

Access to higher education in Estonia

Estonia/Ministry of Education and Research and Archimedes Foundation: Primus Programme of 2008–2015

By providing training for entrants, study and career counselling, and scholarships, Estonia's Primus Programme has successfully acted as a real door-opener for numerous students with disabilities. The programme was funded by the European Social Fund and ended in 2015, but many measures continue to be implemented.

IN BRIEF

As a result of higher education reforms and with the help of funding from the European Social Fund, Estonia launched its Primus Programme, which was implemented from 2008 to 2015. The programme offered stipends and support schemes for students with special needs, arranged training sessions and seminars for freshmen, and developed student support services through a network of study and career counsellors. Since the end of the programme many of its measures continue to be implemented by the Ministry of Education and Research.

FACTS & FIGURES

- 65–90 scholarships were available per year, providing 220€/month to cover university-related costs for transportation, personal assistance, etc., and 550€/month to pay sign language interpreters.
- Starting in 2016 scholarships will be paid out of the Ministry's budget, varying from 60 to 510€/month.
- Counsellors were hired to support students with special needs, and these specialists continue to work even after the programme's formal conclusion.
- Universities have acquired accessible equipment and created accessible study materials and handbooks.

INNOVATIVE ASPECTS

Universal design

Thanks to technical solutions and the mapping of obstacles, universal design was implemented in many universities. Additional costs related to the accommodation of students with disability were reduced thanks to available scholarships.

Innovation

Audio learning materials and audio books were newly developed for students with visual impairments.

Counselling and support

Awareness was raised among counsellors regarding the special needs of students with disabilities. For instance, Tallinn University of Technology offered peer support by a qualified (former) disabled student. Other universities (e.g., University of Tartu) merged the functions of tutors and support staff.

CONTEXT

Prior to the Primus Programme, skills in teaching and supporting students with disabilities were poor in Estonian universities. There were no disability counsellors, no scholarships, not enough technical tools, and little general awareness. A paradigm shift was initiated when in Estonia's Higher Education Strategy (2006–2015) prioritized access to higher education for learners with special needs, and in 2008 the Primus Programme was launched. All higher education institutions, as well as organizations of persons with disabilities and student unions, have participated in the strategy's development. A working group developed and proposed disability-related solutions (scholarship conditions, etc.).

QUOTE

It's difficult to put into words the beam in the eyes of disabled people who have found dignity, purpose, and independence in academic and personal achievements at a university they thought was not accessible to them. —Sven Kõllamets, Counsellor for Students with Special Needs, Tallinn University of Technology

KEY FEATURES

Estonia's Primus Programme for Higher Education Quality Enhancement was a national non-legally binding policy, financed by the European Social Fund and the state budget, and implemented by the Archimedes Foundation. Among others, Primus arranged training sessions and seminars for freshmen with special needs, cooperated through a network of study and career counsellors to develop support services, and supported students with special needs with stipends and support schemes. Students with special needs could apply for scholarships covering regular support services (e.g., personal assistants) or for one-time grants. Primus expanded the range of students with special needs who received support while also involving students in providing services to students with special needs. Each partner informed the Archimedes Foundation of all learners with special needs, and on the basis of the data collected the management council approved the services to be provided.

OUTCOME, IMPACT, AND EFFECTIVENESS

- A student reported that in his university the number of students with disabilities increased from 20 to 200.
- In 2011, the Estonian Union for Persons with Mobility Impairment awarded the Primus Programme with their annual “Aasta tegu” (Deed of the Year) Award.
- The scholarships for students with special needs are now funded by the Ministry of Education and Research, as of Act No. 178 of 2013.
- New policies for 2016–2021 will also pay attention to such special needs as autism, dyslexia, etc.

TRANSFERABILITY, SCALABILITY, AND COST-EFFICIENCY

The Primus Programme is transferable to other countries wishing to enhance the performance and inclusiveness of their higher education institutions. Its total budget for 2008–2015 was €16.4 million, 95% of which came from the European Social Fund. The largest expenses were teacher training (€3.9 million) and student stipends (€1.9 million).

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POLICY

Primus Programme, 2008-2015 by the Ministry of Education and Research, Archimedes Foundation and partners, Estonia

SOURCES

Overview of the Primus Programme, 2008-2015: <http://primus.archimedes.ee/en>

Guide to the Primus Programme, 2008-2015 (in Estonian): <http://bit.ly/1LWVnQb>