inclusion of affected persons in construction, planning, and execution, as well as in the design of library concepts and laboratory facilities● Lack of relaxation rooms
Digital and traditional learning and working materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Unadapted digital media (accessibility of websites, applications, documents, hardware and software, keyboards, screens etc.)● Barriers to using material at libraries● Unsuitable devices such as printers, projectors, high lecterns in lecture halls, office furniture, chairs etc.● Barriers in library facilities, e.g. lack of rooms for reading out loud



1.2 Objective of these guidelines

The guidelines address the above-mentioned areas and offer solutions for the removal of barriers. In addition, checklists are provided to help the people responsible to make an initial assessment of their university's accessibility for R+T.

Subsequently, it is critical to open a dialogue with those affected, because the high number of different impairments and chronic disorders means that there is no “one-size-fits-all” solution. In addition to standard solutions such as wheelchair ramps, talking elevators and automatic doors, individual adjustments will be necessary in most cases.

These guidelines and the checklists can only make an initial contribution to dismantling or reducing potential barriers for R+T at universities. The attitudes of people working at universities are crucial to the successful implementation of these guidelines. Removing individual barriers requires cooperation between all departments involved and the people affected.

There are already guidelines regarding students with disabilities at universities (e.g. The ZHAW's guidelines “Hindernisfreie Hochschule”, 2012). By contrast, the guidelines in this document are specifically geared towards the situation of R+T, because R+T have special needs which have not or have only marginally been broached by these other guidelines.

These guidelines should not be understood as being conclusive, but are intended to serve as a working instrument with the potential for elaboration.



1.3 Structure of the guidelines

The findings from the interviews conducted with those affected revealed three main areas in which R+T need support. Accordingly, these guidelines are subdivided into structural measures (2), support measures (3), and infrastructure measures (4).



**Structural
measures**

2



2.1 Raising awareness

When people with disabilities were interviewed about their experience of working life, one issue that was mentioned very frequently was the lack of awareness in their social environment. The extent of this lack of awareness is directly related to the visibility (or invisibility) of the impairment. The mindset and empathy of others towards the affected person's situation are crucial factors for the removal of all barriers. Improving awareness within the social environment thus plays a major role. Awareness-raising events are therefore important. Disabilities and chronic disorders should also be addressed as a topic in continued training courses for university executives. Moreover, universities should organise events for people with disabilities or chronic disorders to inform them about their rights.

a During the study interviews, interviewees said that they had suffered stigmatisation in various situations. As soon as such people are visible in daily working life, improvements can be achieved, since stigmatisation is reduced when other staff members come into direct contact with those affected and realise that they make a valid contribution in the given circumstances.

b People with disabilities encounter difficulties with university application procedures. They tend to ask themselves whether they should mention their impairment in their application documents or perhaps, if it is an invisible impairment, during the application procedure. With regard to applications by R+T, the question arises as to whether the university is willing to adapt the job profile in question to the applicant's impairment.

c If an impairment arises later in a person's life, they run a greater risk of losing their job than other employees (even if this is legally inadmissible). To avoid this, job profiles need to be adapted to the impairment. By doing so, affected employees can continue with their job even if, due to their impairment, they no longer fulfil all requirements of their original job profile but still reach their work goals in different ways.



Checklist: Raising awareness

- Do job offers explicitly address people with disabilities or chronic disorders?
- Have further training courses on “impairments” been put in place?
- Are these further training courses obligatory for university executives in particular?
- Are disabilities addressed in an appropriate way during courses on university management?
- Do universities actually implement their diversity policies in relation to people with disabilities and chronic disorders?
- Are there awareness-raising events which are open to everyone at the university?
- Does the university endeavour to look for individual solutions for affected R+T?
- Are employees regularly surveyed on their well-being?
- Are disabilities considered in these surveys?
- Is the university prepared to adapt the applicants’ job profiles to their impairments?
- In the case of impairments arising later in an employee’s career, are individual adjustments to their workplace and workflow offered?



2.2 Staff position in the university management and specialist unit for R+T

- a** While several universities now have their own specialist unit for students with disabilities, they often do not have any specific contact person or institution for R+T. In most cases, the specialist units for students do not offer consultation for R+T. Nor do they consider themselves representatives of R+T interests within the university. It would therefore be advisable to install a unified department/specialist unit for students and R+T on an operational level. In addition, round tables with those affected and those responsible for working conditions at the university have proven to be helpful. The results of the round tables can facilitate the work of the specialist unit for R+T. R+T interests can also be rendered visible by appointing an affected person as an employee representative.
- b** People with disabilities or impairments are often dismayed at the slow implementation of accessibility measures. This mainly occurs because different departments within the university are responsible for partial aspects of such measures. As a result, the urgency of the matter tends not to be recognised. A central, superordinate position (staff position) is therefore necessary, which has strategic tasks, and
- which drives and monitors the accessibility measures (depending on the size of the university, this specialist unit may consist of just one person). In addition, budgeting issues often determine whether and when a pressing measure is implemented. Since these measures and their financing affect various areas (construction department, signage, office equipment, IT infrastructure, university budget, faculty budgets, parking management, coordination with disability insurance etc.), this position carries out cross-sectional tasks. It is therefore necessary to establish this unit as a staff position at the management level. This is the only way to guarantee that it receives the necessary support within the university and that it is granted the required funding. Furthermore, being high up in the hierarchy allows this position to become networked more easily with other authorities such as public offices, city councils and social security departments.
- c** To ensure that the specialist unit and the superordinate staff position function as points of contact, they need to be well known. All students and R+T at a university should be introduced to the unit and its



role when they start studying or working at the university. If it becomes known to the specialist unit or the staff position that a person with an impairment or chronic disorder is studying or working at the university, it shall contact this person in order to take the necessary accessibility measures to dismantle barriers. The units should support R+T in their negotiations with their superiors and thereby assume a mediatory role. Since the inclusion of R+T constitutes a cross-sectional task, the staff position should be consulted in all important decisions by the university management.

d When establishing the specialist unit, it is crucial to involve R+T in the process (either as members of or advisors to the staff position), so that the needs of R+T can be specifically addressed (this applies in particular to persons whose impairments are not visible). It would also be ideal for the members of the specialist unit and the staff position to regularly attend further training on accessibility measures.



Checklist: Staff position

- Does a specific specialist unit exist, not only for students but also for R+T?
- Has a staff position been established within the university management?
- Is this staff position involved when R+T start working at the university?
- Is this staff position involved when R+T have meetings with their superiors?
- Are adjustments to the workplace or workflow made with the help of the specialist unit?
- Are affected people involved in the establishment and operation of the specialist unit and the staff position?
- Are affected people surveyed anonymously on a regular basis regarding their expectations of the specialist unit and the staff position (for instance, as part of a staff survey)?
- Do employees at the specialist unit and the staff position attend regular further training courses?
- Are the interests of R+T actively attended to by the staff position, and are the personality rights of R+T protected?
- Does the staff position operate an easily accessible platform that contains regularly updated information relevant to R+T?
- Does the staff position make target agreements with the university management or with individual faculties which envisage concrete improvements for R+T? Are these target agreements evaluated on a regular basis?



**Support
measures**

3



3.1 Additional time requirements

R+T require more time for some tasks; this is the case, for instance, when people with visual impairments are preparing lecture notes. It is important that these additional time requirements are acknowledged by superiors, so that R+T are not discriminated against in this regard.

- a** R+T need more breaks. They often follow a daily routine that does not conform to the underlying norm of working life. Flexible working hours are thus important for them.
- b** Especially with regard to conference participation, additional travel time should be granted. Those affected should not encounter barriers to participating in meetings, conferences or other events. For example, transport could be organised by the hosting university. When participating in conferences, R+T often need more time to recover and can thus attend the specialist presentations but not the supporting programme. For this reason, they have significantly less contact with their expert colleagues. Sufficiently long breaks in the conference programme are therefore important for R+T.

- c** When designing job profiles, the interests of R+T should be considered appropriately. To allow for the additional time requirements of people with visual impairments, for example, teaching responsibilities could be reduced and a different task could be increased in turn.



Checklist: Additional time requirements

- To what extent are R+T's working hours flexible (e.g. different regular or core working hours, home office, longer training periods, more breaks)?
- Are all employees required to accomplish the same amount of work in the same time, or are adjustments to working hours or work content possible?
- Have R+T been asked whether they need more time to accomplish their tasks or to travel to work?
- Has the question been asked as to how this additional time could be remunerated or offset, for example?
- When planning conferences, do universities take into account that R+T need more time for travel or participation in the supporting programme?
- When organising conferences, do universities make sure that rest periods allow R+T enough time to withdraw and recover?
- Does the university grant R+T an entitlement to part-time employment if they need to reduce their workload due to their impairment?
- Does the university envisage a reduction in teaching responsibilities for R+T?



3.2 Additional expenses

- a** Adjustments to the workplace or workflow often require funding. Social security is actually responsible for this. However, its procedures are often lengthy and complicated. It would make sense if the university could advance the necessary funds. Necessary adjustments to the workplace or workflow need to be discussed individually with those affected.
- b** R+T often need additional funds for business trips. If they have to finance their trip with an organisational unit's individual budget, the university should consider the required additional expenditure when calculating this budget. For example, it is more difficult for people with a visual impairment or reduced mobility to travel on public transport if they are not familiar with the surroundings or if their destination does not have easy accessibility. In these cases, they would need additional funds for a taxi. Higher funding is also often required for participation in conferences abroad. Instead of an economy-class flight, R+T may need to book a business-class flight if they cannot sit for longer stretches of time. For R+T with a mental impairment, travel times and costs may increase if travelling is very exhausting for them and they need to arrive at a conference one day in advance or leave a day later. The guidelines for the approval of business trips should contain a flexibility clause for R+T that takes additional expenditure into account.
- c** Universities should furthermore provide central financial resources for R+T, which should be granted to professorships and faculties in addition to their regular resources to avoid placing organisational units that employ many R+T at a disadvantage.



Checklist: Additional expenses

- Are the costs of adjustments to workplaces and workflows borne by the university or by social security?
- Has the university provided enough central financial resources to finance adjustments and work equipment quickly (e.g. an inclusion budget to finance reconstruction measures or further training, or to provide a financial advance for measures that are later refunded by social security)?
- Do R+T need to cover additional expenditure to be able to carry out their work on an equal basis? Is this additional expenditure reimbursed?
- Is all work equipment paid for?
- Has the work equipment or aid been selected in direct consultation with the R+T?
- Are R+T asked during their recruitment or at the beginning of their employment whether additional financial resources are required?
- Are the university's internal guidelines for travel expenses sufficiently flexible to cover potential additional expenditure for R+T travels?
- Are R+T asked what financial resources they need to participate in conferences?
- If the university is organising a conference, is there a point of contact for R+T to assist in keeping the organisational complexity (and thus also the financial cost) of their journey low? (e.g. What is the local situation? Is there accessible accommodation for the disabled?)
- Are R+T subject to wage discrimination because of their impairment?



3.3 Assistance

- a** In many cases, it is not enough to merely compensate for additional time and expenses (see sections 3.1 and 3.2 above) because many R+T depend on help from assisting staff either occasionally or continually. If this need is not covered by social security, it is the university's responsibility to meet R+T's need for assistance. Part of the assistance necessary in everyday working life is provided informally by work colleagues and without pay. However, this should not be taken for granted and cannot always be expected of those assisting nor of those affected. It makes a crucial difference to a person's autonomy whether they constantly depend on other people's goodwill or if fixed and reliable structures for assistance are in place. Universities should arrange for assistance to be possible and to be paid.
- b** Assistance is especially important with regard to mobility. People with perceptual or mobility impairments depend on assistance for business trips (finding locations, access to buildings, communication). However, assisting staff may also often be necessary in the workplace. For instance, people with visual impairments may need to have someone explain graphics to them or lay out a text or slide for them.
- c** It is essential to speak with the R+T to determine the areas in which they need assistance. This means that superiors should ask R+T as soon as they start working – and subsequently at regular intervals – whether they need assistance and, if necessary, they should clarify how it is funded. Conference organisers should already ask on their registration form or their website whether any special assistance is required. In doing so, they can contact the individuals in question to clarify what kind of assistance is required so that they may enjoy accessible participation.



Checklist: Assistance

- Is R+T's need for assistance discussed with the persons affected already at the start of their employment?
- Does the staff position have sufficient knowledge about assistance?
- Does the staff position have access to a pool of assistance staff who they can recruit? Does the staff position help arrange with their employment?
- Are R+T informed of the extent to which assistance is financed?
- Are there additional assistance staff at the university who are not financed by social security?
- When organising conferences, does the university explicitly ask about people's need for assistance?
- Does the university make sure that assistance staff are available and paid for at conferences?
- Does the university bear the cost of assistance staff (e.g. wages or travel expenses)?



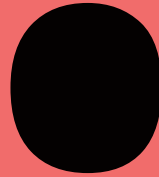
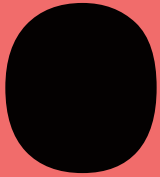
3.4 Promoting young academics

Due to their impairments, trainee R+T need more time, and possibly more financial resources, to qualify for an academic career.

So far, support from the SNSF and the individual universities has focused on gender issues, which has resulted in specific support programmes. It would be desirable to expand such programmes to include trainee R+T.

Checklist: Promoting young academics

- Are special support programmes for R+T offered by the university or the research agencies?
- Does the university consider filling vacancies with persons with disabilities?



**Infrastructure
measures**

4



4.1 Physical infrastructure

Among the various needs of R+T, physical (constructional) infrastructure has been given the most attention by universities so far. This is probably because such infrastructure measures are highly visible (ramps, automatic doors, audio response in elevators), because there are legal requirements addressing them (you can find the corresponding documents on the following website [available in German and French]: <https://www.procap.ch/de/angebote/beratung-information/bauen-und-verkehr/gesetze-und-vorschriften.html>), and because these measures are taken not only for an individual person but rather for a variety of affected people. However, even in this area there is still considerable need for improvement at universities:

- a** There are still disabled toilets, for example, which cannot be used as such, because they serve as storage rooms for the cleaning staff, or because they cannot be accessed with a Eurokey or have not been constructed in an accessible way.
- b** The acoustics in lecture halls or meeting rooms are often poorly suited to people with hearing impairments. Adjusting the acoustics would not only be beneficial for people with hearing impairments; people with regular hearing would likewise benefit from such adjustments.
- c** Signage is often incomplete, outdated or illegible for people with visual impairments. It is imperative that those affected are involved in the design of signage and that all types of impairments are taken into account.
- d** Often elevators are not accessible because controls are positioned too high or consist of touch panels unsuitable for the visually impaired, or because the elevators do not have audio response. Broken elevators are not always repaired immediately and are sometimes even out of order for longer periods of time.
- e** Adjustments and accessibility measures should not only be considered when constructing new or refurbishing existing buildings but should also be checked on a regular basis afterwards. If necessary, existing buildings should also be retrofitted. For this purpose, a budget for the corresponding construction measures should be set aside during the annual finance planning process.



Checklist: Constructional infrastructure

- Does the university apply the Universal Design concept to its structural facilities?
- Are legal requirements for accessible buildings already considered in tenders for construction measures?
- Are the legal requirements for accessible buildings implemented in the construction of the building?
- Are rooms, toilets etc. checked for accessibility on a regular basis?
- Are the control elements of the elevator suitable for all people with impairments?
- Is the elevator regularly maintained?
- Is there another accessible elevator in case the main elevator experiences malfunction?
- Are working spaces, libraries, lecture halls etc. regularly checked for possible improvements to accessibility, and are these improvements carried out?
- Have the acoustics in lecture halls, seminar rooms or offices been adjusted?
- Are the disabled toilets accessible, and are they used for their intended purpose?
- Is the signage outside and inside the building clearly visible, accurate and also readable by touch?
- Is signage adapted if there are any changes?
- Are entrances for the disabled signposted sufficiently, and are there floor markers for the visually impaired? Are any parking spaces reserved for people with impairments?
- Are the access routes to buildings and toilets well communicated (especially on the internet)?
- Is the infrastructure in the lecture hall suitable for R+T (sturdy lectern, technical equipment suited for all types of impairments, etc.)?



4.2 Digital infrastructure

Digital infrastructure often poses problems for R+T:

- a** Not all software is accessible for R+T. When purchasing but also when implementing software (podcasts, PowerPoint slides), only accessible programs and formats should be used. If a crucial software or program is not accessible, assistance staff become necessary (see above under 3.3).
- b** When purchasing books and other documents, their digital accessibility should also be taken into consideration. This holds especially true for libraries. If accessibility is not guaranteed at a library, it needs to establish a call system, so that library employees can assist. Alternatively, assistance staff may be employed (see above under 3.3).



Checklist: Digital infrastructure

- Is digital accessibility of the library given enough consideration?
- Where the books are not accessible, is there a call system and/or assisting staff?
- Are books and journals digitised for the visually impaired on a regular basis or upon request?
- Is the hardware and software used at the university accessible?
- If the programs are not accessible, is there assistance staff to help R+T use these programs?
- Does the library offer consultation hours for R+T where they can borrow books together with library employees or obtain them digitally?
- Is digital accessibility considered sufficiently in procurement?
- Is the university's IT department sufficiently aware of digital accessibility issues?
- Are tenders, competitions and notifications for employees written in an accessible way?



4.3 Help in case of fire or disaster

Most universities don't have a centralised register of persons who need help in the event of fire or disaster. Elevators are deactivated in the event of a fire, which results in persons with restricted mobility becoming trapped in the building. Rescue plans often do not take this situation into account.

Checklist: Fires and disasters

- Does the university have a centralised register of people who depend on help in the event of fire or disaster (e.g. via an emergency app)?
- Are fires and disasters announced only acoustically or also in other ways (visualisation with flashing lights)?



Conclusion

5



Inclusion of R+T in the working environment at universities can only be successful if the needs of people with impairments are addressed, even if these needs may vary significantly from case to case. Individual solutions are thus required. This, in turn, necessitates an open-minded approach by managers and colleagues to individual adjustments so that R+T can have access to the best possible working and framework conditions.

Universities that implement these guidelines are not only adhering to the legal requirements (especially those of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, as well as national provisions), but also create added value for all employees who benefit from the improvements proposed (for instance, good signage or acoustics).

