**Supporting accessibility, inclusion and non-discrimination in the educational offering of the continuous and flexible learning tray**

**Podcast, part 2: Promoting accessibility, inclusion and non-discrimination in higher education institutions**

This is the series on “Supporting accessibility, inclusion and non-discrimination in the educational offering of the continuous and flexible learning tray”, in which we focus on examining these phenomena and their meanings, and on promoting them in everyday life.

In the second part of the series, persons responsible for accessibility at higher education institutions consider why it is important to take accessibility into account in the activities of the entire institution and how it can be promoted. In addition, a discussion will be held from the perspective of continuous learners.

* Outi: Welcome to this Digivisio programme’s podcast on accessibility, inclusion and non-discrimination. I’m Outi Wallin from Tampere University of Applied Sciences and I represent the Digivisio programme. I am joined by Elisa Sinikallio, Accessibility contact person at Tampere University and Maiju Ketko, Special Support Lecturer (special needs teacher) and Accessibility contact person at TAMK.

1 What does accessibility mean?

* MAIJU: In a nutshell, accessibility means a learning and working environment in which everyone regardless of their characteristics can operate equitably.
* The aim is therefore that, at an accessible higher education institution, every student and staff member can feel equality and inclusion, regardless of their personal characteristics or life situation.
* When considering accessibility, we are looking, for example, at how a higher education institution's facilities, electronic systems, learning environments, teaching methods and attitudes enable inclusion and non-discrimination for a wide range of people from different walks of life. So it is particularly about non-discrimination and inclusion.
* ELISA: There is a lot of talk at the moment about the accessibility of digital services and digital content, which is a really important issue and is also regulated by legislation and EU directives, for example. But accessibility as a whole covers more than just that, as Maiju said.

2 Why is accessibility important?

* ELISA: The student population is diverse and this diversity is increasing all the time, for example as the number of higher education students increases. There is no longer a typical higher education student. Students' situations vary, for example they may come from multicultural backgrounds, have health problems or learning difficulties. Their life situations may also vary: one might work while studying, another may have a family, they may be of very different ages, etc. With accessibility in mind, we cater for all kinds of students.
* ELISA: For example, Learning difficulties and other learning-related problems have increased among higher education students. These may include reading difficulties, ADHD, autism spectrum disorder and mental health issues. These issues are now increasingly being recognised and highlighted in the media, for example. Many people entering higher education will have already experienced some of these problems in their earlier studies, but they will also arise during their higher education studies.
* MAIJU Multiculturalism is also on the rise. In terms of accessibility, it’s important to take into account, for example, immigrant students whose Finnish language skills are still developing. Reading Finnish material may take more time, as may producing Finnish text. It can be difficult to demonstrate your own knowledge under pressure in an exam if you have to think about what the correct Finnish sentence structure is.
* MAIJU Students’ starting points, for example, previous knowledge and skills, can be very different. In the past at universities of applied sciences, it's been customary for a practical nurse to train to be a hospital nurse, an electrical fitter to be an engineer and a cook to be a bachelor in hospitality management. Now people are not scared of looking for completely different sectors. This may be reflected in a lack of experience in a field of study and, on the other hand, in vocational education and training, for example, less practice in reading and writing skills than in upper secondary education. Many may also not have studied for several years, if not decades, and feel they are starting from scratch.
* ELISA: It’s important to note that accessibility is not only for the benefit of so-called "special groups". As already noted, students' life situations are very different, and there is a lot of diversity across the whole student population, as the examples highlighted here show. Ultimately, accessibility benefits everyone.

3 What can be done to promote accessibility in higher education?

* ELISA: A lot! As was pointed out at the beginning when defining the concept of accessibility, accessibility really concerns many different functions in higher education and it has to be taken into account in many different functions. For example, in terms of physical space, we can ensure that the premises are as accessible as possible, both when building new premises and when renovating old ones. We can ensure that the website and the various systems in place are as accessible as possible and constantly being improved to make them more accessible. What is also important is the attitude, the way we approach diversity, accessibility, equality – and this is the responsibility of everyone in the higher education community. So the whole higher education community is involved in promoting accessibility
* ELISA: All Finnish higher education institutions also made their own accessibility plan by 2022 at the latest, as this came as a mandate from the Ministry of Education and Culture. It’s worth looking at your own institution’s plan and the measures it contains.

4 How can accessibility be taken into account in teaching and guidance?

* MAIJU: The core idea behind accessibility is for everyone to have the opportunity to participate, learn and demonstrate their skills.
* In teaching and guidance, it all starts with a positive attitude, a desire to understand diverse learners and to learn more about accessibility. You can start small. For example, you can ask yourself "Are my instructions clear?". “Is my material accessible?”
* Examples are Word documents, Moodle templates and online help pages: is the text clear and understandable? Is it easy for a wide range of learners to understand the instructions, timetables, how to return assignments, etc.? Is the font clear and large enough? Are headings and subheadings used and are they made with header styles so that, for example, a screen reader can browse the page? Is the text in Finnish and English or any other required language? For example, you can find tips on how to make accessible material on the website saavutettavasti.fi.
* MAIJU:  In teaching situations, structure and routines help a wide range of learners. At the beginning of the course, it's a good idea to go through the whole thing so that students can get orientated. At the beginning of each teaching session, it’s also a good idea to explain what’s coming up: what topics will be covered, how the session will proceed, what kind of tasks will be done, whether there will be breaks, etc. A slow reader, for example, is helped if they have had the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the material beforehand and know that it’s also available afterwards.
* ELISA One more example I would like to mention is alternative ways of doing things: Could the planned work for the course be done in another way? For example, if writing is difficult for the student for one reason or another, could they make a podcast, a video or answer the exam questions orally instead of writing? Of course, the objectives of the course will determine what methods can be used to further achieve the objectives, what the purpose is, but it's worth considering these options for your course.

5 How to promote the accessibility of assessment?

* ELISA: I'll continue a bit from the previous idea of alternatives ways of doing things. Often assessment focuses on exams, text writing and deadlines, but these are often challenging issues for many types of learners, for example if you have learning difficulties such as slowness in working due to reading difficulties. Could other forms of assessment be used other than the more traditional ones?
* Accessibility of assessment is often addressed through individualised arrangements, i.e. providing tailored arrangements for those students who need them, for example because of a learning disability or ADHD, for whom the preconceived way of doing things does not work. Individualised arrangements are therefore important and an important part of accessibility and education. However, assessment could also be planned to be as accessible as possible in advance: to support the learning of the widest possible range of learners
* Recommended book: Huomioi oppimisen esteet (Attention to learning barriers) (in Finnish) by Henri Pesonen & Juuso Nieminen, which gives good ideas on this theme.

6 How do you see guidance and accessibility, inclusion and non-discrimination from a continuous learning perspective?

* MAIJU With continuous learning, the student population will continue to expand/multiply. Some are doing a degree, some may be taking just one particular course; some are supplementing their skills and seeking more precise knowledge and may not need a mark or a grade; some are changing fields completely and starting from scratch; students are of different ages, some have recently completed studies, some may have a long history of previous studies, so their study skills may be a bit rusty; students may not be familiar with the practices of a particular higher education institution or e-learning environments, etc.
* All this requires teaching and guidance staff to understand that there is an increasingly diverse group of learners: people from different backgrounds, with different goals and needs
* It’s also important to remember that students need to be able to easily find information about the possibility of receiving support for their studies. I believe that today's higher education institutions provide good information and support for their own degree students. A big issue for joint reflection is how they will continue to provide support for a wide range of learners, taking into account the perspective of continuous learning. What else needs to be taken into account to support equality and opportunities for all learners to participate and learn?

 Thank for listening!